‘WHY DO WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO READ ALL THESE BOOKS FOR SCHOOL?’

Assessing literature teachers’ legitimations of literary reading towards students in upper-secondary education

JEROEN DERA

Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Abstract

In recent decades, numerous publications have argued for the importance of literature reading; however, little is known about how such justifications permeate into education. This article addresses this gap and reports on a survey study conducted among Dutch literature teachers working in upper secondary education (10th to 12th grade). The central question of the study focuses on the arguments teachers employ to draw attention to the significance of literary reading. Analysis of the results reveals significant heterogeneity in literature education concerning the justifications teachers practically employ, though some patterns emerge. The emphasis is primarily on literary reading as a tool for broadening students’ perspectives, enhancing their empathic abilities, and improving general literacy skills. The analysis also exposes fundamental tensions regarding the use of justifications for literature reading. Teachers claim to prioritize fostering reading enjoyment, yet this aspect lags significantly in their survey responses. Another tension concerns the balance between broadening students’ worldview and the ethical and socio-political development of young readers. While literature teachers assert a strong focus on expanding students’ horizons and their ability to empathize, they seem to do so without much consideration for the socio-cultural context of literature education or ethical issues related to literature. Based on the research findings, it is recommended to pay more attention in curricula and teacher training programs to the diverse range of justifications for literary reading and how these justifications relate to each other.

Keywords: Literature education; survey research; Dutch literature; educational purposes; curriculum

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Corresponding author: Jeroen Dera, Radboud Institute for Culture and History PO Box 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen. Email: jeroen.dera@ru.nl

1. INTRODUCTION: LEGITIMIZING LITERATURE IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Over the past two decades, a conspicuous number of books have been published advocating for the intrinsic significance of literary reading in education and society. The titles of such publications underscore how much they expound upon the dividends accrued through the act of reading, both on the level of individuals and society at large: *Why Read?* (Edmundson, 2004); *Why Literature?* (Bruns, 2011); *Why Literature Matters in the Twenty-First Century* (Roche, 2004); *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters* (Sumara, 2002). The ascendancy of such texts indicates a deep-felt need in the fields of literary criticism and literature didactics to legitimize the importance of literary reading, specifically in the context of the neoliberal and digital epoch, wherein the value of literature is no longer ubiquitously shared. When the act of literary reading is 'under attack', even in educational settings (Worth, 2017, p. 16), it is hardly astonishing that scholars are compelled to articulate a fervent advocacy for the preservation of literature.

Especially since young people worldwide are reading fewer books in their leisure time compared to earlier decades (Hooper, 2020), the matter of justifying the value of literature is also pertinent to literacy teachers in general and literature instructors in particular. As Merga (2019, p. 99) rightfully notes, students need to receive encouragements and reminders of the importance of reading in order to remain engaged with literacy education. In the case of learners in upper-secondary education, empirical evidence indeed shows that students are inclined to consider literature teachers to be more excellent, if they are able to legitimate the teaching of literature as a subject area (Witte & Jansen, 2016). In the realm of literacy studies and literary pedagogy, however, little is known about the arguments that teachers employ to emphasize the relevance of literature and literary reading to their students. Notably, while the widely utilized textbook *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* (Beach et al., 2021) commences with a chapter elucidating 'Why Teaching Literature Still Matters', research that examines how teachers articulate the importance of literature within the context of their teaching practices remains conspicuously scarce. The urgency of such investigations is heightened by the relative paucity of directives within national curricula regarding the justification of literature as a distinct subject area. As Fialho (2019, p. 3) astutely observes, 'why one would study literature in the first place is an issue that is notoriously ignored in curricula.'

However, in recent years, there has been increased scholarly interest in how literature is legitimized in educational contexts. Exploratory studies have been conducted primarily in Scandinavia. For example, Gourvennec et al. (2020), based on an analysis of formal curricula in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, identified four dominant cultural models for literature education, which were believed to have positive effects on 1) the development of the self, 2) literacy skills and disciplinary knowledge, 3) empathic competence, and 4) knowledge about cultures. Yet, it remains to be seen how much emphasis each of these cultural models receives in

the actual teaching practices of educators. In that respect, Fodstad & Husabø (2021, p. 31) caution against a 'lack of consistent strategies for legitimizing literature instruction'. In their semi-structured interviews with nine Norwegian teachers, facilitating a love of reading emerged as the most frequently mentioned goal for literature education, but the arguments given by teachers for the importance of reading varied widely. Similar findings were reported by Myren-Svelstad & Grüterss (2022), who, in a survey encompassing 65 teachers, identified eight categories of justifications, including 'cultural literacy', 'enstrangement', and 'aesthetic experience'. Unfortunately, the researchers do not indicate how often each justification appeared in their data, but they do conclude that 'teachers possess varied, albeit not always clearly defined, justifications for their choices' (Myren-Svelstad & Grüterss, 2022, p. 6).

This variation raises the question of which arguments for reading literature predominate in the justifications of literature teachers and which arguments are underutilized towards students. The Scandinavian studies suggest that teachers place a strong emphasis on the general literacy skills that students can acquire through reading literature. Fodstad & Husabø observe that in Norway, there is a focus on 'instrumental legitimations, advocating teaching *through* literature as a means of achieving more general skills' (2021, p. 20). In the case of the Swedish situation, Wintersparv et al. (2019) identified a similar 'instrumentalist view'. Their findings are corroborated by empirical classroom-observation studies using authentic video recordings. Based on an analysis of 178 lesson recordings, Gabrielsen et al. (2019, p. 24) concluded that literature 'across so many classrooms, seems to be reduced to a tool for achieving other learning goals', in the sense that literary texts were used to train general literacy rather than to improve students' literary competence. Nissen et al. (2021) observed a similar trend in a majority of 102 recorded lessons in Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Such a strong focus on general literacy skills, such as reading proficiency and vocabulary, may obscure other benefits of reading literature. For instance, Myren-Svelstad & Grüterss (2022) found that 'critical literacy' is relatively underrepresented in the justifications that teachers provide for literature education, while Nissen et al. (2021) were surprised by the limited number of items in their corpus in which literature was used as a source of knowledge about the world.

The purpose of this article is to gain a clearer insight into how literature teachers legitimize the act of reading literature towards their students. Hence, the leading research question is: *What arguments do literature teachers use to justify the reading of literary texts to students in upper-secondary education?* Based on the analysis of a large-scale survey among Dutch literature teachers (*N*=214), the analysis will focus on the diverse arguments that teachers use in the classroom to emphasize the importance of reading, uncovering which arguments are relatively frequently employed and which appear to be underemphasized. By charting this territory, we not only gain a deeper understanding of how the significance of reading is delineated in secondary education but also elucidate which (literary-theoretical and empirical)

insights regarding the importance of literary reading are incorporated into literature classrooms, while simultaneously discerning which perspectives and research findings appear to have yet to realize their educational potential.

