# GOING OFF THE RAILS WITH SALLY JONES: PROMOTING LITERARY UNDERSTANDING IN CHARACTER-FOCUSED READ-ALOUD DISCUSSIONS

ROBERT WALLDÉN

*Malmö University*

Abstract

Although discussion-based approaches to literature have been researched extensively, there has been little qualitative research on read-aloud discussions focusing on specific aspects of literature. Moreover, considering the current bias towards comprehension and analytical skills in language arts curricula, an on-going discussion about different dimensions of literary understanding in classroom practice is necessary. Therefore, the present study seeks to contribute knowledge about possibilities for literary understanding in character-focused classroom discussions. Data, comprised of field notes and transcribed audio record-ings, were collected throughout 12 lessons in a Swedish Grade 4 during the reading aloud of the picture book Legenden om Sally Jones (The Legend of Sally Jones). The analysis was guided by thematic content analysis and reader-response theories, enabling a broad view of literary understanding. The result shows that character-focused discussions promoted evaluating the characters, making inferences, and consider-ing important events. Occasionally, the students made analytical remarks about how the story worked. In addition, the students were encouraged to empathise with the characters while making connections be-tween the text and their lives. Furthermore, the students drew on intertextual knowledge to use the text in creative expressions involving pleasurable narrative deaths. Implications for teaching and language arts curricula are discussed.

Keywords: disciplinary literacy, literary understanding, picture books, primary school, reader-response

The main concern of this article is the opportunities created for experiencing and learning about literature in language arts education. Working with literature in language arts can be seen as a form of disciplinary literacy practice (see Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) which is quite complex in the sense that it can comprise several different dimensions. Literary texts can be used to promote specific skills such reading comprehension strategies (e.g., McKeown et al., 2009; Palincsar & Brown, 1984), analytical genre knowledge (e.g., Gourvennec et al., 2020), and writing (Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Ivanic, 2004; Walldén, 2021). Literary skills less related to the paradigm of measurability include cultural awareness, the ability to empathise with others, and using literature for creative expressions (e.g., Elkad-Lehman & Poyas, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2013; Sipe, 2002). Furthermore, reading literature entails experiencing the texts and making meaningful connections to life experiences and other texts. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional reception theory has proven valuable to distinguish between *efferent* reading, focusing on what can be "carried away" from the text in terms of facts and knowledge, and the *aesthetic* experience of immersing oneself in the text.

Scholars analysing the national curricula of Sweden (Liberg et al., 2012) and other Nordic countries (Gourvennec et al., 2020) have shown that literature education does not reflect the broad conceptualisation of literary literacy outlined above. Based on the findings, the authors argue that literature instruction risks being subsumed by tendencies to foreground the development of language skills and key competencies. This is supported by a large-scale classroom study of literature uses in Norwegian lower-secondary classrooms (Gabrielsen et al., 2019) which highlighted a heavy emphasis on genre knowledge and analytical skills. Similar concerns also apply to the revised curriculum to be implemented in Sweden during 2022 (Skolverket, 2021) which primarily connects literature with analysis, reading comprehension and fluency. As argued by Gabrielsen et al. (2019), there is a need to move beyond issues of measurability, comprehension, and cognition. In shared reading, there is a potential to imbue the narration with life and promote the students' creative engagement with literature (Gordon, 2019).

Since engagement with literary texts varies greatly in students' homes (e.g., Cloran, 2000; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2011), language arts teaching plays a crucial role in providing access to literary literacy practices that foster literary understanding in a broader sense. Overall, the increased linguistic diversity in Swedish classrooms has promoted attention to the importance of classroom discussions for supporting students' engagement with texts (e.g., Walldén, 2020a).

Although discussion-based approaches to literature are widely advocated in theory and research (e.g., Applebee et al, 2003; Langer, 2017; Meller et al, 2009; Terwagne, 2006), there is a lack of qualitative research into discussions focusing on specific aspects of children's books read in classroom contexts. The present study contributes by highlighting discussions focusing on literary characters. It was conducted in a Swedish Grade 4 (10-year-old students) during the read-aloud of a picture book, *Legenden om Sally Jones* (*The Legend of Sally Jones*, Wegelius, 2008). The aim of the

study is to contribute knowledge about character-focused discussions in classroom work with literature. The specific question to be answered **is**:

- What possibilities do character-focused discussions provide for literary understanding?

Regarding discussion-based approaches to literary texts, Ingemansson (2018) confirmed that authentic questions based on Langer's stances (see Applebee et al., 2003; Langer, 2017) promoted primary school students' deep understanding of literary texts among students in elementary and lower-secondary school. Other studies, including experimental studies by Reichenberg (2014) and Olin-Scheller and Tengberg (2016), have shown that enactment of reading strategies in discussions can promote reading comprehension.  However, studies have also warned that reading strategies can be foregrounded in ways which side-track discussions from the literary texts (Walldén, 2020a, McKeown et al., 2009).

Strategy-focused approaches to classroom discussions about literary texts can be contrasted with content-based approaches, in which text-specific (rather than strategy-oriented) questions are used (McKeown et al., 2009; Reichenberg, 2014). The content-based approach aligns with the present study. However, in using a set of qualitative data to highlight character-focused discussions, I seek to narrow the analysis to a specific aspect of the text. In addition, I seek to broaden the scope beyond comprehension and analytical skills (discussed below).

The present study focuses on discussions during read-alouds. Aside for supporting students' comprehension and access to texts, interactive read-aloud is often seen as a way to create motivation for reading (e.g., Ariail & Albright, 2005; Gambrell, 2011; Moussa & Koester, 2021). Meller et al. (2009) emphasised the possibilities to promote critical literacy through read-alouds. By pointing out stories and characters as constructions and the author's use of literary devices to get certain responses from readers, Meller et al. (2009) argue, children can develop an understanding the workings of the text and become aware of the reading process as well as their place in the social world. Based on a study of a picture book read-aloud in kindergarten, Terwagne (2006) argued for an inference-based approach to discussions that enables the children to fill out gaps in the narrative, make intertextual connections, and engage expressively. Terwagne (2006) also showed that the reading of picture-books entails spotting recurrent characters and non-linear patterns and making meaning of illustrations from the verbal text. Similarly, in a study of read-alouds in grade 1 and 2, Sipe (2000) employed a broad view of literary understanding to show that the children expressed understanding of how the stories worked while also connecting the text to their lives, getting immersed in the text, and transforming it creatively. Although Meller et al., 2009, Terwagne (2006) and Sipe (2000) target earlier years of schooling (K-3 and preschool respectively), their approach to discussion-based reading is closer to the present qualitative study than the more performance-oriented perspective evident in some other studies (e.g., Applebee et al, 2003; Reichenberg, 2014; McKeown et al., 2009).

