"The students expect to read non-fiction, so that's what they're set on". Tensions between students' and teachers' views on reading, including educational perspectives

"Los estudiantes esperan leer no ficción, eso es lo que tienen en mente". Tensiones entre las perspectivas de los estudiantes y los profesores sobre la lectura, incluyendo perspectivas educativas

"Els estudiants esperen llegir no ficció, de manera que això és el que tenen en ment". Tensions entre les visions dels estudiants i dels professors sobre la lectura, incloent perspectives educatives

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate how students' responses to reading and talking about a fictional novel relate to teachers' ideas about the possibilities of a literary work. A large group (413) of readers aged 10–12 completed questionnaires both before and after reading the Romani author Katarina Taikon's *Katitzi* (1969/2015), which, in a fast-paced and engaging way touches upon subjects such as vulnerability and racism. Responses from 14 teachers are analysed in relation to these students' answers. The results show great student engagement, with a clear majority (76%) formulating thoughts about Katitzi's situation and their contemporaries. The teachers, on the other hand, highlight problems they see with the literary work and tend to value reading non-fiction more. Through the discrepancy, the question arises as to whether the students' engagement after reading could be utilised more, so that they develop both as readers and participants in a current social debate.

Keywords: teaching literature, children's and youth literature, book talks, Swedish in primary school

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar cómo las respuestas de los y las estudiantes al leer y hablar sobre una novela de ficción se relacionan con las ideas de los profesores sobre las posibilidades de una obra literaria. Un gran grupo (413) de lectores de 10 a 12 años completó cuestionarios antes y después de leer Katitzi (1969/2015), de la autora romaní Katarina Taikon, que, de manera rápida y atractiva, aborda temas como la vulnerabilidad y el racismo. Se analizan las respuestas de 14 miembros del profesorado en relación con las respuestas del alumnado. Los resultados muestran un gran compromiso por parte de los y las estudiantes, con una clara mayoría (76%) expresando pensamientos sobre la situación de Katitzi y sus contemporáneos. Por otro lado, el profesorado resalta problemas que percibe en la obra literaria y tiende a valorar más la lectura de no ficción. A través de esta discrepancia, surge la pregunta de si la motivación del alumnado después de la lectura podría ser utilizado de manera más efectiva, para que se desarrollen tanto como lectores como participantes en un debate social actual.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de literatura, literatura infantil y juvenil, charlas sobre libros, sueco en la escuela primaria.

Resum

Aquest article té com a objectiu investigar com les respostes de l'estudiantat en llegir i parlar sobre una novel·la de ficció es relacionen amb les idees del professorat sobre les possibilitats d'una obra literària. Un grup ampli (413) de lectors de 10 a 12 anys va completar qüestionaris abans i després de llegir Katitzi (1969/2015), de l'autora romaní Katarina Taikon, que, d'una manera ràpida i atractiva, aborda temes com la vulnerabilitat i el racisme. Les respostes de 14 membres del professorat s'analitzen en relació amb les respostes d'aquests i aquestes estudiants. Els resultats mostren un gran compromís de l'alumnat, amb una clara majoria (76%) formulant pensaments sobre la situació de Katitzi i els seus contemporanis. El professorat, d'altra banda, destaca problemes que veu en l'obra literària i tendeix a valorar més la lectura de no ficció. A través de la discrepància, sorgeix la pregunta de si la implicació dels i les estudiants després de la lectura podria ser utilitzada més, de manera que es desenvolupen tant com a lectors com a participants en un debat social actual.

Paraules clau: ensenyament de literatura, literatura infantil i juvenil, xerrades de llibres, suec a l'escola primària.

1. Introduction

Ideas and theories about the thought and mind developing potential of literary, fictional, text have had a major influence on research in the field of teaching literature, at least since the 1930s – and continue to do so (Langer, 2017; Martinsson, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2002). On the other hand, the question of what place literature actually has in Swedish schools in general, and within the subject of Swedish in particular, described often as utility- and measurability oriented, has been raised repeatedly during the last ten years (Erixon & Löfgren, 2018; Lindell, 2020; Lundström,

Manderstedt & Palo, 2011; Sigvardsson, 2020). Adding the digital media surge, the question if literary fiction in the 2020s can mean anything at all for young people's mental identity and personal development is relevant. Although this matter is regularly discussed, both within and outside the research sphere of teaching literature, it is very rarely based on larger, empirical data of literature-reading students and their teachers (Miall, 2006; Nordberg, 2017; Pettersson, 2015). In this article, receptions, reactions and reading experiences of over 400 *Katitzi*-readers aged 9–12, taking part in a municipal community reading circle as part of the research project *Everybody reads! (Alla läser!)* – and their teachers' reflections on the novel during the project– will form the basis for a grounded discussion about the potential of fiction and what the results possibly mean for literature teaching.

This article looks into how students' responses, during and after reading and discussing a novel, relate to teachers' ideas about the importance of literary fiction. Thereby, we want to make visible educational possibilities that lie within values-based work that is not tied to pre-stipulated goals. For this purpose, a book, namely Katarina Taikon's *Katitzi* (1969/2015), with relevance to the school's value base/ethical work is used. The overall analysis, including answers from students and teachers, thus forms the basis for a more comprehensive discussion.

The research questions are linked to these two perspectives, making a mixed-method design of the study necessary. Since questions 1 and 2 focus on students' reactions to the novel, grounded theory is needed to grasp the complexity and diversity of the data, while question 3, focusing on a limited number of teachers' views on the work with *Katitzi*, asks for qualitative research and analysis of the non-numerical data of the study. The research questions read:

> **This article looks into how students' responses, during and after reading and discussing a novel, relate to teachers' ideas about the importance of literary fiction. Thereby, we want to make visible educational possibilities that lie within values-based work that is not tied to pre-stipulated goals.**

1) What thoughts and reactions develop in the participating students during the joint reading and conversation about a fiction book that touches on difficult topics such as racism and exclusion? What role does the basic assumption that the story is a literary text, instead of non-fiction, play in student learning?

2) In what ways do the students relate the events in the novel, reflecting the social and historical background of Romani people in Sweden, to their own lives and the world around them?

3) How do the teachers view and reflect on the need to discuss ethnic belonging and exclusion through *Katitzi* with their students? In what ways do they express opinions about their students'

reading of literary texts, in relation to other forms of texts? Do they have anything to say about the social relevance of fiction, and the relationship of fictional stories to the outside world?