2. WHY READING LITERATURE MATTERS: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

When aiming to convey the importance of literary reading to their students, literacy teachers and literature educators essentially have a plethora of possible arguments at their disposal, based on the theoretical and empirical research conducted in recent decades. Most of such insights imply that literary reading has the power to present students with lifelong benefits, attributing to literature 'a value that will help them become smarter people long after they leave school' (Gallagher, 2009, p. 57). The influx of publications exploring and analyzing the benefits of reading literature appears virtually boundless. Nonetheless, within this extensive corpus of knowledge, some overarching justifications can be discerned that merit explication, particularly in the context of constructing a questionnaire aimed at the multiple ways in which teachers legitimize literature towards their students in secondary education. It should be emphasized beforehand that these justifications are derived from literature across various academic disciplines and geographical contexts, and thus cannot be universally accepted without scrutiny, underscoring the importance of questioning their applicability and persuasive power in different cultural contexts.

As aptly observed by Geoff Hall (2005), it is noteworthy that the predominant arguments underpinning the value of literature can be characterized as inherently humanistic. These arguments, then, are concerned with delineating facets of 'what it means to be human, and how we could live better as human beings' (Hall, 2005, p. 39). The underlying premise posits that individuals who engage as literary readers not only evolve on a personal level but also make substantive contributions to the betterment of society. Hence, in what follows, a distinguishment will be made between arguments on the individual level and arguments on the societal level, followed by a brief discussion of views that oppose a focus on the 'benefits' of literary reading.

2.1 Individual level: Cognitive, social-emotional and health benefits associated with reading

At the individual level, one can initially discern cognitive benefits associated with reading literature. As research in the field of cognitive neuroscience has made all the more clear, brain connectivity in children is increased by the time they spend reading books (Horowitz-Kraus & Hutton, 2018), which underlines the positive correlation between fiction reading and cognitive development that has been widely established in cognitive psychology (e.g., Dehaene, 2009; Willingham, 2017; Wolf, 2007). Apart from brain connectivity, which allows for enhanced cognitive flexibility that in turn influences reading comprehension and reading speed (compare Cartwright, 2008),

reading print fiction is specifically associated with improved concentration skills (e.g., Philips, 2015) and vocabulary growth (e.g., Mol & Bus, 2011; Pfost et al., 2013). Due to these cognitive benefits, frequent reading of literary fiction generally improves teenagers' performances in reading comprehension at large (Jerrim & Moss, 2019).

Such cognitive effects of reading literary fiction extend beyond mere acceleration of neural processes. Enhanced brain connectivity also yields socio-emotional benefits. A pivotal notion posits that literary reading leads to heightened empathy, fostering a greater receptivity to the thoughts, emotions, and perspectives of others. While research in this domain occasionally yields conflicting insights and much uncertainty remains regarding the precise relationship between literature and empathy formation (cf. Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; Quinlan et al., 2023), the empathy hypothesis has been corroborated by various empirical researchers, suggesting a discernible connection between the consumption of literary fiction and Theory of Mind, i.e. the ability to imagine how another individual feels (e.g., Corcoran & Oatley, 2019; Djikic et al., 2013; Koopman, 2016). As an explanation for this association, attention is often drawn to the demands that literary fiction places on the reader's imagination. In a novel, readers can, quite literally, see through the eyes of another; immerse themselves in the thought world of someone whose worldview may be vastly different from their own (Nünning, 2015). Confronted with these unique 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 2023), literary learning experiences typically prompt self-examination, also in the case of canonical texts that may be separated from readers by centuries (Pike, 2003).

In this perspective, the act of reading literary fiction is also linked to (the development of) self-perception and the continuous recalibration of the reader's own perspectives and identity traits in relation to the text (cf. Vischer Bruns, 2011, pp. 12–13). At times, profound forms of recognition occur, which can influence a reader's understanding of everyday life, especially when the text resonates with a personal crisis the reader has experienced (Kuiken et al., 2004). The identification with characters and immersion in narrative worlds can even assume such deep manifestations that readers may feel 'bereft' when they reach the end of a book or series of books (Vischer Bruns, 2016, p. 352). The significant impact that fiction reading can have on the self is also emphasized in contexts where literature is used therapeutically (Heath et al., 2005) or in cases of escapism, where readers describe how transportation into a story world made them momentarily forget their own problems (cf. Begum, 2011). In this light, it is not surprising that there are also studies that identify correlations between literary reading and readers' mental health, including improved mood and reduced feelings of loneliness (e.g., Billington et al., 2013; Carney & Robertson, 2022; Rane-Szostak & Herth, 1995; Webster, 2022).

The correlation between reading and health also manifests itself at the level of physical well-being. Among the elderly, book readers, on average, have a longer life expectancy compared to non-readers or readers of newspapers and magazines (Bavishi et al., 2016). Reading is also associated with a later onset of dementia (Vemuri & Mormino, 2013; Wilson et al., 2013). A recent study in New Zealand

furthermore demonstrated that adult individuals with high reading motivation tend to be in better health than those with low motivation to read, and they also score higher on other well-being indicators such as earnings and civic engagement (Reder, 2023). These findings are consistent with earlier research highlighting the connection between reading fiction and social success, where reading fiction correlates with social mobility and educational achievement (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). In short, those who read have more societal opportunities than those who do not.

2.2 Societal level: Reading for ethics, democracy, and a multifaceted worldview

At the latter point, the personal and societal yields of literary reading intersect. On the personal level, engaging in literary reading enhances the likelihood of attaining a favorable societal position. On the societal level, it has often been posited that a well-functioning society can hardly exist without individuals with a high reading proficiency. Hence, advocates of literature have consistently emphasized the importance of well-read citizens. Particularly renowned is the perspective of Martha Nussbaum, who posits that literature possesses an ethical potency. She contends that literary texts inherently invoke our imagination, construed by Nussbaum (1995) as 'an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own' (p. xvi). In Nussbaum's line of thought, this 'ethical stance' is closely linked to the viability of democracies, that cannot subsist without our capacity to empathize with the perspectives of others. According to this reasoning, the development and refinement of the empathic capacity of individual readers are intricately tied to sustaining a healthy society, wherein citizens are fundamentally literate and literarily adept. In scholarly discourse, many variations abound regarding this perspective, ranging from the notion that the reading of literature can be conceived as an 'imaginative rehearsal for the real world' (Gallagher, 2009, p. 66) to the idea 'that by reading novels—and, in particular, by reading them well—we might extend the horizon of democratic possibility' (Fraser, 2023, p. 492).

In the discourse on the societal significance of literary reading, the concept of extending horizons is intricately linked not only to immersing oneself in the mental landscape of others, but also to the overall expansion of the reader's worldview. The ability to engage in dialogue with both others and us while reading a literary text is often expressed in the mimetic terms 'mirror' and 'window' (cf. Galda, 1998; Sims Bishop, 1990). On one hand, literary texts can provide readers with recognition through a world or character that closely resembles their own (mirror); on the other hand, they can offer a window into a world entirely unfamiliar to them. Both types of encounters contribute to the notion that literary reading plays a role in 'our creation of meaning in the world' (Eaglestone, 2019, p. 74).