My particular focus will be on discussions about the characters in the picture book. While attention to characters has been recognised as a component in making meaning of literary texts (e.g., Barrentine, 1996; Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Meller et al, 2009), few studies have focused specifically on character-focused discussions. Based on a study of open and problem-based discussions about "difficult" literary texts in year 9, Sønneland (2020) showed that the students single out the relationship between characters as an important feature of a story. A previous study by Walldén (2020b) in an adult second-language classroom revealed that discussions about characters supported the jointly created understanding of the text and created pathways to making sense of the narrative structure of the novel. In contrast, in a study of a read-aloud of the children's book Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle (Walldén, 2021), the protagonist was ascribed characteristics to serve the purpose of a writing exercise. Such foregrounding of writing skills in relation to literature was also highlighted by Gabrielsen et al. (2019). From the perspective of aesthetic responses (see below), a survey of Fitzgerald et al. (2020) has shown that the death of an antagonist or other disliked character (justified deaths, see Cox et al., 2005) forms part of readers' pleasurable encounters with literature.

## 1.   THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LITERARY UNDERSTANDING

This study draws inspiration from previous efforts to conceptualise literary understanding broadly, incorporating both understanding the story and responding to it in different ways.

Engaging with stories involves understanding how they unfold (Sipe, 2000). This can be achieved through the use of intertextual connections and knowledge surrounding typical story patterns to make inferences about coming events or characters' motivations (see also Tewagne, 2006). As argued by Iser (1978, p. 111), readers find themselves in-between the response to prior expectations and the awakening of new ones. Furthermore, in making sense of picture books, readers must understand how images and verbal text interplay, for example, by filling in each-other's gaps (Sipe, 2000), contradictions (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 252), and construction of parallel stories (Terwagne, 2006). Sipe (2000) conceptualises the process of making meaning of the text by analytical and intertextual responses as a hermeneutic impulse. In classroom settings, the understanding of how the story unfolds carries a potential for *stepping out* of the text and talking more abstractly and generally about the workings of the story, including the author's reasons for construing events and characters in a certain way (Langer, 1995/2017, p. 41). In addition, a prerequisite to understanding and becoming immersed (see below) in the story, is stepping into the envisionment (Langer 1995/2017, pp. 37–39).

Furthermore, from the perspective of reader-response theory (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1994), literary understanding involves students' making meaningful connections to the text. Life experiences can be used to better understand the text, while literary texts also have the potential to view life experiences in a new, sometimes

disconcerting, light (see also Shklovsky, 1917/2017). In her argument for aesthetic textual modes of engagement, Felski (2008, p. 35) describes this use of literature as *recognition*, which relies on perceived symmetries between life and text. Further, she points out that such symmetries can shed light on real world asymmetries, such as oppressive power relations. In relation to affiliation with characters, Felski (2008, p. 34) explains the difference between *alignment* with a character's point of view, due to literary devices used in the text, and *allegiance*, meaning an affinity with the character.

Finally, literary understanding entails immersive and playful responses to the texts that become apparent when the students appreciate the text in silence, contribute spontaneous verbal and emotional responses (*talking back*, see Sipe, 2002), and use the text as a platform for creative expression. With inspiration of Rosenblatt (1994), Sipe (2000) terms this a result of an aesthetic impulse. Felski (2008) describes the readers immersion in the text as *enchantment*. Further, she points out that it requires a "bifurcation of perception" (p. 74) since the reader is immersed while being conscious of the imaginary spectacle. Felski (2008) puts enchantment in opposition to the *shock* associated with painful and frightening events in literature. Recognition, enchantment and shock — all considered aesthetic modes of engagement by Felski — are notably missing in some conceptualisations of disciplinary literacy in language arts. For example, based on a study of teacher's self-reported activities, Spires et al. (2018, p. 1416) defines the notion of "expressive literacy"—highlighted as defining for language arts—in terms of analytical activities such as deconstructing figurative language, analysing a text's rhetorical devices, and differentiating the speaker from the author.

In this study, I will draw inspiration from Felski (2008), Sipe (2000) and Langer (1995/2017), to explore the potentials for literary understanding in character-focused discussion. While there is a tendency to use concepts such as stances or responses to categorise instances of interaction, the small qualitative study at hand explores the ways in which different stances or responses can support each other and create connections between important dimensions of literary literacy practices (see Walldén, 2020b). While there are substantial parallels between the aforementioned frameworks, they complement each other in important ways. Sipe (2000) focuses explicitly on the reading-aloud of picture books, including the need to decode relationships between images and the verbal text, while Langer's stances are useful for the description of acts of stepping in and out of the texts. Finally, Felski's modes of textual engagement bring extra attention to aesthetic aspects of the reading.

The theories are use**d** selectively. For example, Felski's aesthetic category *knowledge*¸ pertaining to acquiring real world knowledge did not appear to be actualised in the character-focused discussions highlighted in the findings. Regarding the connections between the theoretical perspectives, it is worth noting that Sipe (2000) perceives a stronger parallel between the hermeneutic pulse and Langer's stance of *stepping out*. In my view, understanding how the story unfolds can be attributed to

*being in* the envisionment (see Langer, 1995/2017) while discussing why it unfolds as it does, as a question of genre or the author's choice, is *stepping out*.

Following Gordon (2019), I view the read-aloud, and the opportunities to express and develop aspects of literary understanding as part of a socially mediated extra-narrative. In accordance with the aim of the study, I will highlight the significance of character-focused discussions as part of this extra-narrative.

## 2.  METHOD AND MATERIAL

The study was conducted in a Swedish Grade 4 classroom comprised of two student groups (20 in each). I established contact with the teacher through my professional network, guided by my general research interest in the opportunities created for primary school students to engage with subject-related text and discourse. The relevant school (K-6) is located in a socially segregated and linguistically diverse area. According to official statistics, around 50% of the students came from a "foreign background", meaning that either they themselves or both of their parents were born outside of Sweden. While the second language and sociological perspectives are not foregrounded in the present study, it is important to note that many of the students can be presumed to have limited exposure to discussing literary texts in Swedish in their home environments. The need to provide interactional support to both first and second-language learners was stressed by both the participant teacher and other staff at the school.