In the spring term of 2021, 413 middle school students in a municipality in central Sweden read and discussed the novel *Katitzi* (1968/2015), as part of an extensive and ongoing reading project named, as mentioned above, *Everybody Reads!* The research project's overarching goal is to study the potential and possibilities of deepening conversations about the conditions of democracy, and citizens' different opportunities to participate in social development, through reading and discussing literature in a book circle. The project was developed in 2019, in close collaboration with the municipality, wherein all students from years 4 to 12 in municipal schools read the same novel during a four-week period. The municipality's intention was to promote literary reading and stimulate students' thinking and challenge established patterns and norm systems. The municipality, is slightly below the national average, in terms of the percentage of people with higher education (SCB, 2020; Swedish School Administration, 2022b). School results are also below the national average in some aspects (National Agency for Education, 2022a). Within empirical reading research, the majority of the students who participated in the project can be described as "ordinary readers" (Miall, 2006, 2.)

The idea lying at the heart of the project has been to keep the fictional story itself and the joint discussion at the very centre of classroom work (cf. Lindell & Öhman; Lyngfelt & Nissen, 2018; 2019; Nordberg 2020). We assessed that the best way to do so was to let each teacher design and decide how this should take place in interaction with their students, with the clear basic requirement that the reading and discussion of the book must occur in a group. This basic requirement has been communicated to the teachers via emails sent by the municipality's coordinator (See Nordberg 2021; 2022a; 2022b).

2. Background and theoretical considerations

The project Everybody Reads aims to put established reader response and literary educational theories about literature reading and its potential for personal development, increased understanding of other people and a broad perspective on the world (Felski, 2008; Langer, 2017; Nussbaum, 2010; Rosenblatt 2002; Ziehe, 2003; Zunshine 2006) in direct relation to large-scale empirical results from actual readers' receptions and reading experiences (cf. Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003; Pettersson, 2015; Nordberg, 2019). This theoretical point of departure is rooted in Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 2010), meaning that Grounded Theory is used flexibly to conduct research that prioritizes exploration of a given phenomenon – here students' perception of a novel – in a predominantly inductive theory

development paradigm (cf. Birks et al., 2017). However, as pointed out before, an approach of qualitative research is also needed, to be able to discuss the teachers' opinions about their students' responses. Before looking into how we implemented GT in this study, the theoretical position needs further contextualizing in the Swedish school system, in curricular developments within the subject of Swedish and in notable tendencies in literature teaching.

Scholars have frequently highlighted the beneficial effects of reading literature (Miller, 2002; Attridge, 2004; Farrell, 2004; Felski, 2008; cf. Sumara, 2002), for instance, for an understanding of how other people think and feel ("Theory of Mind", Zunshine, 2006). In this they have received authoritative support from such authorities as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1990, 1998, 2008, 2010) and the historian of ideas Sverker Sörlin (2019) who emphasized the role of literature and the humanities in social cohesion and the promotion of democratic ideals (Biesta, 2013). Yet, all of this reflects theoretical discourse rather than empirical research. There has, however, been some empirical corroboration (e.g., Comer Kidd & Castano 2013) and, in the last decade, research into the digital environment which strongly influences reading.

Furthermore, international critical literacy studies have highlighted the ways teachers and students use language and other semiotic resources to shape their understanding of issues such as gender and social inequality (Janks, 2009). Additionally, studies have stressed the importance of classroom practices in furthering intersectionally and promote critical thinking as a competence developed by reading fiction (Janks, 2013, 2014). In similar studies in Sweden the democratic potential – and responsibility – within Swedish as a school subject has been debated since the late seventies. The first and very influential initiatives, notably those of the "Pedagogical Group", were reader orientated, aiming at a literary reading where the pupils' responses to texts were connected with their own life experience (Lindberg, 1981; L-G Malmgren & Thavenius, 1981; Malmgren & Thavenius, 1982; Linnér & Malmgren, 1982; Linnér, 1984; Malmgren, 1984; Malmgren, 1986). These efforts also emphasized the importance of a broad societal perspective beyond personal readings (Malmgren, 1984, 181). All this was based on the premise that personal engagement in reading makes classrooms more dialogical and egalitarian as well as forms critical and democratic citizens. During the late nineties these ideas receded in favour of a more competence-oriented perspective, which dominated the following decade (Brink, 2006; Degerman, 2012; Mossberg Schüllerkvist, 2008; Torell, 2002; Ullström, 2009; Wolf, 2002; Årheim, 2007). In 2003, however, the democratic orientation was highlighted again, including the point that pupils' access to a literary reading culture is a profound democratic right (Bergöö & Ewald, 2003; Liberg, 2003; G. Malmgren, 2003; Molloy, 2003). This idea of Swedish as a subject that fosters democratic values has been criticized as

instrumentalisation (Andersson, 2010; Lyngfelt, 2017; Thavenius, 2005) but it has frequently been revived as a way of promoting democratic values ("värdegrundsarbete") (Alkestrand, 2016; Lilja Waltå, 2016; Molloy, 2007, 2017).

In practice, literature in the Swedish school system has been clearly marginalized, and the literary teaching instrumentalised, since the new curriculum was launched in 2011, as is shown by Öhman (2015), Lyngfelt (2017), Andersson (2019), Lindell (2019), Nordberg (2020) and Sigvardsson (2020). In policy documents, there has been an emphasis on types of texts other than literature ('descriptive', 'explanatory', 'instructive'), as well as increased general requirements of measurability and grading criteria ("kunskapskrav") (see Berg, 2010; Bornemark, 2018; Lundström, Manderstedt & Palo, 2011; Molloy, 2011; Nordberg, 2021). This favours the study of text genres, linguistically, restricting itself to basic text comprehension in line with functional literacy (Borsgård & Jönsson, 2019, Erixon & Löfgren, 2018). Thus, at a time when antidemocratic forces have grown stronger, changes made in curricula have pushed aside aesthetic forms of expression across all school levels (Lyngfelt & Nissen, 2018). This includes the observation that far from all students are offered the opportunity to engage in dialogue about fictional texts, especially not students in multilingual schools and in socioeconomically vulnerable areas (Economou, 2018). This is worth stressing, since aesthetic expression has been seen as a starting point for students to reconsider their views through encountering what is not already known to them (Ziehe, 2003).

Worth noticing, and considering theoretically, is that all students come from a small Swedish municipality where their parents' academic education is below the national average. In the analyses, their meaning-production is viewed in terms of reader-response theory as a collaboration between them and the text (cf., e.g., Langer 2017: Rosenblatt, 2002; Torell 2002). Our position is that responses thus need to be related to their possibilities of assuming a role as a reader or as a respondent answering the questionnaire or participating in a book talk or a focus group.