It should be noted, however, that the role of literary texts in knowledge production is not undisputed, as debates revolve around the question of 'whether literature deals with "knowledge" at all, and what kinds of knowledge this might

encompass' (McLean Davies et al., 2023, p. 48). Assuming, nonetheless, that literature can be regarded as a source of knowledge, three broad categories emerge concerning the content to which this knowledge pertains, according to theorists. Firstly, it involves an understanding of 'the affairs of heart and soul' (Weinstein, 2022, p. 7): reading literature teaches readers what it means to be human. Secondly, it encompasses historical, cultural, geographical, and literary knowledge: through reading, insights are gained into other times, countries, and cultures, as well as into literature itself and the themes it addresses—all of which contributes to expanding 'the scope and depth of knowledge' (Merga, 2019, p. 17). Thirdly, literature enriches our knowledge of more abstract concepts, such as friendship, love, and justice. According to Catherine Wilson (1983), it is crucial that such conceptual knowledge can be challenged by reading literature. Literary texts may, for instance, provide a radically different interpretation of a concept like 'reasonable action' than the reader initially envisioned, effectively forcing the 'recognition of an alternative' (Wilson, 1983, p. 494). In this view, reading literature can not only enrich one's worldview but also effect a fundamental change, as the reader considers or even adopts new perspectives.

Recently, such philosophical-theoretical reflections have been substantiated by empirical research. For instance, engaging in the reading of literary fiction during childhood correlates with developing a more complex worldview later in life. This concretely implies that literary readers, in comparison to individuals who read little literary fiction as a child, possess higher attributional complexity and greater psychological richness, are less inclined to believe that contemporary inequalities are justified, and are less likely to subscribe to the notion that people are essentially only one way (Buttrick et al., 2022). These findings underscore the previously formulated idea that literary reading is relevant to the development of ethically responsible citizenship within a healthy democratic society. In this context, literature might even play a role in effecting tangible democratization and emancipation. It is, amongst other things, through literary representations that marginalized groups can make their voices heard, with literature thus functioning in the realm of 'equity-oriented sociopolitical action' (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123). Such textual representations elucidate the profound impact of literary engagement on the reader's political consciousness, imploring them to acknowledge the imperative 'to tackle injustices and effect transformative changes in society and the world' (cf. Choo, 2021, p. 32).

2.3 Cautions against the 'benefits' of literary reading

The strongly ideologically oriented views described above presuppose that the reading and teaching of literature have transformative potential at both the individual and societal levels. This stance, however, is at odds with the viewpoint of literary theorists who accentuate the singular or autonomous value intrinsic to literature. Herein, the essence of literature is not contingent upon its pragmatic

applications but resides predominantly within literature *itself*. In this view, literature is deemed relevant on the basis of its own literary merit—a genre that requires no apologetics beyond the sheer pleasure derived from reading and analyzing texts (cf. Alter, 1989). Engaging with literature, then, contributes to one's aesthetic development, the inherent value of which is derived not merely from its instrumental implications, but from the profound enjoyment found in unraveling the unique play that literature engages in with form, aptly referred to by Peter Lamarque (2014) as the 'opacity' of literary texts.

Some proponents of such an aesthetically oriented vision have cautioned that the emphasis on the utility and yields of literature can particularly undermine its legitimation, as the utilitarian perceived gains of reading may overshadow aesthetics as an end in itself (cf. Perloff, 2012). Researchers focusing on the positive effects of literary reading on individuals and society are also aware of this risk. For example, Worth (2017) writes, 'I think that we are in grave danger of so often touting the measurable benefits of reading that we might forget to notice that it can be fun, relaxing, and pleasurable' (p. 209). However, this is not the only caveat that can be raised in relation to studies theoretically or empirically demonstrating the utility of literary reading. First, studies emphasizing the affirmative consequences of literary engagement for the individual have a tendency to neglect that reading is primarily a social process, frequently subscribing to a model in which reading is considered a predominantly solitary endeavor (cf. Kucirkova & Cremin, 2020). Second, research on the benefits of reading for democracy does often not obviate that literature can be strategically deployed within authoritarian regimes, wherein the societal benefits of literary texts may paradoxically lie in the oppression and manipulation of citizens (cf. Brooks, 2022).

In summation, the array of possible legitimizations of literature has many facets, and it depends, in part, on the (ideologically charged) perspectives of its advocates how its utility is justified. This breadth underscores the importance of examining how the reading of literature is legitimized in the context of education, which is particularly pertinent given the imperative to persuade a growing group of students of the value inherent in engaging with literary texts.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY: GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

To answer the research question of which arguments are used by literature teachers to justify the reading of literary texts to students in upper-secondary teachers, a survey study was conducted among educators at secondary schools in the Netherlands. It concerned a self-completion questionnaire, enabling the effective collection of a large volume of data on a topic about which, as explained in paragraph 1, little is known, and where previous research has utilized relatively small sample sizes. Before delving into the design of this questionnaire, an overview of the

literature education curriculum in the Netherlands is provided to contextualize the research.

3.1 Geographical context: Literature education in the Netherlands

The legally regulated curriculum for literature education in the Netherlands pertains to the upper years of the havo level, which prepares students for universities of applied sciences, and the vwo level, which prepares students for research universities. This involves students roughly aged 15–18 years (10th to 12th grade). In the lower years of havo and vwo, literature education generally takes place as well; however, the statutory curriculum refers to *fiction* rather than *literature* here. Therefore, when discussing literature education in the Dutch context, it typically refers to education in the upper years of havo and vwo (cf. Dera, 2020). Currently, a curriculum revision is underway to include knowledge of literature from the 7th grade onwards, but this was not yet implemented at the time of data collection for this study.

The Dutch literature exam program specifies three subdomains that literature teachers within L1 education must assess. It should be emphasized that literature is by no means the only component of the Dutch L1 curriculum: students must also work on various communicative skills (general reading, writing, oral skills) and argumentation theory. Influenced by the so-called communicative-utilitarian paradigm, language skills have increasingly dominated Dutch L1 education in recent decades, resulting in a reduction in the time allocated for literature education (cf. Dera et al., 2023).

The first subdomain is called *Literary development*. Students must be able to provide a reasoned account of their reading experiences with several literary works they have selected: eight for the havo level and 12 for the vwo level, with at least three works published before 1880 required at the vwo level. In most schools, students can largely choose these texts themselves, often documented in student-specific portfolios tracking their development. This approach results in notable variation in individual text selections and a strong reliance on the teacher to explain why reading these diverse texts is essential or desirable (Dera, 2019, 2021a).

The second subdomain is *Literary concepts*. Students must be able to recognize and distinguish literary text genres and use literary concepts in interpreting literary texts. These concepts often involve basic narratological terms such as setting, time, perspective, and motif, rather than ideological concepts from literary criticism movements like postcolonialism or ecocriticism (cf. Dera, 2021b, 2024, 2025).

The final subdomain is *Literary history*, where students must provide an overview of the main lines of (Dutch) literary history and place the works they have read within this historical context. In practice, this domain receives most attention at the vwo level, partly because of the requirement to read three pre-1880 works.