The study was conducted over a span of four months. However, due to winter and spring breaks, compounded by several weeks of covid-related illness on the part of the teacher, the effective timeframe for the study was 10 weeks. The present article builds on data collected during 12 lessons (each lasting 40-70 minutes) focusing on the reading of The Legend of Sally Jones. I chose this period to cover the read-aloud activities until the end of the book. The read-aloud lesson tended to occur once every week or once every other week. In the final two weeks, reading was intensified with two weekly lessons. Overall, the read-aloud appeared to be a pleasurable, but not highly prioritised, activity in the classrooms.

Since the teacher had already started reading the book when the study commenced, it was not possible to cover the reading of the first 15 pages. The classroom study was mainly conducted in one of the groups throughout nine lessons which covered the discussions until the end of the book. The three lessons observed in the other group mirrored ones given to the first since the same parts were read. However, the discussions naturally varied due to different responses and suggestions by the students. Examples from both groups are included in the study.

The read-aloud, including related discussions, were captured through audio recordings (10 hours) and field notes which provided extra contextual information, for example when the teacher pointed to projected images in the book. I took the role as participant observer (Fangen, 2005) as I manly listened, took notes on a laptop, and managed the audio recorder without engaging in the discussions. For the most

part, I was seated at the back of the classroom. However, when the teacher gathered the students closer to the front of the classroom to create more closeness in the performance of the read-aloud, I moved closer as well. The teacher used the classroom whiteboard both to project the pages from the picture book and write instructions for read-aloud activities. Among others, these activities included students' composing letters and using an emotions chart. Such instructions were captured by photographs.

The audio recordings were transcribed (54 000 words) according to broad verbatim standard (e.g., Nikander, 2008). Traces of, for example, learner language in syntax and word choice were retained. The possibility of more detailed transcriptions of, for example, pauses, intonation and overlapping talk potentially adding additional layers of analysis, was not used in order to be able to transcribe more data. In order to give a broad view of character-focused discussions during the read-aloud, the focus in on the content of the discussions. The excerpts chosen for the presentation of the result (see below) were translated from Swedish to English by the researcher. In the excerpts, the students are numbered according to their participation in the relevant discussions.

Regarding research ethics, I followed the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). This meant that I collected written consent from the teacher and the students' caregivers. To ensure informed consent in a context with possible language barriers, consent from caregivers was collected during an annual progress conference with the teacher, enabling oral explanations and giving caregivers the opportunity to ask questions. In addition, I explained the nature of the research to the students and asked for their oral consent to participate, while stressing that they could tell their teacher if they did not want to be recorded.

## 2.1 Analysis

The analysis drew inspiration from thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to find patterns across the data set, guided by the theoretical concepts described above. The initial step consisted identifying character-focused discussions by reading the transcriptions carefully and cross-referencing with field notes to jot down initial ideas. Secondly, these discussions were coded according to their overall emphasis with respect to engaging with literary texts and grouped into themes which, in their finalised forms, are reflected in the headings of the Result section: judging characters, appreciating how the story works, relating to and emphasising with the characters, reacting to the characters during the read aloud, and employing the characters in creative expressions. The two latter themes required broadening the analytical scope, as they concerned discussions and activities in which the characters were central but not the immediate topic. Next, concepts from Felski (2008), Sipe (2000, and Langer (1995/2017) were employed for a more fine-grained analysis of the interaction, sensitive to how different stances, impulses, or aesthetic aspects of reading interplayed in sometimes unforeseen ways. The analysis can be described as

abductive, given that it entailed repeated movements between the data and the theoretical framework (e.g., Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Furthermore, in the necessary movements within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86), students' reactions and creative responses were traced to earlier discussions, readings of parts of the book and to the picture book itself.

Relevant details about the book are discussed below together with the theoretical concepts used to consider how the illustrations of the characters may relate to the responses evoked. Finally, I use two terms related to narrative death causality: accidental and purposeful deaths (see Cox et al., 2005). In the abductive process, I employed these to further probe students' creative responses.

### 2.2  The book used in the read-aloud

The book chosen by the teacher was the picture book *Legenden om Sally Jones* (in English: The Legend of Sally Jones), by Jakob Wegelius (2008). It has been critically acclaimed and was awarded a prestigious Swedish literary prize, the August Prize, in 2008. Being 107 pages long, it has sometimes been termed a graphic novel (e.g., Boglind & Nordenstam, 2015, p. 198)

The picture book tells the story of Sally Jones, a gorilla, who is captured in Kongo and then subjected to a string of unlikely adventures, encounters and misfortunes across the world. These involve several other characters, such as Frau Schultz, who takes care of Sally Jones in Istanbul while instructing her in the art of gentleman thefts, Baba, an orangutang Sally Jones befriends when held at Istanbul's Zoo, a rough-looking but kind ship engineer ("The Chief"), and Kaspar Meyer, a bibulous scientist who uses Sally Jones in his duplicitous research on the wildlife of Borneo.

Regarding the illustrations, it is worth mentioning that the apes (Sally Jones and Baba) are relatively naturalistically portrayed, for example in terms of detail and proportion. However, in confronting many misfortunes and mistreatments, their faces and postures conveys emotions such as fear, worry sadness, and (rarely) contentment. In addition, the apes also show clear affection for each other by holding hands and cradling each other's shoulders. The human characters, on the other hand, are strikingly stylised and, as stated by O'Toole (1994/2011), imbued with a life of their own. Several of them have animalistic features, such as elephant-like eyes, elongated noses, and protruding facial features (e.g., nose, forehead, chin). In interaction with the protagonist, they often have flat or calculating facial expressions. Since human characters resemble animals and vice versa, reality is reflected in an unexpected and potentially unsettling way which can be described as defamiliarising (Shklovsky, 1917/2017) or unheimlich (Freud, 1979/2003). In addition, the depictions invite readers to affiliate themselves with the apes.

## 3.   RESULT

The result is presented according to different kinds of engagement with the picture book in character-focused discussions.

### 3.1  Judging characters

Generally, the read-aloud of parts of the book was preceded and followed by character-focused discussions in which the teacher asked the students to evaluate the characters on a scale between "good" and "bad". Laminated portrait cards of the characters, placed on either the whiteboard in front or a note board at the back of the classroom, were moved along this scale according to the students' suggestions. As a recurring activity, these evaluative discussions constituted a large part of the jointly created extra-narration, and an important point of departure for other character-focused discussion.

