“I BELIEVE IN READING TOGETHER”

Fifteen L1 teachers’ beliefs about reading engagement and ways to provide engaging literature instruction in the upper-secondary classroom

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Abstract

The benefits of reading literature are well documented, and the L1 subject is a shared arena for adolescents to encounter literature. In upper-secondary school (grades 11–13), students meet high demands in terms of literature reading. However, their attitudes toward reading literature are growing more negative. In PISA 2018, Norwegian 15-year-olds ranked second-lowest among OECD countries in engagement in fiction reading. The digitalization of society is offered as one explanation for the decline in reading engagement. Our purpose was to provide, through focus-group interviews, deeper knowledge about 15 Norwegian upper-secondary L1 teachers’ beliefs about the engaged student reader of fiction and their ideas on how to engage students in fiction reading. We find that our participants believe in reading engagement as both a personal aptitude and a social event. Another finding is that they reported on various obstacles to student reading engagement. We also find that the L1 teachers believe student engagement in reading fiction will enhance when “reading together” as a shared and teachers guided experience in the L1 classroom. The data reflect optimism despite the dire signals from PISA. Based on the findings, we argue that L1 teachers can provide all students with an opportunity to gain access to the benefits of reading fiction with the L1 classroom as a decisive arena for doing so.

Keywords: Reading interest, language arts, literature education, narrative texts, high school

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that reading literature is associated with various benefits such as improvements in academic performance, social cognition, and reading skills (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Hutton et al., 2015; Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Whitten et al., 2016). The first-language (L1) school subject plays a key role in exposing all students to literature, ensuring equitable access to those benefits. In Norwegian upper-secondary schools (grades 11–13), that subject places heavy demands on students, who have to read complex texts, including fiction (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020), and to take an increasingly academic approach to text analysis. However, their attitudes toward reading fiction are becoming more negative. In the 2018 version of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2019), Norwegian students ranked second-lowest among member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in their attitudes toward fiction reading (Roe, 2020), and a national survey reports that 64 percent of Norwegian students in grades 8–13 never read books outside of their schoolwork (Bakken, 2022). This trend is also well supported by other surveys targeting Norwegian students in different age groups (Bakken, 2022; Bjørkeng & Lagerstrøm, 2014; Statistics Norway, 2023; Wagner & Støle, 2024). This context is making Norway a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for exploring engagement in reading fiction: we may assume that what works to facilitate reading engagement here, is bound to work elsewhere.

While there appear to be several reasons for the decline in reading engagement, one explanation offered is the digitalization of society: new technology both displaces traditional media such as books (Twenge et al., 2019) and reduces "long-form reading" (Baron & Mangen, 2021). Policy initiatives in Norway dating back to the early 2000s (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2004) aim to make it the most digitalized country in the world by 2030 (Norwegian Ministry of Digitalization and Public Governance, 2024). In recent decades, paper books have been replaced by screens, and digital services have become central in education and private life (Statistics Norway, 2023). Upper-secondary school is at the frontier of this digitalization process: already in 2007, 61 percent of students used computers in school for four hours a week or more (Arnseth et al., 2007), and by 2019, 99.9 percent of them had their own computer in school (Fjørtoft et al., 2019).

1.1 The role of teachers

Against this background, Norwegian upper-secondary L1 teachers are at the forefront of efforts to foster engagement in fiction reading. They have professional skills to teach literature, and they have, to a varying extent, direct experience from the classroom of doing this and hence of dealing with issues of reading engagement.

In this study we explore student engagement in reading fiction from the perspectives of the L1 teachers. Teachers depend on their explicit and implicit beliefs (Fives & Buehl, 2012) to meet the demands of classroom practice, and teachers' perceptions are influenced by their beliefs (Pajares, 1992). For this purpose, we understand beliefs as personal "judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition" (Pajares, 1992). The beliefs of the teachers' steer and influence their "experience, decisions, and actions" (Fives & Gill, 2015), and as such, their teaching practice.

Understanding how the L1 teacher perceives one's role in teaching fiction to adolescents, and how to deal with challenges related to digitalization, is crucial to addressing the decline in reading engagement among students. Not only can knowledgeable and dedicated teachers enhance student motivation (Siegle et al., 2014), but we also know that teachers are crucial to making students engaged in reading, both as role models and through engaging teaching practices (Roe, 2020). This study aims to learn from a group of L1 teachers experience by investigating their beliefs about the engaged student reader of fiction in the academic branch ("general studies") of upper-secondary school as well as their beliefs about factors that may enhance or hinder engagement in reading fiction in the current cultural context.

1.2 Reading-engagement theory

Reading engagement is a key construct in the present work and therefore must be defined at the outset, especially because the term "engagement" can be ambiguous. Engagement theory emphasizes the importance of students' active participation in learning activities in school. John T. Guthrie and colleagues have contributed significantly to our understanding of reading engagement by synthesizing key characteristics of engaged readers (Guthrie, 2008; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). We summarize our understanding of the engaged reader as follows: The engaged reader (i) reads with the intent to understand, (ii) talks about text with peers, and (iii) shows sustained interest over time (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). In contrast, the disengaged reader tends to avoid reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Reading engagement is a multidimensional construct (Lee et al., 2021) and can be approached from several angles. Fredricks and colleagues (2004) first characterized engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. A fourth—social—dimension to engagement has since been proposed (Antonio & Guthrie, 2008; Wang et al., 2016). Ivey and Johnston (2015) go further, emphasizing that engaged reading is "a fully social, fully human experience that is simultaneously and inseparably individual, relational, emotional, and collective" (Ivey & Johnston, 2015, p. 319).