However, students' development through reading literature is dependent on teachers' perceptions of their students and their needs, as well as their own thoughts about what fiction can offer and potentially mean to students. In the article, research on teachers' beliefs is therefore another theoretical starting point. Studies in this field have shown that teachers' experiences and beliefs shape teaching and thus have an impact on students' learning and development (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Kalaja et al., 2016). Dressel (2005) points out, it is often assumed that reading and responding to multicultural literature will help dominant-culture

readers value minorities and diversity. The students' response to this effort, according to Dressel, could be conceived as complex: although students are able to empathize with characters in the story world, their understanding seldom transfers to cultural understanding in the real world. In her study, about middle-school students, the students tend to reject the literary texts or reshape it, resulting in inconsistencies and illogical conclusions. What Dressel stresses, which is crucial for the present study, is the role of teachers as co-learners and leaders of negotiations about the meaning of difference, taking into account that some voices are more dominant than others in the classroom. In this context, Bruner's (2002) theorising about narratives is also relevant; according to him, we are stories and become what we talk about. The overarching educational question for the article then becomes which "stories" could be possible to form based on the reading of Katitzi, considering both the students' responses to the book and the teachers' ideas about their students and how to work with fiction in the classroom.

3. Method and data collection

Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967/2008) tempers researchers' preconceptions in a systematic interaction between data and analysis; data based on a tentative initial orientation generates principles for eliciting new data as well as categorizing responses and making them quantitatively measurable. This comprises a constructivist conception of the categorization as socially positioned with regard to views (in this study) of multiculturalism and diversity, meaning that the researchers must factor into the analysis their own acculturated positions as observers (Charmaz, 2008). This is made by the researchers, by being wary of selective analyses telling a single narrative and an awareness of the social position of the respondents mentioned above. To be able to discuss values and opinions, qualitative research is also added to the study. As pointed out before, it is used for the non-numerical data of the study, i.e., the 14 teachers' comments on their students' reading of *Katitzi*.

Further, Grounded Theory means the possibility of using an approach that is as open as possible to the collection of empirical data, without, for example, pre-formulated thoughts about the ideal reader and the text's given interpretation possibilities (cf. Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003; Nordberg, 2017; Pettersson, 2016). Digital questionnaires, filled in by the participating students and teachers before and after each reading period, have, in the project as a whole, been used to investigate reading and media habits in general, attitudes towards reading fiction in particular, and, most importantly, the students' reflections on the books in question. The students have also been asked about their perceptions of shared reading and organised book talks. Furthermore, direct questions have been posed concerning the students' view of possible

connections between the fictional world and reality. Students have also been asked questions about if and how they consider the potential to develop thoughts about their own existence based on their reading experiences and reflections, a key idea highlighted repeatedly within reader response theory and the literary educational fields overall (Langer, 2017; Nussbaum, 2010; Rosenblatt, 2002).

Taikon's novel *Katitzi* (1968/2015) was chosen since it is easy for students about the same age as "Katitzi" to connect to, and also because the book mirrors the complexity of being part of a minority in Sweden (the Romanis), from a child's perspective. This book is the first in a series of thirteen books, and was published in a new edition in 2015. In the novel, we follow Katitzi's, the Romani girl's, reunion with her family and their wandering life, running a mobile "Tivoli"[1], after she had been living for some time in an orphanage – and before that with the "Cirkus people" (her early childhood is somewhat shrouded in obscurity.) The events are depicted in a direct, innocent and captivating way, addressing the very tangible racism that Romani people experienced in Sweden in the late thirties (Hallberg, 2017). At the same time, the story holds excitement, action, humour and warmth. Taikon, having a Romani background herself, has been an activist, parallel to her authorship for decades. The Katitzi books are fictional novels but have often been approached as autobiographical material (Widhe, 2021).

The results presented are based on digital questionnaires, which in turn are related to the research questions. For the students, the questionnaires analysed here were, with one exception, completed *after* the reading of the novel, while the teachers' responses include both their opinions before and after the students' reading of the book. The before-questionnaires contained 15 questions for students, and 24 for their teachers. As a whole, the questionnaires aimed at exploring the students' use of media and their reading habits, their attitudes to literature, and their views on democracy, gender and ethnicity. Additionally, they included questions about the novel and (when it comes to the teachers) the teachers' views on their students' response to the book. This empirical data was collected by statements that the teachers were asked to respond to by individual comments, written by themselves; it is the teachers' written-down comments that the result about their responses is based on. The after-questionnaires for the students were complemented by semi-structured focus group interviews based on the precepts of Krueger (2009), Morgan (1997), and Wibeck (2010).[2] All in all, this means that it is the results of 413 student digital surveys and the response of 14 teachers that

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[1] A Tivoli is an amusement park.

[2] These interviews are not analysed in this article, but they give the researchers a broadened perspective.

is presented in the article. For the most part, the analyses of student responses are based on closely reading free text responses. In these free text questions there is an openness that interacts with the GT-approach of the study. To give an overview, other forms of student responses, where they grade and choose among alternatives, are also reported quantitatively, where different response categories have been compiled and calculated as a percentage outcome. These response categories emerged entirely from participant responses, not from the pre-determined focus areas. Since the teachers' responses are relatively few in number, but still important for the purpose of the study, the variation in the teachers' responses is not reported as a percentage. Instead, attention is paid (to a greater degree than when reporting the students' response) to the teachers' comments. Based on the results, a literary, educational discussion follows in the conclusion.[i] All questions and answers are translated from Swedish.

> **[…]different response categories have been compiled and calculated as a percentage outcome. These response categories emerged entirely from participant responses, not from the pre-determined focus areas**

4. Results

As in all studies, there are limitations to the study presented, including the fact that the results of the questionnaires, handed out before and after the study, may be due to sociocultural factors like the students' self-confidence and the classroom climate (socially), when answering the questionnaires. Nevertheless, we can state that this large-scale survey is being conducted in a broad base of ordinary, non-academic readers. We opine that this in itself has a certain relevance, through the empirical grounding, within the complex field of literary reading and teaching.

Results are presented in this section, following the chronology of the research questions. The first two research questions are addressed together, not separately. The results section focuses on certain survey questions where the processes we examine appear in different ways; specifically, four questions out of 23 in the student questionnaire. Consistent with the student responses reported in the form of quotations is that they are representative of the category they belong to in terms of content, expressed thoughts and way of reasoning. Regarding the teachers' answers, three questions out of 25 are analysed in relation to research question 3 with sub-questions.