In the excerpt below (Excerpt 1), students were asked to give their thoughts about a character emerging quite recently: the engineer of the ship Sally Jones and her orangutang friend, Baba, embarked on as stowaways after escaping from Istanbul's Zoo.

> *Excerpt 1*
>
> Student 1: Well, I just want to say that he should be below Silvio.
>
> Teacher: Below Silvio. Yes. Tell me why.
>
> Student 1: Because, well. He looks like a thief, and you'd never know how he is.
>
> Teacher: No. But we have some examples of how he is. What did he do?  /…/
>
> Student 2: I think he's smart and he thought he should give them food and let them sleep and so on. /…/ He sort of helped them too. And then he brought them with him.
>
> Teacher: Yes, exactly. That's right. Good. [student's name]?
>
> Student 3: What's it called. Well. I think he still should be there. Down there [pointing]. Because uh look at like his. Well, his appearance he like looks a bit bad.
>
> Teacher: Maybe a bit beardy like that. Yes. You know, the thing is. We should think about what he said. Firstly, the captain of the boat wanted to throw Sally Jones and Baba overboard because they were stowaways. And then he said, no we're not doing that. In fact, the sea law says that if you are a stowaway you get to work it off. Work on the ship instead. And he said there is no difference between humans and apes. [the teacher goes on recounting what had happened]  /…/ So, this far I think he seems a quite decent guy. But we don't know yet. Maybe he looks a bit crookish with that beard but at least he is smiling. /…/ What do you say?
>
> Student 4: No no. I don't care about that. Like, just because he has a beard, he is evil.
>
> Teacher: Yes. /…/ It's exactly like you say.

Student 1 and Student 3 suggest that the character should be placed on the "bad" side of scale, ("below Silvio", another character evaluated negatively in a previous

reading), because he "looks like a thief" and "a bit bad". However, Student 2 gives examples of good actions the character performed towards the other characters. The teacher affirms that the character looks "a bit beardy and crookish" while suggesting he seemed like "a decent guy" based on previous actions. Student 4, followed by some other students, objected to judging the character based on appearance, a perspective acknowledged by the teacher.

In this discussion, it is evident that the students and the teacher draw on different resources to infer the personality of the character. Students 1 and 3 rely on the image of the character shown on the whiteboard, likely drawing on stereotypes of bearded men in literature and popular culture. The teacher and Student 2, in contrast, refer to the character's solicitous actions towards the apes. As evident in the excerpt, the teacher gives validity to both kinds of inferences. Image-based inferences were likely promoted by the use of character portrait cards carrying little of the narrative context but enabling connections to "the wider world of cultural products" through an intertextual response (see Sipe, 2000, p. 271). In addition, these evaluative discussions became a point of departure for the discussion and reviewal of important events. Since the read-aloud was spaced out over several weeks, the discussions seemed to facilitate stepping back into the story (see Langer, 2017, p. 34). With an overall orientation to understanding the characters and the story, many of the evaluative character-focused discussions fostered a hermeneutic impulse.

Many of the discussions centred on what the teacher and the students considered as two major betrayals of the protagonist, Sally Jones. The example below (Excerpt 2) concerns a character, Frau Schultz, first acting very kindly towards the protagonist by taking her into her care. However, later she is shown to train Sally Jones in burglary.

*Excerpt 2*

Student 1: Sally Jones wanted to learn to steal /…/ so she could keep staying with her. So, she would not be, like, outside but she would take care of her.

Teacher: Yes, exactly. So, you may wonder if she actually is all that bad. Perhaps she is just as good as she was before? Let's keep her there. How about this one. [points on a different card]. Frau Schultz. She was completely good last time. Should we keep her there? [several students say no]. Then tell me when to stop [moves the card towards "bad"]. Oh my gosh.

Student 2: Stop.

Student 3: No.

Student 4: A bit more. [students keep commenting]/…/

Teacher: But why has she turned that bad?

Student 5: It's like this. It started like a game with finding things and so on. But then it got a bit exaggerated. Open safeboxes and the like. And takes advantage of the ape for her own sake. After all, the ape does not know any better.

Teacher: Yes, exactly.

In the interaction, this betrayal is extra-narratively accentuated as a pivotal event. Before Student 1's contribution above, some other students had suggested that Sally Jones should be moved to the "bad" side because of her breaking in to steal from a safe. Both Student 1 and Student 5 provide explanations of why the character committed this act: "she could keep staying" (Student 1), "the ape does not know any better" (Student 5). As in Excerpt 1, the students make the inferences necessary for judging the characters.

The changed perception of Frau Schultz is reflected in the students asking her to be moved towards the "bad" side (to varying degrees) and in Student 5's explanation of how seemingly innocent activities were turned into less conscionable ones: "started like a game … got exaggerated … open safe boxes and the like". Another student wanted a confirmation, "Sally Jones is an ape, isn't she?", and suggested that she "might think it is just a game". Overall, this shows the students' *recognition* (Felski, 2008) of the asymmetry between the characters, likely reflecting asymmetries the students are aware of in their real-life world, such as those between humans and pets or adults and children. Thus, the hermeneutic orientation to judging and understanding the characters was intertwined with the recognition. In addition, this recognition enlisted the students' *allegiance* with the protagonist (Felski, 2008, p. 34), as they expressed solidarity and condemned the characters acting badly against her.

The other "betrayal" of Sally Jones was committed by another ape, the orangutang named Baba. After becoming friends while being held capture in Istanbul's Zoo, they escaped as stowaways on the boat with the kind-hearted engineer (see Excerpt 1) and eventually reached Borneo, the home jungle of Baba. In meeting his family after several years and faced with the dilemma of displeasing the elder, he abandons Sally Jones. The perceived betrayal had a clear impact on the extra-narration throughout the read-aloud. While several of the students came to resent Baba (see further examples below), the discussion got slightly more complex, compared to the condemnations Frau Schultz (see Excerpt 2). Students' initial judgements ranged from "How can you forget your best friend? Like, I don't give a crap about you anymore" to more generous interpretations of Baba "missing Borneo" and forgetting about Sally Jones because of "having so much fun with his friends". These inferences show signs of students empathising with the character by putting themselves in his place. These responses can likely be attributed to the relationship between Baba and Sally being more symmetrical compared to the situation with Frau Shultz. In addition, the students likely drew on experiences of being away from home and having fun with friends, thus perceiving a life to text symmetry.  Furthermore, both examples show that the evaluative discussions before and after the read-aloud of parts of the book were intertwined with the shifts of Sally Jones' fortunes in the story. These aspects will be further explored in the coming sections.