1.2.1 Reading engagement as event or aptitude

Lee and colleagues (2021) examine whether literacy researchers frame reading engagement as an event or as an aptitude. An event can be seen as a concrete,

observable reading activity: “like a snapshot that freezes activity in motion” (Winne & Perry, 2000, p. 534). It is characterized by participation in the reading of a specific text in a specific context (Lee et al., 2021). Teachers can observe event-based reading engagement in the classroom as it unfolds in real time. Conversely, an aptitude-based approach to engagement frames it as a more enduring quality within a student (Lee et al., 2021). Although engagement as aptitude is not always directly observable, it can become apparent during discussions about reading experiences. Notably, an aptitude can also be strengthened through practice. However, good teaching practices can nurture engagement from both perspectives (Lee et al., 2021). From the aptitude approach, the teacher is disposed to “attend to the curriculum” (Lee et al., 2021) and support students’ reading endurance. From the event approach, the teacher is disposed to facilitate reading engagement centered around topics and activities they believe will be interesting to students, such as facilitate collaboration, and real-world interactions.

1.2.2 Engaging teaching practices

Teaching that supports reading engagement has several key characteristics and Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) propose an engagement model of reading development that illustrates some of these characteristics. The model includes features of teaching practices which Guthrie and Wigfield claim are known from both empirical arguments and theory to be engaging; real-world interactions, autonomy support, strategy instructions, collaboration, rewards and praise, evaluation, teacher involvement, interesting texts, and learning and knowledge goals (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 410). As the model suggest, both instructions and context that “surround the engagement processes” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 409) may influence reading engagement among students.

1.2.3 The relationship among interest, motivation, and engagement

Two concepts that are closely related to engagement are interest and motivation. Interest theory (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2020; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023) portrays interest as a psychological and relational concept. It can be defined as a student’s motivation to seek opportunities to participate in relation to a specific content (Renninger & Hidi, 2020). Thus defined, interest prompts action. In pedagogy, it is considered a prerequisite for students to engage with content and an essential support for their learning. A core distinction made in interest theory is between enduring, individual interest and short-term, situational interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Since interest in the topic of a text can spark reading engagement, this aspect is relevant for teachers’ text selection.

Motivation is another construct related to engagement. While the two terms are used interchangeably in everyday language, there is an ongoing debate about the distinction between them. Motivation theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) focuses on factors

that drive human behavior, such as psychological or physiological needs. A key idea is that motivation increases when needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging are met. Motivation can be defined as "an individual-level, unobservable state of striving" (Pincus, 2023) which drives goal-oriented actions to satisfy needs.

These constructs of interest, motivation, and engagement are thus related but distinct (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017; Martin et al., 2017). Interest and motivation explain individual cognitive factors, while engagement includes a social and practice-oriented group level. Hence a social lens such as reading engagement is useful for studying whole classes of students.

1.3 Norwegian classroom-based research on reading engagement

Previous research on Norwegian secondary school has investigated both literature didactic practices and choice of texts in the L1 subject from different perspectives. Kjelen (2013) examined how eighteen Norwegian lower-secondary L1 teachers views on literature emerge from their narratives about their own practice. Although all the participating teachers perceived fiction reading to be important, they lacked a shared understanding of qualities that render certain texts significant, as well as appropriate didactic practices to employ (Kjelen, 2013). Furthermore, Magnusson and Johansen (2024) investigated eight upper-secondary students' motivation for fiction reading in L1, the vocational branch, and found that students perceive themselves as readers to a low extent and that they perceive the cost of reading fiction to be high. This study suggests that there is a need for "increasing the use of didactic strategies" (Magnusson & Johansen, 2024, p. 2) to enhance students' motivation in reading.

Gourvennec (2017), explored literature didactic practice and the use of literary group conversations among L1 students in an upper-secondary school in Norway, the academic branch. The study shows that the participating students are engaged readers of fiction when experiencing textual resistance and "diversity of interpretations" (Gourvennec, 2017, p. viii). Furthermore, Sønneland (2019) also explored the role of the text in problem-oriented literature teaching, in three lower-secondary classes in a Norwegian school. A main finding is that friction that delays the disclosing in a story forms the ground for reading engagement among students. This study claims that fiction which requires "food for thought" (Sønneland, 2019, p. 1) forms the basis for engagement in working with fiction.

To summarize, we know that there is a lack of a shared understanding among L1 teachers of didactic practices that may foster reading engagement, and we know that many students experience the cost of reading fiction to be high. We also know that open text is found to be engaging in both lower and upper secondary school. We need more knowledge on teaching instructions that may facilitate reading engagement in fiction among students in secondary education.

1.4 Need for research

In the current study, we examine reading engagement among adolescents through the lens of the Norwegian context, however, a U.S. study (Hooley et al., 2013), provides insight from the perspective of both students and teachers, in a different cultural context. They investigated teachers' and high-school senior students' perceptions of academic reading and found that students avoid reading both in school and in their spare time, while teachers believe they do not have time to provide for students to read in class (Hooley et al., 2013). This study claims that there is a need to address older students academic reading in the classroom to enhance students reading motivation and reading skills.

The above-described studies contribute to our knowledge on both didactic practices and choice of texts in the L1 subject. However, the academic branch of Norwegian upper-secondary school has been understudied after PISA 2018. Hence there is a great need to investigate engagement in reading fiction in the L1 subject for 16 to 19-year-olds enrolled in the academic branch of upper-secondary school.

1.5 Research questions

This study aims to investigate a group of upper-secondary school L1 teachers' beliefs about factors that can enhance or hinder engagement in reading fiction in upper-secondary school at a time when students' reading habits are changing. More specifically, it aims to answer two research questions: (1) What are upper-secondary L1 teachers' beliefs about the engaged student reader of fiction? and (2) What are L1 teachers' beliefs about what enables or hinders engagement in reading fiction in upper-secondary school? The first research question seeks to analyze teachers' beliefs about the engaged student reader using the framework of aptitude versus event (Lee et al., 2021; Winne & Perry, 2000) representing two different approaches to reading engagement. The second one explores teachers' beliefs about what undermines reading engagement in the upper-secondary classroom and on what can be done—through text choice and engaging instruction—to meet challenges and facilitate reading engagement.