4.1. Students' thoughts and feelings after reading

The first question which students answered after finishing the novel is formulated openly as: *What thoughts and feelings did you get from the book that you read with the class?* With this

openness, the answers provide a clear and direct indication of which impressions were strongest among the readers, and how their thoughts and feelings were set in motion. The students' answers have been categorised based on what is mainly addressed and discussed in them. What the categories contain and how they differ can be seen in table 1. In cases where the students clearly process more than one category in their answers, both answers are included in the compilation. This means that the total number of answers numerically becomes greater than 413 (429), and the combined percentage is greater than 100 (104%). However, the numerical results in the categories are consistently converted into percentages in relation to the total number of students participating in the study; thus, in that aspect, the comparison will be consistent, both within this question and in relation to compilations of the other questions. The diagram shows the outcome of the response categories to the open-ended, initial question in percentage form:
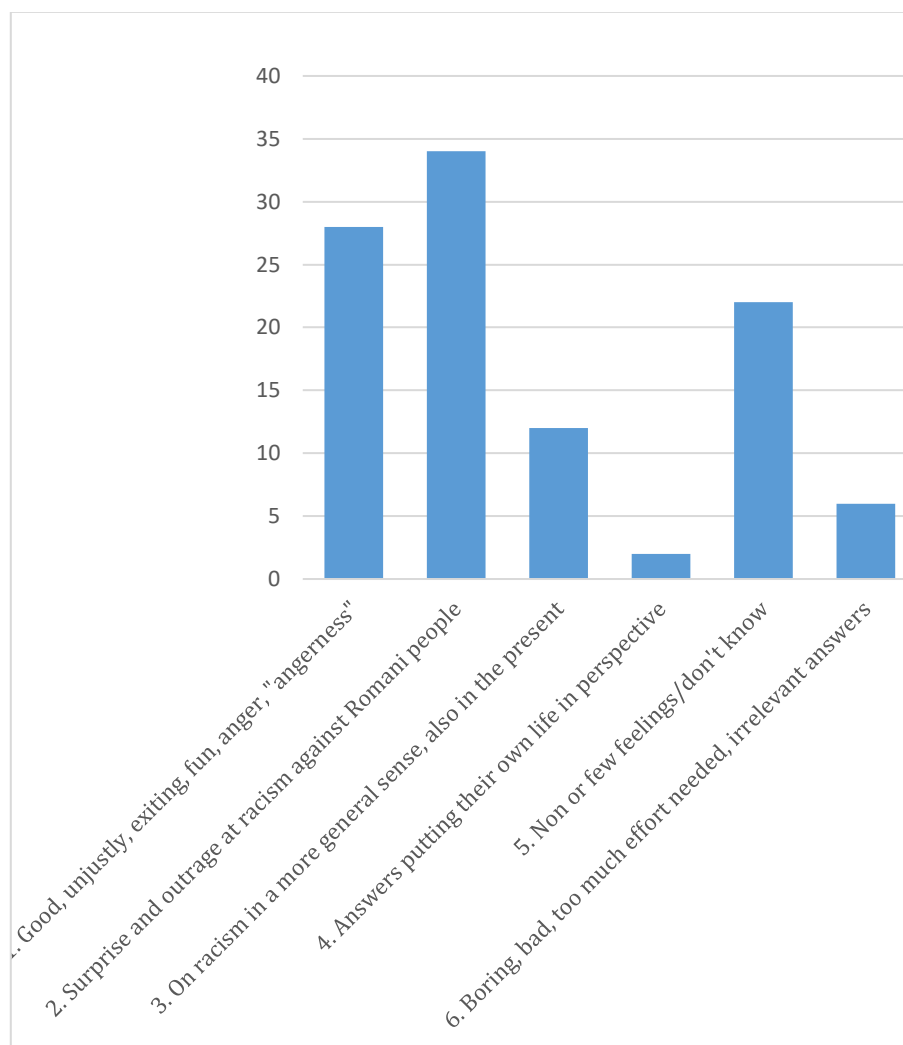

Figure 1. What thoughts and feelings did you get from the book that you read with the class? N=413. Outcome in per cent.

The largest group, category 2 with 34% of the total, represents students who express a clear commitment to the novel, and to the situation of the Romani people. The story of Katitzi has clearly evoked strong reactions, such as anger, sadness and fear. However, many of them have also mentioned that humour in the book was an essential part of their reading experience. Reflections and reactions on how Romani people, and children in a more general sense, have been treated throughout history are common and are representative of the category. Some typical examples are cited here:

> S1: I get upset about how children were treated at that time, and about the prejudices people had about the Romani people.

> S2: I think the book is very funny, but still a little uncomfortable when others treat Romani people in a bad way.

> S3: I've gotten angry at how people have prejudices about certain people, and I've also gotten happy on some occasions and a little bit of everything.[3]

The story of Katitzi has clearly evoked strong reactions, such as anger, sadness and fear. However, many of them have also mentioned that humour in the book was an essential part of their reading experience.

The second most common response type, category 1, involves a large group of students (28%), who, in a somewhat more unspecified way, reflect on how the novel made them feel. The answer type is closely related to the previous one as the students express that they found the reading fun, rewarding, exciting, but also that it aroused anger with the injustices portrayed. Here are some representative examples:

> S4: A little, anger – angerness?[4] is it a feeling? It has made me angry.

> S5: Sad but, at the same time, instructive and funny.

> S6: It was unfair, but it was a good and exciting book.

> S7: I have felt: angry (injustice), I think Katitzi is funny.....😁

Together, these two categories make up for 62% of the total response outcome. In a third group of answers, category 3, which is related to the two previous ones, answers testify to commitment and strong reactions – but where the students also lead the discussion further on, to a more general level. Here, there are descriptions of contexts and connections to racism and

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[3] Students are referred to as Student 1, Student 2 and so forth, shortened as S1, S2 etc. All responses have been translated by the authors.

[4] In Swedish: "arghet" – which is a non-idiomatic expression.

human rights occurring currently. This is an important difference, illustrating the students' ability to step back from the text and reflect on reality in relation to fiction (Langer, 2017). In total, 12% of the students expressed themselves as such in their answers to the open-ended initial question:

> S8: I think the book is very good. I really come to think about how unpleasant and sometimes mean some people are just because you are a certain person. It's terrible.

> S9: I get very happy, angry, sad- quite a lot of emotions at the same time. And I get a lot of thoughts about racism that it is wrong for people to put down people who may have a different skin colour or such.

> S10: It teaches us about what it's like not to be "normal".

> S11: ✊🏼 🪐

A further distinction can be made regarding those answers that clearly and explicitly relate what they have read, and the injustices and abuses depicted, to their own life, when asked the open-ended question. Such answers form category 4. Only 2% of the responses were in that direction:

> S12: I think about how others are doing and that I'm actually doing great.

> S13: That not everyone has it like me and that there are some who have it worse e.g. If I don't get an ice cream on a Monday, there are others who don't even get food.