Although the Dutch exam program does not explicitly justify the reading of literature, the final subdomain (literary history) implies that the Dutch government

views cultural memory as an important function of literature education. Moreover, in the Dutch context, the focus on 'reading experiences' is often framed through the lens of personal (taste) development. Based on the formal national curriculum and its common interpretation, then, one would expect Dutch literature teachers to justify literary reading through cultural heritage on one hand and personal development on the other. However, Verboord (2003) has shown that the focus on cultural education in Dutch education has diminished over the second half of the twentieth century, giving way to personal development, where evaluating reading experiences by individual students has become prominent. In this regard, the Netherlands, along with Portugal, occupies a remarkable international position. According to a comparison of different literature curricula in European countries by Witte & Sâmihăian (2013), Dutch literature education (12th grade) places more emphasis on a personal growth paradigm and less on a cultural paradigm compared to countries like the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, and Romania. Yet, whether such curricular choices translate into how teachers justify the value of literary reading remains to be seen.

3.2 Participants

Two-hundred thirty-seven respondents initiated the survey used in this research, of whom 23 discontinued prematurely (dropout rate = 9.7%). These participants were excluded from the study. Hence, the survey was completed by 214 respondents, all of whom were teachers of Dutch Language and Literature at the upper levels of havo and vwo. 74.8% of the participants identified as female, 25.2% as male, and there were no participants who identified their gender outside of these categories, a distribution that reflects the gender proportions typically observed in Dutch education. The average age of the participants was *M*=42.3 years (*SD*=11.7). On average, they had *M*=11.3 years of teaching experience in upper-secondary education (*SD*=8.6). 66.8% obtained their teaching qualification from a research university, and 29.0% from a university of applied sciences (the other 4.2% were still in training). For 58.4% of them, their graduation thesis focused on a topic related to literary analysis, literary history, literary theory, or literary education; 34.6% wrote their thesis on a different subject (e.g., linguistics), and the remaining 7% had not written an MA thesis yet. 42.5% of the participants taught at a school based in a large Dutch city (>100,000 inhabitants), 25.7% in a medium-sized Dutch city (40,000-100,000 inhabitants), 20.1% in a small city or a large village (25,000-40,000 inhabitants), and 11.7% in a small village (<25,000 inhabitants).

3.3 Survey design

The survey used in this research comprised five sections. Respondents were unable to navigate back to a previous section upon completing one. The first part of the survey focused on collecting demographic data and other relevant background

information about the participants, including gender, age, years of teaching experience, method of acquiring teaching qualifications (university of applied sciences/research university), thesis subject, province of the school, geographical context of the school, and the estimated monthly number of literary works the participant reads.

In the second part of the survey, respondents were presented with three statements regarding literature education. Using a slider scale (0-100 points), they indicated their level of agreement with the following statements:

- Legitimizing literature is a primary task of a literature teacher.
- Stimulating reading pleasure is a primary task of a literature teacher.
- Safeguarding literary heritage is a primary task of a literature teacher.

The first statement gauges the participants' attitude toward the overarching theme of this research. The second and third statements were included in the survey to distinguish between teachers who focus strongly on students' reading experience and those who (also) prioritize the canon in their teaching. While there are no absolute distinctions between these groups, previous research has shown that student-focused and culture-focused approaches lead to different outcomes in literature education (cf. Schrijvers et al., 2016), potentially resulting in differences in the legitimization of literary reading.

In the third part of the survey, participants were presented with an open-ended question in the form of a brief scenario: 'One of your upper-level students asks, in the presence of all other students during a 11th grade literature class, "Why do we actually have to read all these books for school?" What would be your substantive response to this question?' The decision to formulate this question, which touches upon the core of the research question, in terms of a classroom situation was made to enhance the ecological validity of the study.

In the fourth part of the survey, participants were presented with 20 possible reasons for reading literature. For each reason, they indicated how frequently they employed it in their teaching (ordinal scale: *never/rarely/sometimes/often/very often*) and how convincing they believed students would find the respective reason (Likert scale: *very unconvincing/unconvincing/somewhat convincing/convincing /very convincing*). The latter question was posed in anticipation of a planned companion study investigating how students react to legitimizations of literary reading.

The 20 legitimations, presented in randomized order, were derived from the literature discussed in section 2. It was pursued to attain a balanced distribution between personal benefits of reading literature (at cognitive and socio-emotional levels) and societal benefits (at the level of worldview and citizenship), noting the strong interconnection of these categories. To ensure content validity, before data collection commenced, the legitimations were reviewed by ten L1-teacher trainers from various Dutch universities. They were asked whether they recognized the justifications from either literature or practice and if there were legitimizations that should be added or removed. The panel unanimously confirmed the recognizability

of the reasons mentioned in the survey and suggested no additions, although some formulations were refined based on their feedback. An overview of the legitimations used in the survey can be found in Table 2 (section 4.2).

In the fifth and final part of the survey, participants were asked if they encountered a legitimization during the survey that they did not use in their practice but would like to use more frequently. This was an open-ended question based on the assumption that reasons participants could recall from memory indicated genuine engagement. Finally, respondents were given the option to provide their email address if they wished to be contacted about the research results.

To further enhance content validity, the questionnaire was piloted among 15 students from the master's program in Education in Language and Culture at the author's university. In addition, the construct validity of the presented justifications was checked through cognitive interviews following the pilot survey.

3.4 Survey procedure

The questionnaire was conducted through Qualtrics between November 30, 2022 and July 5, 2023. Since there is no comprehensive record of employed teachers of Dutch language and literature in the Netherlands, and random sampling is therefore not a viable sampling method, potential participants were approached through a call disseminated via: a) associations for language teachers in the Netherlands, b) a private Facebook group for teachers of Dutch Language and Literature, c) a highly visited website on Dutch studies (www.neerlandistiek.nl), and d) the researcher's LinkedIn page. A total of 181 teachers responded to the call. They received the link to the Qualtrics survey via email, along with a request to forward it to relevant colleagues. Hence, the study used a combination of self-selected sampling and snowball sampling, resulting in an ultimate sample of 237 teachers (section 3.1). Prior to survey administration, the research received approval from the Ethics Review Board of the involved faculty. Informed consent was obtained from participants before they initiated the survey. They were instructed that they could stop the research at any time and that there were no right or wrong answers.

3.5 Data analysis

The qualitative analysis of open-ended question responses was conducted using Atlas.ti 23.3. The guiding question for the analysis was: *What legitimizations are presented by teachers, and to what extent do specific legitimations co-occur*? Initially, an open coding process was performed following Saldaña's (2016) approach, individually labeling the reasons for literature as presented by the participants. This led to 70 unique labels, which were then grouped into 15 overarching categories (see section 4.1) through axial coding, based on the connections identified by the researcher through repeated analysis of the data (cf.

Boeije, 2009, p. 109). For example, one participant responded to the open-ended question as follows:

> You become a better person. You gain insight into how people in certain periods of our history thought about various topics. By reading literature, you increase your knowledge of language usage. You learn how to empathize with the actions and behaviors of the people around you.