1.6 The Norwegian context

In Norway, students typically start upper-secondary school at the age of 16 years. All students are entitled to receive an upper-secondary education, but they apply for admission to specific schools based on their grades from lower-secondary school. Of all Norwegian 16-year-olds, 97 percent pursue an upper-secondary education, and about half are enrolled in the academic branch (Union of Education Norway, 2022), where L1 Norwegian is taught in all three years. Students receive both teacher-set and exam-based grades, with all grades set at the end of the final year. For L1 Norwegian, they receive three teacher-set grades and one, two, or three exam-

based ones, meaning that this subject has a strong impact on their grade-point average.

The national curriculum for L1 Norwegian is comprehensive, covering literature, nonfiction, multimodal texts, language history, rhetoric, and grammar, as well as reading, writing, oracy, and digital skills. Students must read and analyze fiction dating from the Old Norse period (700–1350) to the present and relate the texts to historical and modern contexts. Since 2020, the curriculum emphasizes perseverance with "long texts" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). Broadly formulated competence goals give teachers significant flexibility in selecting texts and methods and in designing assessments.

2. METHOD

In the present study, we conducted four semi-structured focus-group interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2017) with a total of 15 teachers working at four different upper-secondary schools (academic branch) in the western part of Norway (see Table 1). Each focus group interview included teachers working at a particular school. Data collection took place between December 2023 and May 2024, and the interviews lasted for 63–90 minutes. The overall topic was the teachers' beliefs about their students' engagement in reading fiction in the L1 Norwegian subject, and the three main themes were the student reader, the role of the L1 teacher, and disciplinary reading in L1 (see the extended interview guide in Appendix 1). It is important to note that we do not explore the teachers' actual classroom practices, only their own reports of them as presented in the focus group interviews. Our aim was to make room for new thoughts to arise in the context of a conversation among teachers with experience of fiction reading in the L1 upper-secondary classroom.

In the first two interviews, two researchers were present: the first author served as moderator (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2017), leading the interview, while the second author took notes. In the last two interviews, only the first author was present. All four interviews were audio-recorded using a web-based survey tool (Nettskjema) approved for the collection of confidential data. This tool automatically transcribes the recorded speech, but poorly. The first author corrected the transcriptions while listening to the recordings several times. The final transcriptions comply with standard spelling rules and include comments in brackets on expressions of emotions such as laughter and sighs. These comments are intended to capture the mood of the focus group interviews. The tone was easy-going in all interviews, and the participants laughed several times. At a general level, conversations in the interviews enabled the teachers to broaden each other's perspectives. For example, they often added reflections to their own previous utterances. The participants contributed equally, complementing each other with their individual voices, perspectives, and reflections.

2.1 The sample

The teachers were recruited by email. An invitation was sent to all L1 teachers at each of the four schools, one school at the time, asking for a group of four or five teachers from that school to participate. We combined two strategies when recruiting: convenience and purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2009). For the first two schools, we recruited teachers from the first author's professional network as a former upper-secondary teacher. For the last two interviews, we purposefully recruited teachers from schools selected to widen our sample and provide for variety in the experiences of the teachers. This was to ensure that the four schools would represent greater student diversity. Table 1 shows an overview of the schools and participants. For anonymization purposes, we replaced the teacher and school names with aliases.

Table 1. Overview of schools and participants

School	Teacher (sex)	Years of experience teaching L1 in upper-secondary school
Jupiter	Jacob (male)	13
• Over 1000 students • Medium admission-grade requirement	Jenny (female)	19
	Johanne (female)	20
	Julie (female)	10
Mercury	Marcus (male)	1
• Approximately 500 students • No admission-grade requirement (i.e., all applicants accepted)	Maud (female)	5
	Michael (male)	8
	Miriam (female)	7
Neptune	Nicholas (male)	15
• Approximately 600 students • Medium admission-grade requirement	Nina (female)	14
	Nora (female)	3
	Norman (male)	10

Saturn	Sarah (female)	20
• Over 1000 students • High admission-grade requirement	Selma (female)	18
	Sylvia (female)	18
Sex—total	10 women, 5 men	
Median years of teaching experience		13

Four teachers from each invited school agreed to participate. However, one of the teachers from the Saturn school did not show up owing to illness. In the recruiting process, both teachers and school leaders said that they were preoccupied by students' reading habits and happy to be able to contribute. In fact, we were surprised by the teachers' eagerness to participate, being aware both of teachers' heavy workload and the frequent demands they receive to participate in research projects. We assume that they saw the research topic as highly relevant for their everyday work and appreciated the opportunity to dig into this pressing matter with their colleagues and to share their perspectives with researchers and the world. Furthermore, the first author's background as an experienced L1 teacher, alongside our roles as reading researchers from an institute that is well known among teachers, may have added credibility to the project and hence had a positive impact on recruitment.

The participants in the current study are representative in terms of sex, reflecting the sex distribution of teachers at Norwegian upper-secondary schools. There is also variety in experience teaching L1 to upper-secondary students, ranging from 1 to 20 years (see Table 1). This teaching experience underpins their beliefs about engaged readers and engaging L1 instruction.

Furthermore, the four schools in our study differ in terms of geographical location within the region, students' socioeconomic backgrounds, and the grade-point average required for student admission. The first two schools both required medium-level average grades from lower-secondary school. To gain insights into teachers' beliefs across varying contexts, we therefore selected a school requiring high grades for admission and a strong academic tradition for the third interview and a school accepting all applicants for the fourth one. Given the correlation found between reading engagement and academic achievement (Whitten et al., 2016), we might expect the schools to show variation among them regarding student engagement in reading fiction and hence, in teachers' beliefs about reading engagement and engaging instructions.