Furthermore, answers from students who responded that they had no feelings at all, or briefly wrote "no", or "at least not many", "don't know" and such are very brief. Together, the response type forms category 5 and constitutes 22%. There are some slightly longer arguments, with at least one complete sentence, but they are occasional. The same applies to the 6% in category 6, who wrote that they experienced the reading as boring, difficult or answered with just one word or sign that does not belong to the question.

In total, the answer categories (1, 2, 3, 4), where the students expressed their engagement in the book, reaches 76%, representing a considerable majority. It is worth noting that the vast majority, in response to the open-ended question placed first in the questionnaire, also developed their thoughts on injustice and human rights. Overall, this is clearly the dominant response type, which indicates that the reading and the book talks may have functioned as a kind of a common platform from which the students formulate and share their reasoning about ethnicity and diversity in society.

4.2. Students' reflections on the book's meaning/message

The next question in the survey highlights the student's thoughts on the meaning or the message of the book. The categorised answers resulted in the table below:
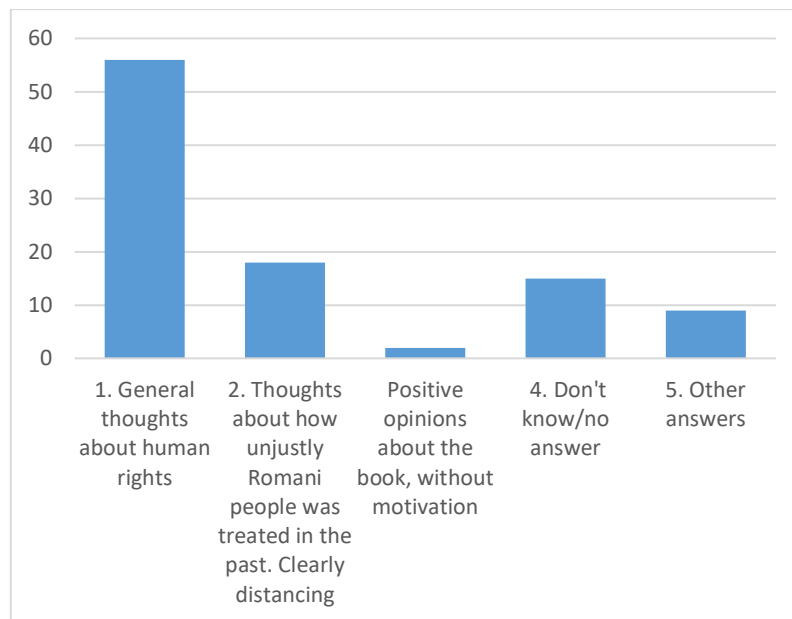

Figure 2. What do you think the book wants to say? What are your thoughts on the message? N=413. Outcome in per cent.

By far, the largest category of answers is category 1 (56%). It comprises answers emphasising, on a general level, that all people are equally valuable and that it is important to raise awareness of and work towards these human rights in the present, not just historically in connection with the difficult situation of the Romani people in Sweden during the 20th century. The idea that this needs to be highlighted even now appears in many of their answers:

> S14: I think the book wants to say that all people should be treated equally. It's important, but it's not like that all over the world.

> S15: I think it wants to say that many people are still not treated equally and that this is not a good thing.

> S16: That everyone is equally valuable; I think it is a very good message that should be spread to people who have no idea about such things.

The second largest category, category 2 (18%), includes answers where injustice and discrimination against the Romani people are underlined through a strong distancing, but where the outward-looking reflection, beyond the novel, is absent. The racism and oppression towards the Romani depicted in the book are experienced as repulsive and horrible; however, they are seen as belonging to the past and "the way it used to be":

S17: That the Romani people had a very difficult time, and that they were treated very unfairly.

S18: The message is that the Romani people were not welcome in society.

S19: That it was racist before because people were [considered] different coming from another country.

When summarising, it can be observed how these two types of answers, which also appeared in the open-ended question, have changed places. The general reasoning about the equal value of all people, emerging from the reading of the specific story of Katitzi, is noticeably more common when the question is asked in this message-oriented way. This could indicate that the process from an open entry to one that is more focused on what the book wants to convey makes students think in more general terms, that is, beyond what is directly depicted in the novel.

The general reasoning about the equal value of all people, emerging from the reading of the specific story of Katitzi, is noticeably more common when the question is asked in this message-oriented way

At the same time, it is reasonable to see the initial open reflection as an important step in the development towards a more analytical level of interpretation.

A small group of responses form category 3 (2%), comprising value judgments that are not motivated, such as "it was good". A larger group, category 4 (15%), includes answers such as "don't know" or "nothing". Thus, this is fewer than in the open-ended question, where the corresponding value is 22%. There were also other answers (9%), which form category 5. These answers spread out a lot and cannot be collected under any other heading than just *Other answers*.

In total, in this question, there were somewhat fewer responses that they do not know. There were also fewer students that left negative answers or answered in such a way that they did not express thoughts or feelings evolving during reading and discussing the book. On the other hand, there were more students who took a step back, out of the world of fiction and looked beyond the book, towards issues and situations that occur in the real world (Langer, 2017; Torell, 2002).

4.3. What can be learned from reading fiction?

In connection with the reasoning above, a brief summary of the responses to the general question *What can one learn from reading made-up stories (fiction)* can provide further and relevant perspectives. Here, there are three main outcomes visible in the responses (besides the 26% who answered "don't know" or "nothing"). The answers can be seen as linked, or related,

in the students' common awareness that reading the novel has broadened their world and made them see things in new ways. The table below reflects the outcome.
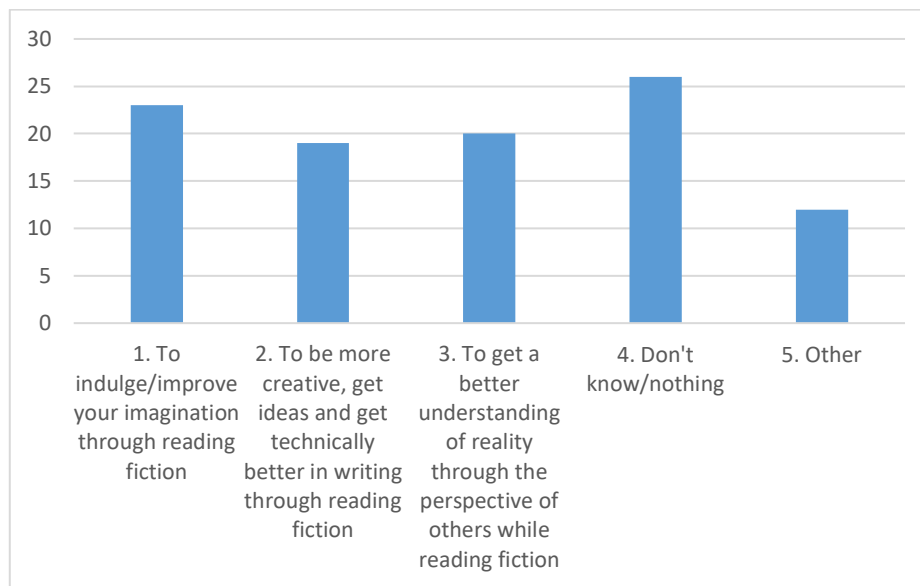

Figure 3. What can one learn from reading made-up stories (fiction)? N=413. Outcome in per cent.

The three main categories thus consist of the students' perspectives on: A) how they experience that reading fiction /enhances their imagination (23%), B) that reading fiction develops creativity, ideas and the ability to write (19%) and C) that reading fiction develops an understanding of reality that is broadened through the perspectives of others that they empathise with and actually experience from inside the characters' minds during reading (20%). In the latter category, there were some answers which, despite the general focus of the question, may suggest a connection to the reading of *Katitzi* such as:

> S20: That it could be made up, but still be about someone being exposed to something they don't want to, or think it is unfair. It can also happen in reality.

> S21: Even if what took place in the fictional stories didn't really happen, you can still learn quite a lot, e.g. how to become a better person, what you read can also help you cope with difficult situations. I also usually get motivation from the characters when I read.

> S22: How others can experience their lives.

There are also answers within the third category that bring Aristotle's poetics to mind, in particular his reasoning about the literary writer's important task, which "is not to say what has happened, but what could happen" (Aristotle 1994, p. 37 f. Our translation). According to Aristotle, this fictional premise means, among other things, that the reader/viewer, through a

strong empathy when taking part in the fictional story, has a greater potential for developing thoughts and general perspectives compared to when reading factual texts (Cf. Nussbaum 2010; Nordberg, 2022b). This perspective is touched upon by some of the students:

> S23: That it can be fun to read certain books even if it is not reality, and that you can read books to learn how reality could have been.
>
> S24: You get better imagination and how it could be. For example, if it is about a third world war or something like that.
>
> S25: You can learn more about how other people think. At the same time, you can get new ideas.[5]

Additionally, there are a handful of responses pointing out that reading can be a springboard into the future, and a realisation of dreams awakened through it. Some students touch upon the fun aspect of reading, without giving reasons in more detail: "I don't know. I mostly just do it because it's fun". However, others bring up empathy as an answer to the question, in a sense that they can learn themselves something from the empathic experiences.

4.4. How can reading literature affect the view of the outside world?

Further on in the survey, the students were presented with questions about their experiences of discussing books in the classroom from different perspectives, about reading literature in relation to fictional depictions in other media, and about the importance of empathy in fiction. There is not room here to summarise the answers to these questions, even if they are relevant in different ways. Instead, one of the final questions in the survey where the students are given the opportunity to summarise their overall impressions of reading *Katitzi* and how it may have affected their view of the outside world, could serve as a kind of summary of this important part of reading fiction, described by Keen and Zimmerman (2003) as "text-to-world connection" (p. 75). The question reads: *Has reading the book influenced your way of looking at society and your surrounding environment? Explain how you are thinking.*

The difficulty of young readers to see and describe their own possible development, or their changed opinions and perspectives, despite previously testifying in the same survey about strong commitment in the stories and strong reading experiences, has been shown in other contexts (Nordberg, 2019). However, in the material we collected here, among *Katitzi* readers aged 9–12 who read and discussed the book together for four weeks, there are many answers

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[5] The emphasis is the authors'.

where it is evident that there is a kind of change in their outlook and perspective. Specifically, 34%, which corresponds to 140 students, express themselves in that direction. These responses have many similarities but vary slightly in their focus. One response type explains that working with the book has made them see and become aware of the ongoing racism that exists around them. Some typical examples:

> S26: It has, because now I have realised that the world is more unfair, I think, and that people are not treated equally.
>
> S27: Yes, I think about racism a lot.
>
> S28: I notice things like this are more common, thanks to the book.

Another category of answers concerns how the reading provided new insights into society, and what can be called structural racism. In several responses, it also appears that an understanding has emerged and that it is experienced as meaningful, not least the understanding that the mechanisms of racism are still present and important to deal with, even at present:

> S29: Yes, it really has. That society has actually treated some people badly.
>
> S30: I wonder why you can't accept another ethnic group that just want somewhere to live and go to school.
>
> S31: It has affected me because now I understand that people can treat others this badly.

A third group of responses is focused on how the students themselves want to act in the future, and includes general thoughts about humanity, with answers such as: 'I look around more to see if someone is treating someone badly', and 'Yes. You shouldn't be mean'. With the wording of the question in mind, where the students are asked to explain whether reading the book affected how they look at society and their surroundings, these answers give the impression that something has actually happened and will have consequences. One student summarises concisely, responding to this complex question about what effect the reading may have had on the students' way of looking at the surrounding society: 'I think that everyone should read Katitzi'. This could be understood as a comment in the same direction, regarding vulnerability and the importance of a broader understanding to be able to work against discrimination of all kinds.

Another way for us to study the subject of how literary fiction can give a perspective on reality is by allowing students to place a value on a statement that is presented to them in the survey, both before and after reading: *It is common in our society today that people are treated better or worse because of their skin colour.* Alternatives are given on a five-point scale with *Not true*

at all at one end of the scale and *Completely true* at the other. The result shows that many of the students are engaged and have a clear opinion that there is discrimination currently taking place. In the comment field, where the students are asked to clarify how they have thought when they relate to this rather direct statement, detailed examples are given of how discrimination and racism are expressed both in their own locality and in the larger perspective. In total, 180 students, which makes up 44%, take a clear position against this negative differential treatment in the comments field of the post-survey. In the pre-survey, 25% took a similar position. Some typical examples from the post-survey are:

The result shows that many of the students are engaged and have a clear opinion that there is discrimination currently taking place.

> S32: I think it's quite common for people to be treated better and some worse because of their skin colour and I think that's soooooo bad.

> S33: Many people still think that if you are dark, you are less worthy.

> S34: Every day in Sweden, people are treated differently because of their [skin colour] and it's horrible.

Some of the answers refer to social media, and what the students are exposed to there is, to some extent, related to what they read in more or less pronounced ways:

> S35: I have heard it a lot on social media and as now in the book.

> S36: I haven't heard anything, but I have seen on TikTok that those with dark skin colour are treated a little differently compared to those with light skin colour.

> S37: I notice on social media that dark-skinned people are treated much worse.

As illustrated in the above examples, some students reason in general terms. However, the answers can also be perceived as applying, for example, to their own immediate neighbourhood. A recurring concrete example from the outside world here is the Black Lives Matter movement. That type of reasoning is more common after reading than before.

> S38: In the US, the police killed people because of the colour of their skin, and that is not okay.

> S39: It is not right that it is the way it is. I may not notice very much here in Sweden, but like BLM in the USA you notice more.

> S40: BLACK LIVES MATTER ✊🏿 ✊🏾 ✊🏽 ✊🏻

The students' reflections make clear that reading about a charismatic but severely exposed Romani girl in the late 1930s in Sweden can bring thoughts to the present world. Also, the

response shows that this present is seen by many in a different light and with a different understanding of how individual events are connected to values in society.

4.5. Teachers' responses to the survey

To be able to discuss possibilities and difficulties for the students to develop as readers, the students' responses to *Katitzi* are here connected with their teachers' opinions on the students' reading of the book. How do the teachers view and reflect on the need to discuss ethnic belonging and exclusion through *Katitzi* with their students? In what ways do they express opinions about their students' reading of literary texts, in relation to other forms of texts? Do they have anything to say about the social relevance of fiction, and the relationship of fictional stories to the outside world? In order to be able to discuss the significance of their answers to these questions, the responses in the questionnaire that may contribute answers to the questions are now reported. Hence, the teachers' written comments to questions 8, 12 and 17 in the survey are presented and discussed below. The teachers' answers are then related to the students' answers, which, in turn, opens the way for educational aspects of work with literary texts at school.

The same questions were asked before and after the students' reading, which means that any differences in the interview answers could be noticed. The questions are presented verbatim, and are organised on the basis of the sub-titles presented below. As pointed out before, since only 14 out of the 28 teachers responded, i.e. the middle school teachers who read Katitzi with their students in the study, these teachers' comments are considered to be non-numerical data, with no need for a presentation showing percentages of the results. Instead, the teachers' comments to each question answered are addressed here; all their comments are presented below, and related to the themes and issues that research question 3 contains (summarized above).

4.6. Teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes towards multiculturalism

Before reading Katitzi, the teachers were asked to decide on the following statement: "In the group of students with whom I will read the book, some students have a reserved attitude towards people with a foreign background and towards a multicultural society". One of the teachers then replied: "I have never heard or seen any such tendencies at all, thank God", while another teacher wrote: "The students live in a smaller village, and there are not many here with

a foreign background". A third teacher commented: "Ignorance among some", while a fourth stated: "In one of my groups, there are some students who talk openly about 'immigrants' being this and that, and that they are criminals". In the teachers' responses after reading Katitzi, the following comments can be found: "In one of the groups, there are some who have a reserved attitude and are clear about it" and "It has happened that a few in the class have used negro as a word of abuse , and also called other people this".6 A third teacher highlights the following: "There is clearly a single student/class who has expressed prejudice about people with a foreign background or a multicultural society", while a fourth teacher stated that the students hide their thoughts in discussions. However, you can still "secretly hear their opinions at home". Other comments tend to be explanatory, like a comment indicating that the students answer as they do, since they want to demonstrate a "tough" attitude. As a whole, the teachers' response mirrors a complexity when dealing with questions having to do with multiculturalism at school. Since what the students express may be due to values at home, which the students are likely to be emotionally engaged with and feel the need to defend, an open and tolerant classroom climate and deepening dialogue is crucial when questions are discussed, related to multiculturalism (cf. Dressel, 2005).

4.7. Teachers' reasoning about literary texts in relation to other forms of texts

Since only 14 out of 28 teachers responded, it is worth pondering why not all of them responded. One reason could be lack of time since the teachers were asked to fill in the forms as part of their daily workload. Another reason may be that they found it difficult to participate and answer honestly; there is always a risk, with any survey, that respondents feel urged to adapt their answers to what they consider to be the "correct" answers. Since Katitzi is a book that depicts the subordination of a young girl because of the exclusion of the Romani in society, teachers might have been afraid of positioning themselves politically. This could have been the case, even if all questions to the teachers circled around theirs views on their students' perception of Katitzi.

Question 12 of the questionnaire was formulated before the literature work, as follows: "Do you usually emphasise to the students that reading fiction differs from other forms of texts?", and after reading Katitzi: "During your work with the book, have you come across differences between literary texts and other texts?" In the teachers' comments, the following can be found

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6 This teacher actually misunderstood/misspelled the word "skällsord", which means word of abuse in Swedish. In the answer, this is written "själs ord"(= soul word in English).

before the reading: "Many of the students have more experience with non-fiction. Mainly those who are gaming", and "Students expect to read non-fiction at school, so that's what they're set

Since Katitzi is a book that depicts the subordination of a young girl because of the exclusion of the Romani in society, teachers might have been afraid of positioning themselves politically.

on". One teacher points out that students may find literary texts difficult because many students "see things in 'black and white'". Two teachers also testified that it is easier to read non-fiction because the students are more interested in this, while a third expressed that the students have difficulties verbally developing thoughts based on literary texts – the teacher thinks that reading

fiction presents difficulties for many students. A fourth teacher added that students were "scared" by reading texts. However, four teachers indicated that reading fiction can be positive: it is "more fun" and "more peaceful", according to two teachers; another teacher described that the students "empathise with the stories". A fourth teacher wrote, "Fiction provides the opportunity for 'closer' text conversations".

After reading fiction, a few teachers developed their answers that directly connect to the question of whether they "got into differences between literary texts and other texts", but five teachers wrote that reading fiction is "freer for some students" and that it "sets them thinking more". Among these five teachers, it is emphasised that fiction "attracts some students" to conversations and contributes to a "greater interest" in the questions, by "getting

Worth noticing in this response from the teachers, is not that the teachers see advantages in making use of fiction in the classroom, but that they perceive difficulties in reading fiction that their students do not see; this lack of correspondence could be further explored in a future study.

closer". However, one teacher felt that the work "becomes more spread out" when working on literature, while another teacher saw no difference between working with literary and other texts. Worth noticing in this response from the teachers, is not that the teachers see advantages in making use of fiction in the classroom, but that they perceive difficulties in reading fiction that their students do not see; this lack of correspondence could be further explored in a future study.

4.8. Teachers' thoughts on the social relevance of literature

Question 17 is formulated as a statement: "Literature and teaching literature have great social relevance". Here, only one teacher left a comment before reading Katitzi; one teacher wrote

that we can "learn a lot about ourselves and about society through literature". However, there were several comments after the reading. One teacher thought that fiction was "a useful tool for introducing students to discussions about important social issues". Other aspects that the teachers highlight are opportunities to develop empathy and understanding "for someone/something". One teacher wrote, "You can gain an understanding of someone/something you have not experienced yourself, which creates an understanding (as my students came up with)." In line with this, another teacher felt that fiction can generate a "historical understanding", while another teacher thought that fiction was socially relevant because society is reflected in literature. Perhaps this is the least surprising response from the teachers, since the statement that the teachers were asked to relate to is hard to have any objections to. However, from an educational point of view, the response paves the way for literature to play a role in discussions about intrinsic societal problems.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This discussion begins with a follow-up to the first two research questions: 1) *What thoughts and reactions develop in the participating students during the joint reading and conversation about a fiction book that touches on difficult topics such as racism and exclusion? What role does the basic assumption that the story* is a literary text, instead of non-fiction*, play in student learning?* and 2) In what ways do the students relate the events in the novel, reflecting the social and historical background of Romani people in Sweden, to their own lives and the world around them?

The analysis of the students' responses provides interesting answers to both of these research questions, from an educational point of view. The results presented above show that the middle school students' thoughts have been formulated and developed in relation to the novel's content; here, empathy for the main character, "Katitzi", seems to have played a decisive role. The majority of the readers, namely 76% (for the open question, see figure 1) and 74% (for the message question, see figure 2), have clearly formulated their thoughts about ethnicity and diversity (meaning that the readers relate to Katitzi's situation). Consciously, as shown, they reflect on discrimination and injustice, which have their basis in ethnic affiliation and racism. The students also, albeit to varying degrees, reason about how the oppression depicted in the book during the late 1930s in Sweden has connections to what has happened later in history – and also to what is happening nowadays (Black Lives Matter).

In the students' answers to questions about how they understand the content of *Katitzi*, and if they feel that the book influenced their way of looking at contemporary society, this type of

world-oriented reasoning, where the gaze is raised beyond the direct action of the book (cf. Langer, 2017), becomes more frequent. Similar lines of thought, such as, for example, that discrimination due to skin colour also continues in our time, are expressed in answers to questions asked in the survey about what one can possibly learn from reading fiction.

Hence, a large group of students, grounded in their reading, reason about current social events both in the outside world and in their own immediate environment. The ability, or the literary competence, to be able to create a kind of analytical distance and relate the reading experience to the real world, after entering and being involved in situations in the fictional world, has repeatedly been highlighted as central in literary reading. The understanding of fictionality itself is viewed as an important key in this indirect process (see e.g. Langer, 2017; Keen & Zimmerman, 2003; Torell, 2002). Recurringly during

> [...]the results show how the participating middle school students were not only engaged in the book and the talks about it. Many of them were also able to develop their thoughts beyond the events in the fictional world, in ways where value-based questions about human rights are actualised.

the 2000s, it has been underlined that children and young people in Sweden often practise a purely subjective reading, misunderstanding the unique nature of literary fiction (for an overview, see Nordberg, 2017) with the consequence that everything that happens in literature is perceived as having connections to the authors' real life (see e.g. Olin-Scheller, 2006; Årheim, 2007). In this study, very few students have this subjective and direct understanding of the novel, despite the biographical connection between the author and the story. At the same time, it is clear that they have reacted affectively to the story of Katitzi (Felski, 2008; cf. Nordberg, 2022a; 2022b). The criticism against affective reading, that is, saying that the thoughts and impressions stay with the reader's own emotional world, and that the reading becomes trivial and subjective instead of objective, outward looking and analytical (see e.g. Agrell, 2009; Thorson, 2009), is not at all justified here. Instead, the results show how the participating middle school students were not only engaged in the book and the talks about it. Many of them were also able to develop their thoughts beyond the events in the fictional world, in ways where value-based questions about human rights are actualised. A similar reasoning can be found in the answers to questions about the relationship between the fictional world and the surrounding here and now.

On the basis of the teachers' answers in the survey, the following is important: Teachers believe that some of their students have "a reserved attitude towards people with a foreign background and towards a multicultural society". They give a number of explanations for this, including that

their students live in socio-culturally homogenous environments, and that parents may express doubts about immigration at home. It is worth noting that one of the teachers highlights the difficulty of students being silent during discussions. The reason for this, according to the teacher, is that students experience problems when identifying with the main character (Katitzi) and have difficulty handling demands to express themselves "correctly" in terms of values in the classroom. This, in turn, could be related to Dressel's research (Dressel, 2005), stressing the role of teachers as colearners, negotiating aspects of multiculturalism and difference, taking into account that some voices are more dominant than others in the classroom.

Also, the answers to the question "what makes literary texts special in this context" are crucial, since the teachers' perceptions that students prefer to read non-fiction can be problematized through the students' responses. However, in order to increase knowledge about how the teachers' pre-understanding influences their students' views, another study is needed. Nonetheless, the response to the statement that literary texts are important for increasing the interest in social circumstances (question 17) is interesting– as one of the teachers puts it (when commenting on the use of literary texts): "You can gain an understanding of someone/something you have not experienced yourself, which creates an understanding (as my students arrived at)"; here, it might be that the teacher's reflection on this influences his or her teaching in the future, since teaching is always dependent on meta-cognitive reflection.

To sum up, it is possible to make some educational points. First, the survey tells us that joint reading and conversation about a literary text opens the way for reflections from students about norms and power-relations, both individually and on a group level (cf. Dressel, 2005). The study shows, grounded in a large group of young readers, that an engaging fictional story that touches on difficult topics, such as ethnicity, racism and discrimination, leads to commitment and in-depth learning among students. Even if this potential of fiction and literary conversations to develop empathy and democratic values has been highlighted (c.f. Alkestrand, 2016; Molloy, 2017; Nussbaum, 2010; Rosenblatt, 2002), the fact that literary texts matter to students – if they get the opportunity to express themselves about their reading – to a large extent remains empirically unexplored (Miall, 2006; Pettersson, 2015).

The crucial question though is whether, and to what extent, students' thoughts are taken advantage of when it comes to the negotiation of who they are and aim at being, collectively, in society (cf. Bruner, 2002). From a societal perspective, not making use of the students' concerns about ethnic belonging and exclusion seems to be a loss, and here the teachers' views are crucial. Since the teachers doubt that their students are capable of reading literary texts like

Katitzi, there is a risk that the students' possibilities to develop as human beings (through reading) are limited (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Kalaja et al., 2015). Here, the survey paves the way for a future study, focusing on the relation between teachers' views on literary texts and their students' ability to develop their thinking from their reading. This is worth exploring , for how can readers develop if teachers do not reflect on their influence on their students' possibilities to develop by reading literary texts?

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