This response was assigned four open codes: (1) *becoming a better person*, (2) *gaining new insights into history*, (3) *gaining new knowledge about language*, and (4) *empathy development*. In axial coding, these codes were placed in the overarching categories coined by the author when working though the data, in this case *Ethical arguments* (1), *Knowledge arguments* (2+3), and *Social development arguments* (4). Evidently, these overarching categories are, to some extent, umbrella terms: 'insights in history', for example, encompasses a different type of knowledge than 'knowledge about language', rendering the category *Knowledge arguments* somewhat generalized. Additionally, the name of a category can evoke specific connotations. For instance, the category *Bildung arguments* was partly formed because participants repeatedly used this term, even though the complex term 'Bildung' itself is a fuzzy concept. For these reasons, the coding scheme, including the definitions of the categories used as mentioned in Table 1, was subjected to an inter-rater reliability analysis. A research assistant coded 25 randomly assigned answers (11.7% of the data) based on the 15 overarching codes. This resulted in an inter-rater reliability of K=.88. Cases where the raters disagreed were resolved through discussion.

The 15 categories created in this manner were added to the survey output as nominal data (mentioned/not mentioned per participant) for a targeted co-occurrence analysis. This analysis, like the analysis of the closed survey questions, was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Guiding questions in the quantitative analysis were: 1) *How do the 20 queried legitimizations of literature score in terms of usage and perceived persuasiveness?* and 2) *Is it possible to discern differences between groups of teachers regarding their responses to the legitimations presented in the survey?* For the analysis of the latter question, the age and years of teaching experience variables were transformed into ordinal data. In both cases, three groups were distinguished: <35 years / 35-49 years / ≥50 years for age, and ≤7 years / 8-14 years / ≥15 years for years of teaching experience. The 7-year cutoff for years of teaching experience is based on Kini & Podolsky (2016).

All materials and analyses can be accessed through the OSF folder accompanying this article [https://osf.io/c3jg5/].

4. RESULTS

4.1 Legitimations of literary reading provided by literature teachers

Table 1 provides an overview of the justifications that literature teachers in this study claimed they would use if a student were to pose the question, 'Why do we actually have to read all these books for school?' during a class discussion. The relative frequencies of each argument are based on the total number of coded justifications (*N*=818).

Consistent with the earlier observation by Fodstad & Husabø (2021), the table reveals the heterogeneous ways in which literature teachers legitimize the importance of literary reading. While four argumentative categories are evidently occurring more frequently than others (*worldview*, *social development*, *literacy*, and *Bildung*), only the worldview argument is utilized by more than half of the participants. Legitimations that notably lag behind could be considered subvariants of the four most frequently occurring arguments. For instance, *ethical arguments* and *knowledge* could be associated with the worldview and Bildung category, while *creative imagination* and *public attainment* could be construed as elaborations of the literacy argument. Nevertheless, the majority of teachers do not explicitly mention these justifications.

The fact that only a handful of teachers respond affirmatively to the idea that literature serves no utilitarian purpose (included in the category *other arguments*) underscores teachers' general endorsement of the premise that literature has a personal and/or societal justification. This is further emphasized by the results of the statement on the slider, 'Legitimizing literature is a primary task of a literature teacher' (*M*=84.4; *SD*=16.3).

Table 1. Legitimations of reading literature provided by survey participants, including their relative frequency in the dataset and their usage across participants

Category	*Essence*	*Relative frequency in dataset*	*Participant count per category (%)*
Aesthetic arguments	Reading literature aids in cultivating taste, building an aesthetic repertoire, and fostering language appreciation, contributing to one's aesthetic development.	5.1	33 (15.4)
Affective arguments	Reading literature can evoke emotions, bringing joy, anger, or tenderness, providing pleasure and physical or emotional engagement.	5.6	44 (20.6)
Bildung arguments	Reading literature is crucial for overall development and cultural enrichment. Those who read become richer human beings.	9.4	71 (33.2)

Cognitive arguments	Reading literature fosters cognitive development. Those who read invest in concentration, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking.	5.6	33 (15.4)
Creative imagination arguments	Reading literature stimulates our imagination, personal creativity, and self-expression.	2.1	17 (7.9)
Curricular arguments	We read literature due to legal obligations and academic expectations at the current examination level.	3.7	30 (14.0)
Ethical arguments	Engaging with literature makes us a better person and enhances our humanity, enabling us to take a stance on moral and ethical dilemmas.	1.6	13 (6.1)
Health arguments	Reading literature benefits mental health through relaxation and escapism, and potentially contributes to physical well-being.	2.4	18 (8.4)
Knowledge arguments	Reading literature imparts tangible knowledge in history, the world, language, culture, and/or other themes explored in books.	3.2	26 (12.1)
Literacy arguments	Reading literature enhances overall literacy skills, including general reading proficiency, oral and written expressive ability, and vocabulary.	13.9	83 (38.8)
Personal development arguments	Reading literature stimulates the reader's identity development, can lead to self-insight, and might aid in stepping outside one's comfort zone.	7.0	50 (23.4)
Public attainment arguments	Reading literature can contribute to attaining a favorable societal position, as society in general and universities in particular expect individuals to be able to engage in literary discourse.	2.2	17 (7.9)
Social development arguments	Reading literature contributes to gaining a deeper understanding of (the perspectives of) others.	13	99 (46.3)
Worldview arguments	Reading literature results in a more nuanced worldview and broadens the reader's horizon.	23.8	131 (61.2)
Other arguments	Reading literature is legitimized by arguments outside the aforementioned categories, including the notion that the value of literature lies in its lack of utility.	1.3	11 (5.1)

Co-occurrence analysis based on cross-tabulations underscores the relative significance of justifications grounded in social development and worldview within the sample. Notably, for ten of the legitimation categories, more than 50% of participants cite these categories in conjunction with social development, and similarly, for ten categories, more than 50% of participants mention them in combination with worldview. Social development stands out particularly when a participant presents creative imagination (82.4% of cases), health (66.7%), or cognitive arguments (63.6%). Worldview is almost always mentioned in tandem when a participant employs public attainment arguments (88.2%), and also in the cases of health arguments (83.3%), personal development arguments (80.0%), and affective arguments (75.0%). The combination of social development and worldview is also prevalent—when educators address the social development category, they also discuss worldview in 69.7% of instances. The category of literacy, too, is relatively well-represented in conjunction with other categories (5 times at 50% or higher), although less prominently than social development and worldview. Specifically, when participants use health arguments, literacy is also mentioned (66.7%), as well as in the cases of creative imagination (58.8%) and cognitive arguments (54.5%). For the Bildung arguments, mentioned by a third of the participants in the sample, there are no categories in which more than half of the participants also invoke this justification. A complete overview of cross-tabulations can be found in the OSF-folder accompanying this article.

4.2 Usage and perceived persuasiveness of legitimations queried in the survey

On average, participants selected 35.5% (*SD*=15.3) of the specified justifications as being utilized ‘often’ or ‘very often’ in their teaching, equating to an average of approximately seven frequently used justifications per teacher in the sample. Table 2 illustrates the median frequency with which the legitimations of literature addressed in the survey are employed by the teachers in the sample in their instructional practices, and the perceived persuasiveness of these legitimations as assessed by the teachers.