2.2 Analytical approach

To analyze our data and answer the research questions, we used qualitative content analysis, which is a "research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding" (Hsieh &

Shannon, 2005). This approach fits our purpose well because we were interested in the content of what was said in the focus group interviews. Content analysis is a flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data. It helped us compare the focus group interviews, discover common features, and obtain an "understanding of what [was] going on" (Maxwell, 2009, p. 237). To this end, we sorted the material into categories (Maxwell, 2009), in three phases. In the first phase, we deductively decided to base the analysis on three cornerstones for reading engagement: the reader, the text, and the teacher's instruction. They represent a triangle that student engagement in reading fiction may build on.

In the second phase, we derived four broad, organizational categories (Maxwell, 2009) from the questions in the interview guide, and in the third phase, we identified subcodes within each broad category (as shown in Table 2): In the category (i) The engaged student reader, the theoretical basis for the subcodes is the distinction between the aptitude and event approaches to reading engagement suggested by Lee and colleagues (2021). In the category (ii) Choice of texts, we coded for topic, genre, complexity, and length. The category (iii) Instructional processes builds on the engagement model of reading development proposed by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), which includes features of teaching practices known to be engaging (p. 410). One of the elements in their model is interesting texts, but since we had chosen texts as one of the three cornerstones for our study, we decided to include interesting texts in the above-mentioned category choice of texts. Hence it is not included in the category Instructional processes. The final category, (iv) Obstacles to reading engagement, concerned teachers' views on factors they believe undermines reading engagement in the L1 subject. Here we coded the material based on whether it pertained to a micro or a macro level. At the micro level, the teachers are concerned with the individual students and "their actions, beliefs, [and] desires" (Zahle, 2016, p. 1). At the macro level, teachers instead discuss what they believe to undermine reading engagement in a group as a whole (Zahle, 2016). All authors participated in the coding process, but the first and second authors coded all interviews.

We developed an analysis template in Microsoft Word and organized the coded material in columns for comparison. The codes were not exclusive, as some utterances pertained to several of the broad categories. In such cases, we marked two codes in parallel. When only one or a few words in the middle of an utterance pertained to a different category, we marked only that or those words with the relevant code color. When the overlap was broader, we made a note of it and kept the whole utterance in both categories. In the next step, we reorganized the data material in code groups, with fragments of the teacher utterances. To achieve a structured presentation, the first author wrote summaries of the material in each category. Those summaries were then discussed in the four-strong research group. Table 2 shows the two research questions and the four broad categories of analysis, with representative quotes from participants (translated into English by the first author) for each category.

Table 2. Research questions, categories of analysis, and representative quotes from the study

Research question	Category of analysis	Quotes
(1) What are upper-secondary L1 teachers' perceptions of the engaged student reader of fiction?	The engaged student reader (aptitude versus event)	"Well, some students are interested in literature in a way. Kind of like that, they just *are*." (Johanne) "I see engagement as something that arises, or that is in a situation. The student is more or less engaged in that situation, in that text. And you must have a certain engagement for the class to feel successful. That's our benchmark." (Nina)
(2) What are L1 teachers' perceptions of what enables or hinders engagement in reading fiction in upper secondary school?	Choice of texts	"Something or other that captivates them, where they can identify with the character, or at least there's a theme they find interesting." (Marcus) "I think it's pretty much about knowing your students, and being able to engage them in a topic they themselves are interested in." (Nora) "Reading *entire* works, then at least they can be confident that they have an overview." (Selma) "They thought [the novel] was dead slow at first. But then after a while they kind of got caught up in it." (Miriam)
	Instructional processes	"[Reading fiction] is a very social activity, perhaps one of the most social activities we engage in." (Julie) "The value of devoting time to discussing together what we have read. So many times, when we've read texts that are hard to understand, by talking about literature, […] they see levels in the text that they wouldn't have seen before and didn't see while reading." (Sarah) "[…] there's something unifying about us all reading the same thing." (Maud) "[…] it's nice to have a shared reading experience. So I believe in reading together." (Nina)

Obstacles to reading engagement	"It's just as if they've got a lot of resistance to reading. Many of them brag about not reading." (Miriam)
	"These students, they're so ambitious […]. The grades stand in the way, plain and simple." (Selma)
	"And sometimes it turns out that nobody has read what they were supposed to read. What should we do then?" (Maud)
	"I consider my present students to be the result of this experiment where children are given smartphones at the age of eight." (Norman)
	"Texts that we could easily let the students loose on before, we can no longer let them loose on, because they don't understand them." (Nicholas)

3. RESULTS

Given adolescents' declining engagement in reading, it was to be expected that there would be few stories from the classroom about engaged student readers. We did indeed find that the participants reported on various obstacles to student engagement in reading fiction. However, interestingly, the teachers in the study still expressed a faith in that their efforts would contribute to reading engagement. In answer to a question about the engaged student reader, Selma immediately replied, initially in a playful tone: "Do you mean now, before we've inspired them to read? [laughter from several people] Or after we've introduced them to what we want to read with them? Because that engagement is different from the one they bring with them." This quote shows a view of reading engagement as malleable, where teachers can foster student engagement in fiction reading. The teachers in all four interviews appear to have a mission of "planting seeds" (Jenny) for reading engagement to grow out of in the years to come. Hence the data from our interviews reflect optimism on the part of teachers despite the dire signals from PISA and other studies. In the following sections, we will discuss the answers to the first and second research questions, respectively.

3.1 The engaged student reader: aptitude and event

The teachers in our study manifest a dual perception of reading engagement as both aptitude and event. When prompted to describe the engaged student reader of fiction in L1, they initially focused on students with a natural inclination for reading,

viewing engagement as an aptitude. Those students are "genuinely" (Nina) interested in literature—"kind of like that, they just are" (Johanne). To Johanne, this represents "the ideal student," and she associates this reading engagement with a fairly durable quality in the person. Further, the engaged student reader was described in all interviews as someone who reads much "on their own initiative" (Nina) and in their spare time, independently of the teacher's influence.