*3.2  Appreciating how the story works*

The previous section showed that the evaluative discussions about the characters related to the understanding of characters' motivations and making inferences about a character based on images and previous events. In addition, the students showed signs of perceiving (a)symmetries between characters, and between the text and their lives. Therefore, the overall hermeneutic orientation was interspersed with personalising impulses of recognition. In some character-focused discussions, the attention to Sally Jones' shifting fortunes became more pronounced. Before the read-aloud of the part of the story in which Baba's betrayal occurred, the teacher pointed out that: "Now, let's all keep in mind that the best character, it is Baba." The phrasing "best" referred to the students having placed Baba the furthest on the "good" part of the scaled. Thereby, she foreshadowed an important plot development in a way which also highlighted the transition of expectations between previous and new ones (see Iser, 1978). In the discussion following the read-aloud of this part, the teacher asks the students to justify negative judgements of Baba by referring to preceding events (Excerpt 3).

> *Excerpt 3*
>
> Teacher: What did he do?
>
> Student 1: He, like, doesn't care anymore about Sally Jones.
>
> Teacher: Yes, exactly.
>
> Student 1: And Sally Jones like helped him with everything and then he didn't care.
>
> Teacher: What happened really in all of this. It started with Sally Jones saving him from the zoo, right? [the teacher goes on recounting]

In this part of the read-aloud, the teacher guides the students through the unfolding of the story by foreshadowing an important development and reviewing preceding events. This occurred as part of the character-focused extra-narrative, providing additional fuel for the judging of Baba, while also highlighting how the story works according to a hermeneutic orientation.

On some occasions, the teacher asked the students to predict coming events. In one such instance, the read-aloud had focused on a part in which Sally Jones was trapped inside a small cabin with Kaspar Meyer, an embittered scientist who tried and failed to use Sally Jones as sensational proof of gorillas living on Borneo. Being portrayed as an indolent drunk beating Sally Jones on several occasions, the character had been an easy target of disparaging judgments in earlier discussions. In this lesson, the teacher concluded the reading when Sally Jones was shown to grasp the scientist's wrist as he was about to give her a particularly vicious beating. Asking the students to discuss what they thought would happen next, the teacher emphasised that the students were supposed to use "all the knowledge you have of Sally Jones … her character" and think about "the *likely* thing she would do", giving further evidence to a hermeneutic orientation. However, several of the students suggested that

Sally Jones killed the scientist. In response to this, the teacher asks if Sally Jones really "is the kind of gorilla to knock down and kill people", thus prompting the students to adhere to the text according to the hermeneutic orientation. Some of the students' differing responses to this, involving using the story for creative expression, are highlighted in the final Result section.

On one occasion, the teacher concluded the read-aloud with a "book talk" about the engineer's choice to break up an engagement with a woman who refused Sally Jones as the bridesmaid. In response to students expressing solidarity with the engineer's choice, the teacher asked the students to consider if the woman really was the love of his live. Calling this into question, a student points out that the woman has proved herself to be "a bit mean" since she must know about the strong friendship between Sally Jones and the engineer. The student seemed to point out that the teacher's hypothetical question, potentially inviting personal responses, was incongruous with the expectations generated by the text. This shows that the hermeneutic orientation to the text was not singularly promoted by the teacher but at times initiated by the students.

A more complex activity which promoted the same orientation was the teacher asking the students to map important events on a "emotions chart", focusing on the way they thought Sally Jones felt throughout the story. Before letting the students conduct the activity in pairs, she recapitulated the events and exemplified how to map the events on a chart from 5 (very happy) to 1 (very unhappy).

*Excerpt 4*

Teacher: How did she feel when she was sitting in that zoo in that park?

Student 1: She was happy.

Student 2: What?

Student 1: Because that ape came.

Teacher: Right, but I thought about before he came. /…/ You know, she was sitting there for several years. For six years, she was sitting in that cage before he, Baba, came.

Being surprised by the students' suggestion that Sally was "happy" while being kept in the zoo, the teacher points to the considerable timeframe spent locked up in the cage. There is a duality to the activity, with the students positioned to engage with the text by taking the perspective of the protagonist, an act of recognition requiring alignment (Felski, 2008), while also stepping out of the text to look at it analytically. One of the clearest examples of stepping out in this way was initiated by a student, who pointed out that the example chart showed quite regular shifts in Sally Jones's feelings (Excerpt 5).

*Excerpt 5*

Student 1: If you look it's like. It's like one happy and one unhappy and then happy and unhappy.

Teacher: You think it seems to be every other. That's a good analysis.

The teacher affirms it as "a good analysis". Indeed, the student notices something which could be used to discuss how stories tend to work.

### 3.3  Relating to and emphasising with the characters

In some character-related discussions, a greater emphasis was placed on recognition and life to text responses. In a discussion about Baba abandoning the protagonist in favour of his family and friends, a student argued against his behaviour through a personal response (Excerpt 6).

*Excerpt 6*

Student 1: For example, now, take me and [student's name]. Perhaps we are not the same species. Uh, I don't know. We are some animals. So, when I come to a new home. And when, for example, the chieftain says now [student's name] must go home because she is not the same species or whatever they say. Ok, then. Then, instead, Baba should have said. Or perhaps I. /…/ Then perhaps I can say but she could still be with us because she has done no wrong. She helped me.

Teacher: Yes, that is what you should do, isn't it? But it may also be that this chieftain, he was scared that enemies could really come to them.

In comparing Baba's action with what she would do herself in the same situation, the student recognises a symmetry between the apes' relationship and friendship between classmates. Rather than taking the perspective of Baba, she reads herself into the text and judged the character negatively. The teacher affirms that "that is what you should do" but calls attention to the possibility that there was a real danger to the apes. In doing so, the teacher invites the student to recognise the perspective of the chieftain, a minor character. The student's response, achieved somewhat hesitantly, seems challenged by the different species of the apes, a detail complicating the symmetry between life and text.

The clearest instances of students' reading themselves into the text was when the teacher asked the students to write letters between the apes, Sally Jones and Baba. One of the groups was assigned taking the perspective of Sally Jones while the other was expected to take the perspective of Baba. An excerpt from the instruction given to the group focusing on Sally Jones is shown below (Excerpt 7).

*Excerpt 7*

Teacher: How would it feel to be Sally Jones? And what would you like to write to Baba? Still, she does not know where Baba went. We know, because we, like, read that the flock of orangutangs went up the trees /…/ But Sally Jones, she still waited quite a long time for Baba. And thought he would come back. And she has been betrayed before, hasn't she? By [inviting the students to fill in].

In addition to asking the students to imagine how Sally would feel, the teacher encourages the students' sustained allegiance with Sally Jones by asking about a previous betrayal. The students are very quick to fill in the name of the culprit, Frau Schultz. Furthermore, the teacher points out that the protagonist knew less about

Baba's disappearance than the readers of the story. In doing so, she facilitated *alignment* with the character's perspective (see Felski, 2008, p. 34).

The group assigned the perspective of Baba arguably had a more strenuous task, considering their pervasive dislike of the character. In addition, Baba had not been part of the story for a while. As shown below, the teacher took this into account when giving instructions to the students (Excerpt 8).

> *Excerpt 8*
>
> Teacher: And if you're to be Baba you must try to imagine how it feels to be Baba. /… / Why did he leave her like that? I don't think it was just to be mean. /…/ Like, how did it feel to return to his whole family after being so very unhappy?  And then try to get Sally Jones into this. And it didn't work out. Have any of you experienced an outsider friend, perhaps from a [sports] practice or some cousin or the like who would join? And it feels like it does not really fit together? A bit like that.

To promote alignment with Baba's perspective, the teacher asks how he might feel in the situation of meeting his family and having to "get Sally Jones into" the family. Most importantly, in the teacher shows the possibility of recognition by construing a relatable real-world context of having an "outsider" friend who did not "fit" with the regular group.

The continued discussion in the group assigned Baba's perspective showed the students contributing further life to text connections. When asking the students how they would describe Baba, the teacher elicited suggestions such as "cowardly" and "feels sorry for himself", prompting a remark by the teacher that "you are pretty sour on Baba, that is clear". However, some students expressed an understanding of Baba, exemplified below (Excerpt 9).

> *Excerpt 9*
>
> Student 1: He is not exactly mean. /…/ But I mean when you are with another family. /…. / Like with my friends and my mum calls me. Then, I run there right away.
>
> Teacher: Exactly. Like, family and mum come before friends. /…/ I will write that here, it's not a bad thought.
>
> Student 2: That's exactly how it is. Family before friends.
>
> Teacher: Maybe that's why he left Sally Jones.

Student 1 finds justification for Baba's behaviour by referring to how they would "run there right away" if his mother called while being at a friend's house. This is affirmed by the teacher as "not a bad thought" and more strongly echoed by Student 2: "family before friends". In her concluding comment, the teacher returns to the text: "Maybe that's why he left Sally Jones". The students are clearly involved in recognising symmetries between life and text. In perceiving Baba and Sally Jones as children with family relationships to consider, they read themselves into the text and engaged in recognition.

The writing assignment shows a substantial transformation of the story in the jointly created and sustained extra-narrative, since it brought back a character that had been absent from the pages of the book for a time and remained so throughout. In addition, the focus on Baba's and Sally's relationship seemed to compress the timeframe of the story, since neither the teacher nor the students pointed out the substantial time (several years) passing between Baba's betrayal and the point of the story in which the students were asked to write these letters. Thus, in this part of instruction, the personalising orientation seemed most pronounced.

### 3.4 Reacting to the characters during the read-aloud

The previous sections have focused on discussions and instruction occurring before and after readings of different parts of the book. In contrast, this section will highlight the students and the teacher responding to the characters during the actual reading of the text.

On many occasions, the students showed traces of being *enchanted* with the reading of the story (see Felski, 2008). They expressed enthusiasm before the read-aloud, protested when the read-aloud was concluded, and responded with exclamations. In relation to the characters, there were occurrences of *talking back* (Sipe, 2002), especially to the ones disliked by the students. Many of these instances concerned Kaspar Meyer, the dubious scientist. For example, the students offered that "he really looks like an ape", when he appeared on a picture, and remarked that he did "assault on a gorilla" when he beat Sally Jones. After a fraught jungle expedition, a student disappointedly asked, "but why didn't he die". Furthermore, the students displayed sympathy for the protagonist, Sally Jones. When a minor character in the book speculated that Sally Jones suffered from a broken heart, a student responded, "that is so true".

Not surprisingly, talking back also occurred when reading the part about Baba's "betrayal" with exclamations such as "mean" and "after all Sally did for him". The teacher chimed in, offering "what a traitor". In relation to the other betrayal, committed by Frau Schultz, who had trained Sally Jones to steal, the students expressed pleasure when she received her come-uppance. Facilitating this response, the teacher pointed at a revealing object not mentioned in the verbal text when the villainous character was shown to have been robbed (Excerpt 10).

> *Excerpt 10*
>
> Teacher: The thief had left a clue behind. [pointing] A banana peel.
>
> Student 1: Ahh
>
> Student 2: Sally Jones. /.../
>
> Student 3: That's what happened.
>
> Teacher: Right.
>
> Student 3: You get robbed yourself.

> Teacher: Exactly. If you do bad things, some time will pass, and then it will get back to you.

The teacher's remark highlights the gap filled out by the image in relation to the verbal text and secures that all of the students can appreciate Frau Schultz' just deserts. On another occasion, the roles were reversed when a student pointed out a resurfacing character, who is shown holding hands with a love interest of the sympathetic engineer.

> *Excerpt 11*
>
> Student 1: But it is Silvio! [shouting]
>
> Teacher: Is it really? Is it Silvio?
>
> Student 2: Yes!
>
> Teacher: Gosh, has he returned again? What the hey, it really is him [putting his card on the whiteboard].
>
> Student 3: It's the thief. The lady thief.

The teacher is surprised and delighted by the students' discovery. Much like the banana peel, the depiction of the character functions as a punchline for the page, which, in this case, is identified by a student. In addition, it shows a parallel story between minor characters (see Terwagne, 2006). Overall, enchantment, or what Sipe (2000) terms an aesthetic impulse, was prominent in the read-aloud process and sometimes supported by explicit attention to the relationship between the verbal text and those images providing additional information and parallel stories. The latter indicates a hermeneutic impulse. While acts of talking back and enjoying the interplay between textual elements are expected in any read-aloud, it seems reasonable to assume that the extra attention given to discussing and judging characters contributed to the character-focused engagement while the text was read.

## 3.5  Employing the characters in creative expressions

Sipe (2000) describes two kinds of aesthetic responses: the transparent response, corresponding to Felski's (2008) concept of enchantment, and the performative response, which entails using the text as a platform for creative expression. Some of the activities led by the teacher encouraged students' responses of the latter kind. One such instance was when the teacher asked what the students thought would happen in the struggle between Sally Jones and the abusive scientist (Excerpt 12, see also previous section).

> *Excerpt 12*
>
> Student 1: He fainted because he had been grogging /…/ drinking too much. So, he fainted. And then Sally ran away. And then she walked around in the forest. And, uh, tried to find Baba. But then she sees Baba. So, he lies dead on the ground. /…/ [inaudible comments from students]

> Teacher: I get the sense that several of you in the class feel like this, that you are a bit angry. Angry with Baba.

Perhaps with the teacher's objections against interpretations of Sally killing the scientist in mind (discussed above), the student suggests that he fainted "because he had been grogging". On the other hand, the student invents the death of Baba ("he lies dead on the ground"). The teacher interprets this as a sign of the students' sustained grudge against the same character. The students' reshaping the text to suit their evaluation of characters are clear examples of performative or creative response. In the same activity, another student suggested a purposeful death for Baba. (Excerpt 13)

> *Excerpt 13*
>
> Student 1: Sally will run away. Go where the journalist was eaten by a crocodile. Take the pencil. Go to Baba and kill Baba.
>
> Student 2: Yeah!
>
> Teacher: Kill Baba?
>
> Student 2: Because he was mean.

In the contribution, the student referred to a page showing a satisfied crocodile beside a hat and a notepad contradicting a verbal text statement about the journalist having "disappeared without a trace" in a fateful jungle expedition. The suggestion meets enthusiastic approval by another student ("Yeah!"), indicating the pleasure taken in the death. In his creative expression, Student 1 makes use of both the freedom given by the teacher's question and specific details presented on an image earlier in the story to suggest events subverting both the text (a purposeful killing of a character construed by students as an antagonist) and sympathetic traits attributed to the protagonist in previous discussions.

The question of "what happened next" had been discussed in student groups of three. Therefore, the teacher turned to the other students and asked if they "were onboard of this version". One of them affirmed but suggested a modified version: "Ok, [s]he perhaps didn't kill him but [s]he maybe, like, goes to him and ask why you did that".[1] This suggestion, recalling conflicts between childhood friends, is clearly aligned with previous discussions building on life to text symmetries. In response to both suggestions, the teacher affirmed that "You think this is not quite wrapped up, the thing with Baba. You feel that he needs to know that he did something wrong." The teacher's remark indicates the central place given to Baba in the jointly constructed extra-narrative. It also calls attention to expectations that the conflict between the characters, largely an extra-narrative construction, will be resolved according to common story patterns.

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[1] *The students quite frequently used the pronoun han (he) to refer to the character. This was not corrected by the teacher, who at times picked up this use of pronoun. In the book, Sally Jones is referred to as hon (she).*

The second instance encouraging creative expressions occurred before the read-aloud of the final part of the story. At that point, the teacher asked what kind of ending the students wished for. The choice of verb (wish) indicates a large degree of freedom. A suggestion voiced similarly by several students is shown below:

*Excerpt 14*

Student: I would have liked the Chief to go to Kongo with that boat they bought. And they met Sally Jones' family. And then they are together, like, as a family. And then the chief becomes a part of the family.

Teacher: Like "happy ending", huh? [expressed in English]. That would have been nice.

This suggestion aligns with the personalising text to life connections exemplified previously. In such a response, the anthropomorphic nature of the protagonist is amplified to enabling her to live with the engineer as a family. In addition, the suggestion echoes common narrative patterns such as the hero's journey (Sally returning home) and, as indicated by the teacher, a happy ending. Although not as subversive as some other suggestions (see below), this transformation of Sally Jones's character is a form of creative expression based on an intertextual response.

Two students used the text for more fantastical creative expressions. The first example is shown below (Excerpt 15).

*Excerpt 15*

Student 1: I want the boat to sink. The Chief will die. Sally Jonas will ride, like, dolphins. They had lived in a hole in Texas. Then, fifty years later, they see flying ships and get a heart attack.

Teacher: As usual, it is a bit, uh, science fiction

Student 1: Yes.

Teacher: And right away, you see [student] go further down this track if he got the opportunity.

As recognised by the teacher, the student uses a different kind of intertextual response. In addition to the subversive inclusion of flying ships and dolphin-riding, the student plays with the protagonist's name by calling her "Sally Jonas" (Jonas being a male forename used in Sweden). The teacher's mention of narrative conventions (happy ending, Excerpt 14) and referral to a genre diverging from the one currently engaged with (science fiction, Excerpt 15) hints at an analytical stance (*stepping out*, Langer, 2017) to the how the students' expressions relate to genre expectations. In addition, the teacher's concluding remark signals the two students' engagement in a creative contest. The other student's contribution was as follows (Excerpt 16).

*Excerpt 16*

Student 1: Well, they take their small boat. Sail to Kongo. And then go to shore. But there, it happens, like Baba teleports all the way from Borneo to *Kongo*. So, they find him and kills him with knives they found in the ocean. And then, Sally Jones robs Baba's secret safe there inside of Baba. Finds all his organs. Brings them and eats them.

Student 2: Cannibal bananas. [laughter]

Teacher: Ok. [student] is delighted. Now, you're off the rails again. Here we go.

Student 2: But mine is better. Dolphins. Just riding dolphins over the Atlantic.

Once again, the student lets Baba meet a pointy end. Similar to the example in Excerpt 13 (a different student), Student 1 uses specific information from the book, in this case the different geographic locations of Sally Jones and Baba and a safe box as an object strongly connoted with the protagonist, in a creative expression which adds elements not only of science fiction (e.g., teleportation) but also of horror and gore. Student 2 laughingly affirms the story with another linguistically playful response ("cannibal bananas", in Swedish "kannibala bananer"), while maintaining his suggestion as the better one. The English translation corresponds to the sound play and synecdoche in the original language. The mock competition by the students, the instances of linguistic playfulness and the teacher's affirmation of the boys "going off the rails" highlights the *performative* nature of the creative expressions.

## 4.   DISCUSSION

The present study has highlighted character-focused discussions as part of read-aloud practices, with a focus on the possibilities created for students' development of literary understanding.  The result has shown that the character-focused discussions were oriented towards understanding the picture book while also creating opportunities for being immersed in the text and responding to it creatively. The recurring activity of judging key characters on a scale from "good" to "bad" may appear unpromising for more nuanced discussions relating to the character. However, in alignment with findings in Walldén (2020b), these discussions entailed making inferences about the characters' motivations and considering the events they were tied up in. To make sense of the characters, the students and teacher made varied inferences based on the verbal text, images, and life to text connections. Aside from being a point of departure for summarising previous events and re-entering the envisionment of the picture book (see Langer, 2017), the discussions called attention to how the story worked, as it became apparent how shifting perceptions of characters were intermingled with pivotal events. In the exercise of charting the protagonist's emotions throughout, one of the students made an analytical remark about a regular pattern. As shown by Sipe (2000) and Meller et al. (2009), such contributions can be used to further discussions about how stories work.

In the character-focused discussions, the children used the text to make personal connections, empathise with the characters and explain why they behaved in a certain way. Aligning with Sønneland's findings (2020), the relationship between characters, especially between the protagonist and the characters perceived as betraying her, became a salient point in discussions. The students recognised symmetries with real world relationships (Felski, 2008), which played an important part in making inferences about the characters (see Terwagne, 2006). As such, the present study has

highlighted considerable interplay between what Sipe (2000) has termed hermeneutic (understanding the text) and personalising impulses (connecting with the text). In contrast to some previous studies (Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Walldén, 2021) writing was used in a way which furthered the students' engagement with the book rather than promoted for its own sake.

The result raises interesting questions about how perceived symmetries and asymmetries shaped the students' reactions. Being able to relate to Baba's responsibilities to his characters and perceiving him as a peer of Sally Jones, some students seemed more inclined to excuse Baba's betrayal in comparison to Frau Schultz who took advantage of Sally Jones in an asymmetrical relationship. However, the life to text connection to real-world  relationships between friends, such as classmates, may also have made Baba's betrayal the more reprehensible to other students. Probing the students' responses further in the character-focused discussions could have provided opportunities for an analytical gaze on the characters as literary constructions evoking responses and leaving gaps to be filled out. The potential to objectify the text in such a manner has been shown by previous research (Meller et al, 2009; Sipe, 2000) but did not occur in the present study. Moreover, the students' personal responses could be used to discuss cultural norms. In an individualistic country like Sweden, sentiments such as "family first" and "family before friends" may be less common than in less individualistic countries. In linguistically diverse classrooms in particular, there is a potential to use literature to promote (inter)cultural awareness (e.g., Elkad-Lehman & Poyas, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2013) and the students' sense of themselves as social subjects in the world (see Meller et al., 2009).

In the reading of different parts of the book, both the teacher and students showed engagement with the characters. The teacher's foregrounding of the characters in the discussions, including the protagonist's shifting emotions in the unfolding of the story may have promoted the students' enchantment in experiencing the reading. In addition, it is necessary to consider how the depictions of the characters may relate to this response. Students' expressing sympathy for the protagonist and expressing revulsion for the villainous scientist ("looks like an ape") relate to the unheimlich-effect achieved in the book by depicting the protagonist with human emotions and the human characters with beastly facial features. As shown in previous research on picture books, the interplay between verbal text and images is key for enjoying the story and understanding how it works (Nikolajeva, 2003; Sipe, 2000). In the studied read-aloud, both the teacher and the students pointed out the significance of images in a way with seemed to promote a pleasurable reading experience. Furthermore, the result indicates the potential in discussing why the characters were portrayed in a certain way, thus promoting a critical awareness of the reading process (Meller, 2003). Potentially, such discussions could increase the possibilities for recognising symmetries between the several instances of human cruelty to Sally Jones and similar events in the real world, pertaining to human exploitation of animals or to abusive relationships more generally. The scientist subjecting Sally Jones to drunken violence seems particularly disturbing in this light. The selected picture

book has several layers of meanings, some of which may not be intended for the young audience. Regardless, the text to life dimension of recognition (Felski, 2008) was less apparent in the read-aloud than the personalising life to text responses discussed above.

In the activities in which the students were asked to imagine what happened next in the story, the students used the picture book for creative expressions. These performative responses (Sipe, 2000) differed slightly in nature. Creating a happy ending for the protagonist and the Chief can be seen as way to *control* the story according to the wishes of the students (Sipe, 2002). The controlling mode of performative response was also apparent when students staged often purposeful demises of characters construed as antagonists in the extra-narration. In addition, the latter contributions recall Sipe's (2002) category of *taking over*, since the students used the text as a platform for trumping each other with humorous and subversive suggestions (Excerpt 15 and 16). However, these suggestions also built on specific details in the text, including the images, in clever ways. Overall, the striking illustrations of the different characters in *The Legend of Sally Jones* likely had an important role in promoting the students' engagement and use of creative expressions in the read-aloud activities.

The result validates creative expression as part of the conceptualisation of disciplinary literacy practices in language arts (Gabrielsen et al., 2019; cf. Spires et al., 2018) and in the employment of discussion-based approaches. It follows that creative expression deserves a clearer place in the curriculum of Nordic countries (see Liberg et al., 2012; Gourvennec et al., 2020). Furthermore, while Sipe (2000) relates intertextual connections to a hermeneutic understanding of the text, the present study has showed the intertextual nature of the students' creative responses, building on narrative patterns of happy resolutions and pleasurable deaths of antagonists (e.g., Cox et al, 2005; Fitzgerald et al, 2020). Discouragingly, the soon to be implemented curriculum for Swedish language arts (Skolverket, 2021) do not contain the word creativity and refers to intertextuality only in relation to analytical practices in grades 7–9 ("analysis of texts in connection to other texts", see Skolverket, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, the advocated use of picture books is restricted to grades 1–3 (p. 2) while graphic novels are not mentioned. In light of the potentials shown in the present study of using a well-written and richly illustrated picture book to promote creative, personal and analytical responses from linguistically diverse students, the curriculum's "on the rails" approach to literature and literary understanding seems limiting.

My hope is that the present study will inspire teachers to consider the interconnected nature of literary understanding (see also Walldén, 2020b) and the value of read-aloud discussions based on visually and verbally engaging picture books or graphic novels. These discussions can promote different kinds of responses from students that show and support literary understanding, including responses in which the students go off the rails with the characters and the story. These opportunities appear particularly important in settings in which students have limited

opportunities to discuss literature outside school in the majority language. As shown by the result, focusing on the characters is a promising point of departure for these literary literacy practices.

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