Table 2. Usage and perceived persuasiveness of legitimations of reading literature queried in the survey

	Legitimation		*Usage by teachers (median)*	*Teacher-perceived persuasiveness to students (median)*
Reading literature can help to…	1.	… stimulate neural connections in the brain	Sometimes	A little convincing
	2.	… master complex interpretation skills	Seldom	A little convincing
	3.	… prevent brain aging	Never	Unconvincing
	4.	… enhance concentration skills	Sometimes Often	A little convincing A little convincing
	5.	… train empathic abilities	Sometimes	A little convincing
	6.	… promote self-awareness	Often	Unconvincing
	7.	… relax	Sometimes	A little convincing
	8.	… momentarily escape reality	Seldom	A little convincing
	9.	… cope with personal issues therapeutically	Often	A little convincing
	10.	… illuminate matters from multiple perspectives	Seldom Often	Unconvincing A little convincing
	11.	… explore ethical problems		
	12.	… develop a more nuanced worldview	Often	A little convincing
	13.	… acquire knowledge (world/history/culture etc.)	Seldom	A little convincing
	14.	… empower marginalized groups	Never	Unconvincing
	15.	… climb the social ladder	Seldom	Unconvincing
	16.	… increase political awareness	Sometimes Often	A little convincing Convincing
	17.	… improve expressive skills		
	18.	… enhance general reading proficiency	Sometimes	Unconvincing
	19.	… enjoy language (for the sake of language)	Sometimes	Unconvincing
	20.	… gain access to cultural heritage		

Table 2 reveals patterns analogous to those in Table 1 regarding teachers' reported utilization of specific arguments in the classroom. Similar to Table 1, worldview and empathy (as part of social development) are prominently represented. Additionally, a legitimation in terms of literacy development is frequently employed, highlighting a notable incongruity between the frequently mentioned benefits for general reading proficiency and the only occasional acknowledgment of gains in expressive skills. A notable deviation from the findings in Table 1 pertains to the role of knowledge, which is conspicuously emphasized in Table 2. While the majority of participants do not articulate knowledge as a rationale when independently responding to why reading is important, they recognize its frequent application in

practice. This tension may be elucidated by the responses categorized under *Bildung arguments* in Table 1, with 87% of participants whose responses were coded in that category indicating that they legitimized literature as a source of knowledge 'often' or 'very often'.

Of significance is also the justification in terms of relaxation. Teachers indicate its frequent use, yet in responses to the open-ended question, 'relaxation' is scarcely mentioned. Likewise, reading for pleasure is not abundantly represented in the results of the open question. On the other hand, the statement 'Stimulating reading pleasure is a primary task of literature teachers' largely garners agreement within the sample (M=74.3; SD=20.2), aligning with the high median in the relaxation legitimation. It appears that when explicitly asked about reading pleasure and reading for relaxation, teachers express a high regard for these aspects yet are less likely to spontaneously emphasize pleasure and relaxation when a student inquires about the significance of reading. In that context, it is also important to note that the concept of 'pleasure' does not primarily seem to refer to enjoyment of textual form or style, as evidenced by the low median score for the justification in terms of language pleasure. This quintessentially literary argument for reading literature is therefore not highly represented in literature education, similar to arguments in terms of cultural heritage—despite teachers relatively concurring with the statement 'Safeguarding literary heritage is a primary task of literature teachers' (M=71.4; SD=21.2).

Relatively underrepresented, as indicated in Table 2, are arguments related to the cognitive benefits of reading literature, which are at best occasionally employed or even never, as in the case of preventing brain aging. Arguments closely tied to the personal, psychological, or individual-societal level of the student (escapism, self-insight, social mobility, reading as therapy) are less frequently advocated than arguments at the social and general societal level (empathy formation and worldview as components of citizenship). More political-ethical arguments (formation of political consciousness; literature as an emancipatory phenomenon; literature as part of ethical exploration) systematically receive a low median score.

Considering the perceived persuasiveness of justifications in the eyes of students, it is noteworthy that teachers seem to have limited confidence in the effects of a compelling narrative on students' beliefs about the importance of literature. More than half of the legitimations are deemed only 'a little convincing'. The only argument perceived as truly convincing is also the most utilitarian in the short term: reading literature improves students' overall reading proficiency, which is crucial for successfully completing language education exams. Strikingly low scores are observed for strongly literary-oriented arguments (language pleasure; cultural heritage), as well as the relaxation argument and legitimations related to political awareness and public attainment. Taken together, this implies that teachers think their students, beyond the direct educational benefits, do not endorse the idea that one can enhance their citizenship through reading literature, and neither do they find it enjoyable or culturally significant. Although it cannot be explicitly inferred

from the data, this may suggest that teachers perceive the average student as someone who considers literary reading important primarily for instrumental reasons, namely because it is necessary to obtain a school diploma. This could be related to the relatively low reading motivation among students, particularly in the Dutch context (cf. Meelissen et al., 2023), which teachers also experience in practice, reinforcing their impression that students see little value in literature. While research by Schrijvers (2019) showed that students' motivation for literature education increased during a series of lessons focused on self-insight and social insight through reading, teachers' perceptions in this regard seem to be more pessimistic.

Correlation analyses reveal that, in most instances, teachers who frequently employ a specific legitimation also appear to believe in its persuasive power. In all cases, a significant Spearman's rank correlation was identified between the usage of a specific rationale from Table 2 and its perceived persuasiveness. In five instances, this correlation was found to be strong: stimulating neural connections ($r(212) = .518$, $p<.001$), mastering complex interpretation skills ($r(212) = .520$, $p<.001$), dealing with personal problems ($r(212) = .547$, $p<.001$), exploring ethical problems ($r(212) = .504$, $p<.001$), and gaining access to cultural heritage ($r(212) = .593$, $p<.001$). A weak correlation was only observed for the relaxation justification ($r(212) = .156$, $p<.001$) and preventing brain aging ($r(212) = .232$, $p<.001$). In all other cases, moderate correlations were identified; detailed information can be found in the publicly accessible OSF folder associated with this article.

4.3 Differences in legitimizing literature among distinct groups of teachers

Table 3 gives an overview of differences in legitimizing literature across groups of teachers, based on Mann Whitney U tests and Kruskall Wallis tests by ranks (including pairwise comparisons based on Dunn's post hoc test).

Table 3. Differences in legitimizing literature across groups (u = usage; p = perceived persuasiveness)

Grouping variable	*Legitimation where difference occurs*	*Statistics based on Mann Whitney U Test or Kruskall Wallis Test*	*Direction of difference*
Gender	Brain aging (u)	*U=3908, p=.022*	Mean rank 1 (mdn1) < 2 (mdn1)
1 = female	Cultural heritage (u)	*U=3183.5, p=.003*	1 (mdn3) < 2 (mdn4)
2 = male	Enjoy language (u)	*U=3486.5, p=.024*	1 (mdn3) < 2 (mdn3)
	Escape reality (u)	*U=5128, p=.031*	Mean rank 1 (mdn3) > 2 (mdn3)
	Relax (u)	*U=5110, p=.031*	1 (mdn4) > 2 (mdn3)
	Social ladder (u)	*U=3655, p=.046*	Mean rank 1 (mdn1) < 2 (mdn1)
Age group	Brain aging (p)	*H(2)=15.082, p<.001*	1 > 2 + 3
1 = ≤35y	Cultural heritage (p)	*H(2)=9.161, p=.010*	3 > 2
2 = 36-49y	Enjoy language (u)	*H(2)=8.284, p=.016*	3 > 1
3 = ≥50y	Enjoy language (p)	*H(2)=8.087, p=.018*	3 > 1
	Interpretation skills (u)	*H(2)=6.979, p=.031*	1 > 2
	Neural connections (p)	*H(2)=9.847, p=.007*	1 > 3
	Personal problems (p)	*H(2)=9.501, p=.009*	1 > 2 + 3
	Reading proficiency (p)	*H(2)=11.961, p=.003*	1 > 2
	Social ladder (p)	*H(2)=9.824, p=.007*	1 > 2
Teaching experience	Social ladder (p)	*H(2)=6.683, p=.035*	1 > 3
1 = ≤7y			
2 = 8-14y			
3 = ≥15y			

Type of qualification 1 = applied 2 = research	Enjoy language (u) Interpretation skills (u) Self-insight (u)	*U=5173.5, p=.041* *U=3671, p=.043* *U=5151.5, p=.049*	1(mdn4) > 2(mdn3) 1(mdn1) < 2(mdn3) Mean rank 1 (mdn2) > 2 (mdn2)
Thesis topic 1 = literature 2 = other	Concentration (p)	*U=3726.5, p=.014*	Mean rank 1(mdn3) > 2 (mdn3)
Geographical area school 1 = big city 2 = average city 3 = small town 4 = village	Emancipation (u) Emancipation (p) Political awareness (p)	*H(3)=11.180, p=.011* *H(3)=15.079, p=.002* *H(3)=8.044, p=.045*	1 > 4 1 > 4 1 > 4
Monthly number of books read 1 = ≤1 2 = 2 3 = 3 4 = ≥4	Brain aging (p) Emancipation (u) Ethical problems (u) Interpretation skills (p)	*H(3)=8.365, p=.039* *H(3)=12.816, p=.005* *H(3)=9.109, p=.028* *H(3)=8.967, p=.030*	1 > 4 4 > 1 4 > 1 1 > 2

In light of the overall findings from Table 3, it is noteworthy that group differences are particularly evident in legitimizations with a relatively low median score. In other words, participants exhibit consensus regarding frequently employed legitimizations, while variations emerge at levels where legitimizations are seldom or sometimes utilized. Notable outcomes regarding the usage of legitimizations can be observed across different grouping variables. Regarding gender, female teachers, compared to their male counterparts, place more emphasis on relaxation and less on cultural heritage and language enjoyment. Language enjoyment is also more frequently used as a justification by teachers aged 50 and older than by those under 35, possibly because the older generation has been more influenced by structuralist views of literature than teachers who graduated more recently. A potential effect of education is evident in the differences between teachers who obtained their teaching qualifications from a university of applied sciences and those who did so at a research university: the latter group places slightly more focus on interpretation skills and somewhat less on language enjoyment, aligning with the more distanced approach to literature at research universities. Regarding the geographical area of the participants' schools, it is notable that teachers in urban contexts emphasize emancipation arguments more than their colleagues in small villages. This likely relates to the more multicultural and socio-economically diverse student populations in city schools and the assumed relevance of the emancipation argument for students in weaker social positions. Finally, teachers who read many books per month also use the emancipation argument more frequently than their colleagues who read less, as well as the justification that reading literature contributes to ethical development. A bold explanation here could be that teachers who read frequently, due to their regular engagement with literary texts, are more attuned to the ethical and socio-political dimensions of literature than teachers with relatively limited reading habits.

4.4 Legitimations teachers would like to use more often

At the conclusion of the questionnaire, 100 participants indicated encountering legitimations for reading literature that they would like to employ more frequently in practice (46.7%). 19 participants reported being unable to recall the arguments (8.9%), while the remaining 95 teachers responded negatively to the question (44.4%). All 20 justifications from Table 2 are mentioned by at least one participant as a legitimation to use more often in classroom practice. However, two justifications stand out: preventing brain aging (mentioned 31 times) and training concentration skills (mentioned 29 times). Regarding the first argument, several respondents explicitly state that they were unaware of the correlation between reading and brain health and consider it an 'interesting fact to mention in the classroom'. Concerning concentration skills, various respondents note that this argument precisely addresses the challenges they observe in their classes.

Relatively frequently mentioned is also the development of political awareness (20 times), often in combination with the emancipatory function of literature (17 times). Slightly less prominent but recurring are the strongly personal justifications for reading: getting to know oneself better (9 times), escapism (9), and therapy (8), as well as the more utilitarian justification that possessing good reading skills increases one's chances of social mobility (8).

A comprehensive overview of the mentioned reasons can be found in the public OSF folder associated with this research.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

5.1 General discussion

The primary objective of this research was to gain a clearer understanding of how literature teachers in upper-secondary education justify the importance of literary reading towards their students. Aligning with prior observations by Fodstad & Husabø (2021) and Myren-Svelstad & Grüterss (2022), the research findings demonstrate unequivocally the heterogeneity of practices in this domain. This is evident, firstly, in the broad range of arguments that teachers themselves present in response to how they would inform a student about the significance of literature when being asked about it in a classroom setting. Secondly, it is observed that even the most frequently occurring arguments are not employed by the majority of teachers—with the broadening worldview argument as the only exception. Thirdly, subtle variations in focus among groups of teachers emerge, revealing significant differences between male and female teachers, older and younger teachers, teachers in urban and rural contexts, and teachers with varying reading habits. These differences indicate that literature teachers cannot be considered a homogeneous group when it comes to legitimizing literary reading.

Despite the heterogeneity of the landscape, certain trends can be identified in how literature teachers justify literary reading to their students. For many of them, emphasis is put particularly on broadening the worldview of the adolescent reader, which, as indicated by responses to the open survey question, translates into an expansion of horizons leading to greater understanding of other cultures, perspectives and beliefs. In this regard, the broadening of the worldview is strongly linked to the development of empathy, an argument explicitly stated by almost half of the teachers to their students. Slightly less represented but still relatively frequent in the overall responses were justifications in terms of literacy development and Bildung. In this sense, the findings in this study deviate from observations in Scandinavian research, where fostering a love for reading was found to be the primary justification for literary reading. Although the Dutch teachers in this study often emphasized the relaxing nature of reading when explicitly asked about this argument, relaxation and pleasure were relatively infrequently mentioned in responses to the open question about the purpose of reading.

Due to the extensive scale of the research, it also provides insights into justifications that seem relatively neglected—or at least underutilized—in the practices of literature teachers. Among the cultural models distinguished by Gourvennec et al. (2020), knowledge about cultures and empathic competence are well-represented in this study. The same goes, albeit to a lesser extent, to literacy skills and disciplinary knowledge. However, the development of the self is only occasionally addressed by the survey participants, indicating that justifications of literature in terms of personal development are underemphasized in upper-secondary education. The same holds true for strongly cognitive arguments and for legitimations related to creative development as a principal component of literacy and literature education. When it comes to literacy, teachers' legitimations of literary reading are primarily related to general expressive skills and reading proficiency, with a particular emphasis on the latter.