In all interviews, the participants claim that their students seldom expose their personal reading engagement in class. Rather, it is the teachers' perception that this appears to be something "intimate and private" (Norman) that students keep to themselves. Hence the teacher may not know whether a student is an engaged reader. However, in their perception, this can be revealed in one-on-one conversations where students "confess" (Miriam) to the teacher about books they have read. According to Lee and colleagues (2021), the aptitude approach to reading engagement can be examined "using students' retrospective ratings of their general tendencies, beliefs, or actions" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 548). Although it is our teachers' perception that their students seldom reveal their personal engagement in fiction reading, it is clear that reading engagement, from an aptitude perspective, can be conveyed to the teacher through a retrospective lens. Sylvia and other teachers also express that some students disclose their reading habits through their writing: "Well, there are students who you can tell read a lot. Who can put words on their own reading experiences. Who show an amazing ability to interpret" (Sylvia).

In all interviews, it is the teachers' perception that few students are individually and genuinely engaged fiction readers. Nevertheless, when they were prompted to report on what they had done to facilitate reading engagement, the event approach surfaced. Nina noted that she "see[s] engagement as something that arises, or that is, in a situation. The student is more or less engaged in that situation". She went on to emphasize that she sees the momentary manifestation of reading engagement as a "benchmark" for a meaningful, high-quality class. Our participants report that they may also sense engagement in reading fiction when their students are discussing literature "during recess" (Jenny) or even in the classroom when students engage in "eager" conversation (Nicholas) and participate vigorously in activities facilitated by the teacher. In such cases where the participating teachers focus on signs of engagement in particular situations—like snapshots or scenes—they clearly take an event approach to reading engagement as something they can see and make room for through deliberate instructional choices.

When teachers view engagement from the aptitude approach, they are likely to strengthen "students' stamina in reading" (Lee et al., 2021). It is the perception of Sarah from Saturn, the school with high-achieving students, that engagement may be awakened when the teacher makes students read complex texts. She elaborates on how she "forced" all her students to read a novel by Jon Fosse, the Norwegian author who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2023. At first, it was Sarah's perception that many of her students were annoyed and highly reluctant, finding the content of the text to be "nonsense". However, after reading and

discussing the novel more thoroughly, Sarah experienced that the class had an epiphany when realizing what it was actually about, being fascinated by how a text can express deep meaning in few words. In this situation Sarah implicitly appears to rely on an aptitude approach, where the teacher may strengthen students' stamina by having them read complex texts.

When teachers view reading engagement as a social event, they are likely to use texts that they believe students will find interesting (Lee et al., 2021). Marcus foregrounded how he tries to make literature more accessible to students. He elaborated on how he facilitated an opportunity to engage his students in reading by using poetry from the Instagram social network by the author and musician Trygve Skau, "just to show that […] poetry isn't just old and boring in a way". Here, Marcus is facilitating reading engagement by adapting "lesson based on students' current interests" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 568) which suggests that Marcus in this situation implicitly appears to rely on a view on reading engagement as event. Thus, the findings from this category indicate that the teachers in our study believe in reading engagement as both a somewhat durable aptitude within a student, and as a social event they may observe and facilitate in class.

3.2 Opportunities for, and obstacles to, reading engagement

In all four interviews, teachers addressed what they perceived as both obstacles to and opportunities for engaging their students in reading fiction. Interestingly, once they had directed their attention to instruction, they mainly focused on the opportunities that they identify and respond to in their instruction, given the students they have and the context within which they teach. Only when prompted by the researcher did they more explicitly reflect upon obstacles to engaged fiction reading in their classrooms.

3.2.1 Choice of texts

Our participants perceive their students as more engaged when texts are relatable or thematically interesting: "Something or other that captivates them, where they can identify with the character, or at least there's a theme they find interesting" (Marcus). They also stress the importance of "knowing your students" (Nora) to be able to select relevant texts.

When it comes to text topic, our teachers often make a distinction between texts they perceive as immediately appealing to their students, on the one hand, and texts that, in their experience, students will need to spend time on before seeing their relevance, on the other. However, when they discuss texts in class and the teacher asks questions they assume will help students relate the content of the text to their own lives, students "attain a different relationship to the text" (Sarah). The teachers in our study express that discussion and contextualization can unlock engagement in fiction. Further, in their experience texts can grow on students, as attested by the

following episode shared by Nora: Her class was reading a poem by the late 19th-century Norwegian poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder. His poems are often seen as challenging because of their early-modernist form and their distance in time to students' contemporary world. In "Navnløs [Nameless]" (Obstfelder, 1893), the lyrical self is depressed, sick, and lonely, and afraid of infecting others with his illness. As the students were discussing the poem, it was Nora's perception that a burst of engagement erupted in the classroom: "Then they started saying, 'What illness was that?' and 'Is he from the 18th century, or is he from the 19th century?' […] And they just went, 'Can't we have a little quiz about him?'". The students' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic may have made the poem unexpectedly relevant to the students in Noras class, but it took some work for this relevance to become apparent.

The participating teachers also ascribe significance to reading whole texts rather than excerpts. This enabler of reading engagement is mentioned in all the four interviews. It is their perception that the present curriculum offers better opportunities to do this than older ones where the focus was on learning about the history of literature as a whole rather than delving deeply into a few works. Jacob report that reading the entire text gives students "the whole picture". In Selma's experience, reading the entire text makes her students "confident" when they know what is going on in the whole text. It is emphasized that reading entire novels takes a fair amount of time, which makes room for reading engagement to arise. The value of reading whole texts is highlighted by many of the teachers; Johanne even claims that "one of the most valuable things [they] do is read entire novels". Thus, the findings indicate that our participants believe texts with interesting and relevant topics may be engaging to students, and they also believe in reading longer texts, and in reading whole texts rather than excerpts.

3.2.2 Instructional processes

When it comes to instructional processes, the teachers discussed various ways to facilitate student engagement in reading fiction. What stands out, however, is that they believe in the classroom as a decisive arena for facilitating both reading and discussing fiction as a collective, social activity. This is important, because although it might seem straightforward, they perceive it as time-consuming and may take time they else would have spent on other topics from the curriculum.

Collaboration. The teachers discussed various strategies that both theory and practice suggest may be engaging. Collaboration (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 413) is highlighted in all interviews. It was the teacher's perception that reading engagement increases when students read together with their peers and the teacher facilitates both reading and discussing fiction in class. This perception aligns with a view of reading engagement as a social experience (Ivey & Johnston, 2015). Further, it is claimed that discussions with fellow students and the teacher can make students engaged in a text they did not find interesting at first and make them more deeply engaged in texts they already enjoyed. Teachers in the present study perceive

collective reading projects as deemed to be more engaging to many students than individual reading projects, where students sit alone "with their own books" (Jenny), hence Nina's credo "I believe in reading together" is representative for all four interviews.

Strategy instructions. The teachers in our study are preoccupied with being good role models: "I always try to bring books into class to show them, and I like to tell students how many books I've read […] only to give them an idea" (Michael). The use of strategy instructions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 413) to promote reading engagement is mentioned in all interviews: the teachers report that they should guide their students in learning from text and be "good teachers who model" (Jacob). Hence, the teachers believe that strategy instructions may significantly impact students' reading engagement.

Real-world interactions. A third feature of instructional processes noticeable in all interviews is how the participants value facilitating reading engagement through real-world interactions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 410): "It was dark, and we had dressed up the whole stage in Christmas lights and Christmas trees, and we had the squirrel there. It was magical" (Sarah). What Sarah refers to is a visit by the Norwegian author Ingvild Rishøi after the students had read Rishøi's novel *Brightly Shining* (Rishøi, 2024). Here Sarah elaborated on how she and her colleagues wanted to make this visit an enjoyable and immediately interesting experience for their students. In all interviews, the teachers discuss how they can make fiction meaningful by presenting the exciting life of an author, watching movie adaptations, arranging roleplays, reading aloud to the students, and listening to audio recordings of novels where actors give life to the text. Thus, they believe real-world interactions can help students become more engaged by connecting the text to their own lives.

3.2.3 Obstacles to reading engagement

During the interviews, the teachers identify possible obstacles to engagement in reading fiction. However, they mainly highlighted obstacles at the group level, such as properties ascribed to the student group, social structures, and the culture and traditions associated with the curriculum and the evaluation system. By contrast, they rarely mentioned obstacles at the level of individual students.

Resistance in the student group. In all four interviews the teachers report that "resistance" (Jenny) to reading in the student group is a major obstacle to reading engagement: "A lot of students don't read unless we tell them to, and maybe not even then" (Johanne). However, the perceived challenges encountered by the teachers vary depending on the student population of each school. At Mercury, where all students are admitted regardless of their lower-secondary grades, it is Michael's experience that many students "brag" in class about never having read a book in their lives. Similarly, Miriam expresses that many of her students are "proud" of their identity as nonreaders.

Teachers at the selective Saturn school also experience students' reluctance to read fiction, but they have another perspective. Sarah, Selma, and Sylvia express that academic ambitions can be a hinder for reading engagement: grades are so important to many of their students that they refrain from engaging with fiction for its own sake, preferring instead to focus on activities that will affect their final grades more: "The grades stand in the way, plain and simple" (Selma). This perspective is also present in the two schools with medium-high admission standards: "The purpose that they see and understand is assessment" (Norman).

Smartphones and screens. Teachers in all interviews suggest the omnipresence of smartphones as a possible explanation for why students are disengaged readers. As they see it, fiction reading cannot compete with the digital life of adolescents either in their spare time or in the classroom. They notice a lack of concentration in the student group which affects students when reading, listening to audio recordings, and watching movies. Nicholas, with 15 years of teaching experience in secondary education, reports that he notices a change during his years of practice regarding which texts he can use in class: "Texts that we could easily let the students loose on before, we can no longer let them loose on, because they don't understand them" (Nicholas). Nicholas claims that there is a discrepancy between the effort his current students are willing to invest in reading fiction and the complexity of the texts that they are expected to read in upper-secondary school.

Curriculum and national exams. In all the four interviews we found that it is the teachers' experience a conflict between letting students read texts on topics of interest to them and presenting other topics from the complex L1 curriculum: "Something has to go, […] or at least it must be shrunk […] We must think differently" (Selma). While the participants want to read more fiction with their students, they also express that they should spend more time preparing their students for the final national exams. From our focus group interviews we found that it is the participating teachers' perception that they are bound by the complex curriculum but they also reflect on the pitfalls: complying with the curriculum and preparing students for the national exams may give the teacher a clear conscience, but it is our teachers experience that it may also disengage students. Hence, our findings show that the participants believe in a variety of possible obstacles to reading engagement: students refraining from fiction reading, the digital life of students as a rival to fiction reading, and a conflict between spending time reading fiction and preparing students for final examens.

4. DISCUSSION

In this study, we have examined fifteen Norwegian upper-secondary L1 teachers beliefs about what may enhance or hinder engagement in reading fiction at a time when students' reading habits are changing, attempting to answer two research questions: (1) What are upper-secondary L1 teachers' beliefs about the engaged student reader of fiction? and (2) What are L1 teachers' beliefs about factors that

enables or hinders engagement in reading fiction in upper-secondary school? These questions are closely connected because the teachers' beliefs about the engaged reader and their view of reading engagement will both influence their teaching practice. We will discuss the answers to these questions below.

Overall, the participating teachers believe there is a strong resistance to fiction reading, both from students manifesting a somewhat hostile attitude toward it and from students who quietly refrain from reading fictional texts assigned to them. However, the teachers in our study desire to read fiction with their students. They trust that effort in the classroom can make a difference in student engagement, and they reflect a belief that engagement in fiction will arise when both reading and discussing fiction is facilitated as a social event within the classroom context.