In both philosophy and literary theory, a quintessential justification for literature links reading to ethically responsible citizenship, promoting constructive engagement with divergent perspectives and opinions and taking into account the needs of others and the often unequal circumstances in which people live—which ultimately leads to ethically responsible decision-making within a democracy. While literature teachers commonly use legitimations that touch upon the core of this reasoning (such as broadening the reader's worldview and developing empathic abilities), it is noteworthy that justifications centered around ethics, emancipation, political awareness, and democracy are conspicuously absent in participants' responses. This suggests that the emphasis on expanding horizons and fostering empathy in literature teachers is not necessarily directly tied to the ethical and/or political development of students, nor is it inherently linked to the socio-political conditions in which literature education takes place—a connection explicitly made by theorists from different cultural contexts such as Nussbaum (1995) and Choo (2021). Significantly, teachers express skepticism regarding the persuasiveness of such ethical or political perspectives in the eyes of students, while mildly appraising the persuasive power of justifications framed in terms of broadening perspectives and cultivating empathy when presented independently of a political or socio-cultural framework.

When examining the specific context of literature education in the Netherlands, it is noteworthy that justifications framed in terms of personal development are seldom referred to by teachers. This creates a tension with the Dutch exam program, which places an emphasis on individual reading experiences of students. Justifications that reflect a social paradigm (broadening worldviews; fostering empathy for others) appear to resonate more strongly with teachers but currently have no formal place in the national curriculum.

5.2 Implications for practice and future research

The conclusions described in the previous paragraph have significant implications for curriculum developers and teacher training programs. Based on this study, the observation by Fialho (2019) that the question of why we read literature is scarcely addressed in secondary education curricula remains highly relevant. While it is possible to critically question the necessity of incorporating justifications for reading literature into curricula, as discussed in paragraph 2.3 with reference to the perspectives of Perloff (2012) and Worth (2017), it seems not unreasonable—especially in an era where students read less and are increasingly exposed to societal indifference towards literature—to explicitly confront them with the various benefits that reading can offer. This is particularly true if one starts from the premise that an increased awareness of relevance could lead to greater motivation for the subject.

Regarding the specificity of this relevance, however, this article shows that the multitude of legitimations emerging from empirical and theoretical research is employed in a highly diffuse manner. This implies that the beliefs and knowledge of teachers largely dictate which discourses are introduced to students regarding the uses of literary reading. Therefore, it is a desideratum for knowledge about diverse reasons for reading to be incorporated into national language education curricula. The same applies to teacher training programs. Pre-service teachers should be exposed to an extensive range of legitimations, including suggestions for effectively implementing such arguments in their literature education through pedagogy. Special attention could be given to arguments that are still underutilized in practice and to the interconnections between such arguments—as in the case of worldview development and ethical or political development. The latter should also be emphasized in professional development activities for active literature teachers.

This study also suggests various perspectives for further research. First, a crucial question for future research is how secondary school students respond to the various justifications for reading literature. How convincing do they find such arguments, and is there a difference between reading for school purposes and volitional reading? These questions will be central to a companion study of the research presented in this article, where students will also have the opportunity to independently articulate the benefits they perceive from literary reading. The results of that study will allow for a comparison between students' evaluations and teachers' estimates of the persuasiveness of various justifications of literature in the eyes of their target audience. Given that previous empirical research has demonstrated an effect of student-oriented teaching (in terms of personal growth and social awareness) on motivation in reading (Fässler et al., 2019), an intriguing question in this respect is whether students independently validate personal and social justifications for reading literature.

Regarding the teacher's perspective, secondly, it is interesting to conduct further research into the reasons teachers provide for (not) emphasizing certain

justifications for reading literature in their teaching, both in relation to their views on the curriculum and their assessment of students' motivation. Engaging more extensively with teachers about the perceived benefits of literary reading can also provide greater insight into the interrelation among the various possible justifications. This offers understanding of how the different discourses surrounding the value of reading may permeate each other in educational contexts, where value judgments about literature interact with teachers' professional thinking, pedagogical beliefs, and classroom experiences. Regarding the latter, this study's finding that teachers consider most arguments for reading literature to be only somewhat convincing for students raises the question of whether this judgment stems from pessimism about the (experienced or assumed) reading culture among students or also (partly) from self-efficacy beliefs regarding literature teaching.

Thirdly, it is desirable to conduct follow-up studies on an international comparative level, examining how justifications for literary reading in different geographical (and cultural) contexts compare to each other. Differences between teachers in large cities and small villages already emerged in this study conducted in the Netherlands, justifying the hypothesis that such geographical differences will also occur at the level of individual countries. Comparative research is also desirable among teachers of different subjects (e.g., L1 education versus L2 education) and among teachers in primary versus secondary education.

5.3 Methodological considerations

Due to limited knowledge about how literature teachers justify literary reading, this study opted for a survey that covered a breadth of legitimizations. Since follow-up questions are not possible in self-completion questionnaires, the use of this instrument inevitably leads to surface-level exploratory insights. Additionally, participants in this study actively volunteered to participate in the survey, potentially leading to selection bias—it is possible that teachers who chose not to participate might have cited very different justifications for literary reading than the sample in this study, for whom the justification of literature is a significant subject. At the same time, even among these voluntary participants, who may have a strong affinity with the subject matter, we observe a significant heterogeneity in responses.

To gain richer insights through such follow-up research, it would be fruitful to enrich the methodological approach in this study with in-depth interviews or other qualitative research methods, such as video observations or think-aloud tasks. Such methods can further deepen the study's insights and are also suitable for acquiring knowledge about tensions that emerged in this exploratory research, such as the tension between an emphasis on worldview development on one hand and minimal attention to political-ethical awareness on the other hand. Especially in interview research, this relationship can be further explored, for instance, through targeted scenarios presented to participants. Moreover, interviews are a suitable method for inquiring about lived experiences related to the legitimization of literature in the

classroom: which legitimizations do teachers believe resonate with students, and what practical examples do they provide in this context? Expansion of the methodological arsenal with video observations is particularly important because serious discrepancies may exist between the behavior that teachers *think* they exhibit in their teaching (and likewise self-report in questionnaires and interviews) and the behavior they *actually* demonstrate in their classrooms. Although recordings of a literature class capture only a snapshot of that practice and thus do not constitute an objective record of something as complex as actual teacher behavior, they can nonetheless provide insights into specific classroom situations where teachers and students discuss literature together and exchange arguments about its value.

While more detailed data are desirable, their absence does not detract from the contribution this study makes to understanding how literature is legitimized in secondary education. The insight that this occurs in highly varied ways calls for coordinated action on one hand and is hopeful on the other. Collectively, literature teachers cover a rich spectrum of arguments—underlining that literary texts are assured of a pluriform community of apologists.

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