4.1 Teachers' view of reading engagement

Regarding the first research question, the present study shows that the fifteen teachers in our study have a dual belief about reading engagement as both aptitude and event. From an aptitude approach, they conceptualize reading engagement as an individual characteristic of students who read on their own initiative. This represents the traditionally most common view of reading engagement (Ivey & Johnston, 2015, p. 298). Taking this approach, our teachers identified few engaged readers in their student groups. However, when the focus in the four interviews shifted to the classroom context, the event approach to reading engagement emerged. Then the teachers provided numerous accounts of instances where reading engagement appeared to be fostered within the classroom setting. This finding is significant because teachers' beliefs about reading engagement affects how they organize their teaching (Lee et al., 2021).

When teachers conceptualize reading engagement from the aptitude angle, they tend to focus on building students' "stamina" in reading (Lee et al., 2021). To do so, the teachers in all four schools assign fictional texts that in their opinion will be challenging for their students. We know that engaging in texts that are perceived as challenging can increase both reading engagement (Gourvennec, 2017; Sønneland, 2019) and reading stamina (Baron & Mangen, 2021). However, one potential problem with taking only the aptitude approach is that students may be expected to do most of their reading outside of school. Although spare-time reading is a possible long-term goal, our study also show that the teachers believe that they cannot trust their students to read on their own as homework. By contrast, when teachers conceptualize reading engagement from the event approach, they tend to facilitate fiction reading as a social event in the classroom, and assigning texts that students find interesting (Lee et al., 2021), as the Instagram-poetry example from teacher Marcus imply.

The situational event approach and the individual aptitude approach to reading engagement can be both contradictory and complementary. It can be questioned whether engagement arising in an enjoyable task will make students engaged

readers in the long run, as noted by one teacher (Nicholas). On the one hand, short-term engagement may be better than no engagement: at least it provides encounters with literature that students would not otherwise have. This view could be understandable in teachers habitually confronted with students who read fiction to a limited extent on their own. However, students who consistently show reading engagement in the event sense are likely to have some reading engagement in the aptitude sense (Lee et al., 2021). Further, taking the event approach to reading engagement may build students' attitudes toward reading, enhance their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) in reading fiction, and strengthen reading engagement as aptitude. One might have expected the teachers from the least selective school to place less emphasis on students' reading engagement as aptitude, but we have found that teachers in all four schools challenge their students to read texts that can make them develop as readers and contribute to their individual reading habits. Hence, our findings indicate that both the aptitude and event approaches to reading engagement are important and should be applied in parallel by teachers in the classroom, like threads twined together to make a stronger rope.

4.2 Teachers with a personal conviction

With our second research question, we investigated what teachers believe hinders engagement in reading fiction in the student group and what opportunities they find to promote reading engagement through their choice of fictional texts and engaging teaching practices. Through their discussions on specific texts, authors, and teaching routines, our participants revealed an abundant knowledge about both literature, and instructional processes known from research to be engaging (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The teachers at the four schools appear to have a personal conviction about reading fiction with their students. They want to give their students positive experiences with literature and are willing to spend considerable classroom time doing so despite a comprehensive curriculum encompassing both historical, linguistic, and literary topics. This finding differs from that of Hooley and colleagues (2013), who found that upper-secondary teachers did not think they had the time to let their students read in the classroom.

Traditionally, students in the academic branch of Norwegian upper-secondary school have been expected to be both willing and able to read on their own. Hence we might have expected our teachers to be discouraged now that they are facing a group of student readers who are more "disengaged" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The teachers in our study did acknowledge the difficulty of engaging today's students in fiction reading, but they appear to adapt to this situation and explore new teaching strategies to manage a group of students who often do not read what they have been assigned to read.

Personal conviction can be a powerful tool, and teachers' dedication can encourage students (Siegle et al., 2014). However, it is problematic for literature education to rely entirely on teachers' personal desire to read fiction, since this

works only if all teachers have that desire. This matter is too important to be left to individual teachers' discretion. Hence we need a curriculum ensuring that fiction reading will take place in the classroom regardless of teachers' personal convictions. The curriculum for the Norwegian L1 subject is broad and offers teachers considerable freedom of choice. This may ensure autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and it may work well for experienced teachers, but it can be difficult to handle for inexperienced ones: they may not feel competent enough to make radical text choices or dare to spend time on time-consuming reading project. Based on our findings, we argue that the curriculum should lay down not only that the L1 subject must encompass the reading of fiction, but also that fiction reading must be facilitated within the classroom context. Our findings have implications for the curriculum, for teacher training, and for mentorship programs for new teachers.

4.3 Students' attitudes toward reading fiction

The four interviews also gave us new insights into students' attitudes toward fiction reading from the lenses of the teachers. One might assume that students with high grades from lower-secondary school and positive attitudes toward schoolwork would be more engaged readers, but the teachers in the present study believe that resistance to reading is relatively independent of their students' academic level and ambitions. In their experience, a group of students with high academic ambitions refrain from fiction reading while prioritizing activities that will affect their final grades. A tendency among high-achieving students to get by with just enough effort to maintain the grade level they want, thus employing a strategy that "unintentionally place[s] an artificial ceiling on their learning" (Siegle et al., 2014, p. 47), is known from previous research. Given that it is often expected that ambitious students will contribute to a good learning environment in class and bring fellow students on board through a positive attitude toward the teacher's instruction, such students' resistance to reading fiction may have a negative effect not only on their own learning but also on the classroom learning environment. This is an important matter worthy of further investigation.

4.4 Opportunities for reading engagement: Implications

Through their discussions on specific fictional texts, authors, and teaching instructions, the participating teachers show ample knowledge about both texts and teaching strategies that they believe are likely to enhance student engagement in fiction reading. Here we will discuss them in turn. Firstly, we know that interesting texts are important for student engagement (Guthrie, 2008; Hidi & Renninger, 2006). However, we find that teachers emphasize different qualities of texts, depending on their student group. Teachers at all schools in our study valued both texts with topics perceived as interesting by students and texts that were perceived as challenging. However, teachers of students with high academic ambitions highlighted providing

such students with challenging texts, believing that an interesting topic alone does not justify spending time reading a text—it must also provide academic value.

Secondly, one might assume that teachers facing students who are reluctant to read would lower their expectations and assign short texts and excerpts. Although this would be understandable, it would undermine a key principle: sustained reading over time is essential for engagement to develop (Guthrie, 2008). However, the teachers in our study believe that, for reading engagement to arise, students must grasp the entire context of the text to achieve a full understanding, meaning that they all let their students read entire works.

Thirdly, our teachers strongly believe that both student collaboration in the classroom and real-world interactions may nourish reading engagement. However, it is worth stressing that, while collaborative and enjoyable activities are valuable, they can distract from the primary focus on the text, meaning that it is crucial for the primary objective to be reading fictional text. Based on what the L1 teachers in our study believe should be done we thus argue that successful engagement in reading fiction in the upper-secondary L1 subject requires (i) texts that connect to students' lives—in more or less obvious ways—through interesting topics and/or academic value acknowledged by students; (ii) fictional texts of a certain length, which are not excerpts; and (iii) reading as a shared and teacher-guided experience with the classroom as a pivotal scene.

4.5 The crucial context of the classroom

The teachers in our study "believe in reading together" (Nina). They believe in the classroom as a decisive arena for facilitating both reading and discussing fiction as a collective, social event. They also believe in reading longer fiction and entire works to allow reading engagement to arise. Based on these findings, this study suggests that, to enhance engagement in reading fiction in upper-secondary students, the teacher should facilitate reading and discussing longer fictional text as a social event in the context of the classroom. This will be important both for instruction in the L1 subject and for research.

4.6 Limitations and further directions

Focus-group interviews, data from which form the basis of the present study, are intended to make participants who are knowledgeable about a topic elaborate on different perspectives; the purpose is not for the participants to reach a joint conclusion but to provide knowledge on the interpretations, interactions, and norms of a social group (Halkier, 2020). We wished to give our participants an opportunity to share and interpret their experiences within the context of a focus group interview. This study is limited by a sample of 15 teachers representing four Norwegian upper-secondary schools, and international readers should of course interpret our results through the prism of their national context, including the

characteristics of their school system, student groups, and L1 curriculum. Further, the results are potentially biased because we can expect the teachers who volunteered for participation to take an above-average interest in literature education. However, this privileged position may serve as an inspiration for teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, and educational researchers. Further research, including observation of student–teacher interaction, is needed to explore how reading engagement can be facilitated as a teacher-guided social event in the upper-secondary classroom. There is also a need to hear what upper-secondary students themselves have to say about engagement in reading fiction.

5. CONCLUSION

The L1 subject represents a place where adolescents can encounter fiction, with teachers providing a counterweight to the trend of falling engagement in reading fiction. In a culture where adolescents avoid reading fiction in their spare time, books are being displaced by digital services (Twenge et al., 2019), and politicians promote ever-greater digitalization (Norwegian Ministry of Digitalization and Public Governance, 2024), the L1 teachers in our study believe that they can play a crucial role. This study reveals the teachers' beliefs in such a decisive role in counteracting negative attitudes and enhance engagement, so that their students can benefit from reading fiction.

Reading fiction improves literacy and has been found to have a positive impact on students' grades in subjects as diverse as English, mathematics, science, and history (Whitten et al., 2016). Moreover, reading fiction strengthens our ability to change perspective, understand the lives of others, and discern our "similarity with others" (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Further, in a cultural context where entertainment is increasingly individualized and there seem to be fewer common cultural references, reading fiction in the L1 subject can contribute to social cohesion and strengthen democracy.

As students' attitudes toward reading have moved in a negative direction, the work of literature teachers has become more challenging. This study contributes to the research field by showing how 15 L1 teachers in four upper-secondary schools in Norway "believe in reading together" and in the L1 classroom as a pivotal scene for fiction reading. We argue that, when a teacher views reading engagement as a social and dynamic reading event created in the classroom situation, this will influence the teacher's classroom practice. Further, based on our findings, we suggest the L1 upper-secondary classroom as a decisive arena for both reading and discussing fiction as a collective social event to enhance engagement in reading fiction among adolescents. This is important at a time when digital services affect almost all arenas of adolescents' lives, and many students identify as nonreaders. Engaging upper-secondary students in reading fiction is a matter that needs priority for years to come, both in the L1 subject and in other arenas.

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APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview will last for about 60 minutes, including presentation and summary.

Interview guide and information letter are distributed and consent form is signed.

Participation in the project is voluntary. You may withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason. In that case, you can contact the researchers on the project, either by email, or letting us know directly during the interview. The data will be treated confidentially and in accordance with data protection regulations.

The interview will be audio recorded.

A focus group interview is an informal conversation between participants about a topic all the participants have experience with, where the goal is to shed light on various aspects and points of view of the topic. In the conversation, the participants share their experiences while the topic is further elucidated by relating to each other's opinions.

Questions or comments can also be sent by email to [the email address of the researcher].

Overarching topic

Engagement in reading fiction in the Norwegian L1 subject, academic branch, upper secondary school.

Main themes

1) Presentation of the participant

- Can you briefly tell us about your role and experience as L1 teacher?

2) The reading student

- Can you describe a student you know, that in your experience connects to the work with reading fiction in the L1 subject?
- Can you describe a student who commits to reading fiction over some period?

3) The role of the L1 teacher

- Can you tell us what you as a teacher want to do, or try to do, to facilitate student participation in reading fiction?
- In your experience, how is it to read fiction with students today compared with, say, some years ago?

4) Disciplinary reading in L1

- The L1 Norwegian curriculum states that reading is a basic skill and that the L1 subject has a particular responsibility for reading instructions. What does this imply for you as teachers in upper-secondary education?
- What distinguishes the L1 subject from other subjects you know when it comes to reading?

5) Summary

- In your opinion, what is engagement in reading fiction in the Norwegian L1 subject all about?
- Is there anything else regarding this matter that that you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation!