

Reading the World: Challenging Cultural Insideness in Swedish Upper Secondary Literature Education

Leyendo el mundo: desafiar el sentido de pertenencia cultural en la enseñanza de la literatura en la educación secundaria superior sueca

Llegint el món: desafiar el sentit de pertinença cultural en l'ensenyament de la literatura a l'educació secundària superior sueca

Björn Bradling. University of Borås/Jönköping University, Sweden. bjorn.bradling@hb.se
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8660-8620>

Ylva Lindberg. Jönköping University, Sweden. ylva.lindberg@ju.se
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8634-715X>

Abstract

This study sets out to challenge politically motivated reinforced insideness of Swedish upper secondary L1 literature education. It does so by highlighting transformative aims presented in the curriculum and introducing transnational literature to L1 students. Theoretically, categories of insideness (Relph, 2016) and the pedagogical idea of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1994; 2003; 2006) are used to analyse the material, which consists of 28 student reflections on transformative phrasing used in the curriculum and on two transnational short stories. Methodologically the study is based on participatory research which is concretised through a focus group interview with school librarians. The interview was part of preparing for the intervention in the students' L1 classroom. The material was thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2019) using the categories of vicarious, empathetic, and existential insideness (Relph, 2016).

The results show how students' insideness is revealed and challenged by the use of transnational literature. Literature which challenge the students' expectations and frames of reference can add to a more multiperspectivist understanding of the world. However, for this transformation to occur it is necessary for the reader to recognize aspects of oneself in the literary work. Moreover, scaffolding teaching practices, including subject-specific language such as the conceptual apparatus of cultural insideness, are crucial to support transnational reading as a transformative learning practice. L1 literature education can become a window to the world, but only if it includes aspects of recognition. To know a there you have to know a here and vice versa.

Keywords: Cultural insideness, Transnational literature, Multi-perspectivism, Transformative learning, Participatory research.

Resumen

Este estudio se propone cuestionar el sentido de pertenencia cultural¹ (*insideness*) reforzado políticamente en la enseñanza de la literatura de L1 (lengua materna) en la educación secundaria superior sueca. Lo hace destacando los objetivos transformadores presentados en el currículo e introduciendo literatura transnacional a los estudiantes de L1. Teóricamente, se utilizan las categorías de sentido de pertenencia cultural (Relph, 2016) y la idea pedagógica del aprendizaje transformador (Mezirow, 1994; 2003; 2006) para analizar el material, que consiste en 28 reflexiones de los estudiantes sobre el lenguaje transformador utilizado en el currículo y sobre dos relatos cortos transnacionales. Metodológicamente, el estudio se basa en la investigación participativa, que se concretiza a través de una entrevista en grupo focal con bibliotecarios escolares. La entrevista fue parte de la preparación para la intervención en el aula de L1 de los estudiantes. El material fue analizado temáticamente (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) utilizando las categorías de sentido de pertenencia vicario, empático y existencial (Relph, 2016).

Los resultados muestran cómo el sentido de pertenencia cultural de los estudiantes se revela y se desafía mediante el uso de literatura transnacional. La literatura que desafía las expectativas y marcos de referencia de los estudiantes puede contribuir a una comprensión multiperspectivista del mundo. Sin embargo, para que ocurra esta transformación es necesario que el lector reconozca aspectos de sí mismo en la obra literaria. Además, las prácticas docentes que incluyen un andamiaje pedagógico, como el uso de lenguaje específico del tema, como el aparato conceptual del sentido de pertenencia, cultural son cruciales para apoyar la lectura transnacional como práctica de aprendizaje transformador. La enseñanza de la literatura de L1 puede convertirse en una ventana al mundo, pero solo si incluye aspectos de reconocimiento. Para conocer un "allí", hay que conocer un "aquí" y viceversa.

Palabras clave: Sentido de pertenencia cultural, Literatura transnacional, Multiperspectivismo, Aprendizaje transformador, Investigación participativa.

Resum

Aquest estudi pretén desafiar el reforç del sentit de pertinença (*insideness*) cultural motivat políticament en l'educació literària de l'assignatura L1 en el batxillerat suec. Ho fa destacant els objectius transformadors presentats en el currículum i introduint literatura transnacional als estudiants de L1. Teòricament, s'utilitzen les categories sentit de pertinença (Relph, 2016) i la idea pedagògica de l'aprenentatge transformador (Mezirow, 1994; 2003; 2006) per analitzar el material, que consisteix en 28 reflexions d'estudiants sobre el llenguatge transformador utilitzat en el currículum i en dos relats curts transnacionals. Metodològicament, l'estudi es basa en la investigació participativa, concretada en una entrevista amb un grup de discussió format per bibliotecaris escolars. L'entrevista va ser part de la preparació per a la intervenció a l'aula de L1 dels estudiants. El material va ser analitzat temàticament (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) utilitzant les categories de sentit de pertinença vicari, empàtic i existencial (Relph, 2016).

Els resultats mostren com es revela i es qüestiona sentit de pertinença dels estudiants a través de l'ús de la literatura transnacional. La literatura que desafia les expectatives i marcs de referència dels estudiants pot contribuir a una comprensió més multiperspectivista del món. No obstant això, perquè es produïska aquesta transformació és necessari que el lector reconega aspectes d'ell mateix en l'obra literària. A més, les pràctiques d'ensenyament amb suport, incloent-hi el llenguatge específic de la matèria, com ara l'aparell conceptual del sentit de pertinença cultural, són crucials per a recolzar la lectura transnacional com a pràctica d'aprenentatge transformador. L'educació literària de L1 pot convertir-se en una finestra al món, però només si inclou aspectes de reconeixement. Per a conèixer un "allí" cal conèixer un "ací" i viceversa.

Paraules clau: sentit de pertinença cultural, literatura transnacional, multiperspectivisme, aprenentatge transformador, investigació participativa.

¹ Otra traducción alternativa es "arraigo". Abarca-Álvarez, F. J., & Campos-Sánchez, F. S. (2013). Urbanismos sin lugar: Paisajes participados. *Revista Bitácora Urbano Territorial*, 22(1), 53-60 (nota de l'editor).

1. Introduction

As part of L1 education, literature pedagogy is particularly sensitive to the results of cultural debates and political decisions regarding what is to be read at school and how it is to be read. In the Swedish context, the content and purpose of literature education have shifted from being seen as a cultural-preserving activity to the expression of New Public Management ideals via predominant reader-response approaches aimed at fostering democracy (Lilja Waltå, 2016; Thavenius, 1999). Current upper secondary school steering documents highlight literature education as a transformative learning activity aimed at inducing students to gain an understanding of themselves and the world through fiction:

Students should have the opportunity to understand in fiction not only what is distinctive but also what is universal in space and time. Teaching should also lead to students developing their ability to use fiction [...] as a source of self-awareness and understanding of other people's experiences, living conditions, thinking, and conceptual worlds. It should challenge students to adopt new ways of thinking and an openness to new perspectives (Skolverket, 2012).

These policy ambitions present literature education as a mirror, i.e., focused on personal growth and identity and as a window providing insights into the surrounding world (Tschida et al., 2014; cf. Stites Kruep & Popov, 2023). Bishop (1990) argues that there is not necessarily a clear line between the mirror and the window. The world is mediated through literature and made to function as a source of self-reflection, ideally leaving readers with the possibility to grasp parts of both the world and themselves through fiction. Such literary windows and mirrors are enabled through readers' encounters with representations of themselves and others through literature (Bishop, 1990). Diverse literary encounters offer readers a broader understanding of the human experience, allowing them to navigate between familiarity and strangeness. This prevents the reader from becoming confined to 'a single story,' a concept popularized by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her influential 2009 TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*. Adichie warns that an over-reliance on singular narratives risks erasing the complexity and richness of individual experiences, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting perspectives. A varied literary engagement exposes readers to both dominant cultural norms and hegemonic expressions, as well as the customs, beliefs, and practices of less familiar or marginalized cultures, thereby fostering a more nuanced and critical reading experience (Skaremyr et al., 2024).

The mirror/window metaphor also translates into the dichotomy of insideness/outsideness, stressing a fundamental double feature of literature teaching, encouraging students to look inside themselves

while exploring the outside world through fiction. The present study explores how reading transnational literature translated into Swedish in an L1 education context can support the above-mentioned policy ambitions while challenging recent political decisions to reinforce a Swedish national culture in L1 education. One assumption behind this move is that a dominant focus on Swedish national literature tends to imprison literature pedagogy in perspectives of insideness, disconnecting reading from its outsideness, which, we claim, is also an inherent part of learning how to read. This paper argues that both dimensions demand attention in the context of L1 education.

In Sweden, a recent political decision at the government level instructs expert committees to create official Swedish cultural canons that include different forms of art and official reading lists targeting literature education (Tidöavtalet, 2022). This decision reinforces a view of culture and education as something ‘national’, built from the inside. From this perspective, culture and education are viewed as static rather than dynamic phenomena. This political initiative has created uncertainty regarding how one should interpret existing steering documents. In an attempt to mitigate confusion in this area, the general directors of the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Arts Council have publicly explained that the national literary canons and reading lists in the making are separate assignments and that normative prescriptions regarding which works are to be read and actual educational realities are often separate affairs (Ravin & Fredriksson, 2024).

The politicization of literature education in Sweden underscores the point that any choice that is made regarding a work of fiction at school is either explicitly or implicitly political by definition since fiction in itself reinforces and/or challenges the order of the day, just as it includes or excludes people in some ways. There is no such thing as a neutral cultural expression.

According to Freire (1983), to read is to make use of your worldview while putting the very same worldview at risk.

The main assumption in this study is that reading transnational literature can breed a juxtaposing of perspectives within a person’s outlook on the world, so-called “multi-perspectivism” (Helgesson & Rosendahl Thomsen, 2020, p. 158).

Reading and literature education can be transformative acts of learning that foster a multi-perspectivist understanding of the surrounding world while adopting a pedagogical approach that moves the reader away from ‘the danger of the single story’ (Adichie, 2009). Such a pedagogical approach must be explored in times of social antagonism and politicization of L1 literature education.

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By employing the lens of multi-perspectivism, this study challenges the currently promoted *insiderness* of Swedish L1 literature education by responding to the following research question:

How can transnational literature in Swedish upper secondary school L1 education support transformative learning and challenge cultural *insiderness*?

2. Background and Theory: Cultural Insiderness and Transformative Learning

‘Cultural insiderness’ is a central concept of this study. It is based on Relph’s (2016) elaboration of insiderness as an immersive yet unconscious situational state of a person feeling at home within a collective. Even though Relph (2016) relates insiderness to geographical places, his work has been widely referenced in various fields of study, including geography, environmental studies, psychology, and sociology (Seamon & Sowers, 2008). Among numerous illustrative examples, Relph (2016) shares several instances from the world of literature, with reference to Rilke, Miller, Whitman, Steinbeck, and Camus, to name but a few.

For Relph (2016), insiderness instantiates a dichotomic relation to outsidership. However, complexity is added to this relation as a result of his argument for the existence of different levels of insiderness and outsidership. For the purpose of this study on L1 literature education, three variations of insiderness are included: (i) vicarious insiderness, which occurs in one’s imagination when, for example, one reads about a location reproducing a specific place and time and imagines it as if one was there; (ii) empathetic insiderness, which is based on the reader willingly becoming immersed in a place and its significance and meaning to its people; and (iii) existential insiderness, which takes place when a tacit way of life of a familiar place becomes a taken-for-granted assumption (Relph, 2016). Regarding insiderness, Seamon and Sowers (2008) explain that anyone who “feels inside a place [...] is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed” (p. 45), thereby highlighting insiderness as a culturally normative environment beneficial for the reproduction of fixed mindsets. Such existential insiderness can be exposed and challenged in literature. For example, regarding Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* (2004), Burch (2010) demonstrates how spatial insiderness creates a sense of belonging that “enriches one’s experience of existence” (p. 32) and proceeds to argue that even a futile process of achieving insiderness is still worth the effort. Similarly, Relph (2016) describes existential insiderness as an experience of a safe space while acknowledging inherent aspects of not belonging, especially feelings of not belonging as a result of displacement through migration.

Such “existential outsidership” (Relph, 2016, p. 51) is a common literary theme and is present, for example, in Tayeb Salih’s novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). In this novel, the protagonists’

lives are torn apart because of the bipolar magnetism existing between Sudan and Britain, rurality and urbanity, traditionalism and modernity. In this context, recognition can be considered a centerpiece for revealing lost insideness. In a previous study on L1 teaching of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) a student participant reported: “I can recognize myself in the feeling of returning to a place, which you have identified yourself with, and then returning to that place after having developed as a person with a new identity” (Bradling, 2024, p. 97). Similarly, Ågerup (2023) has shown that students’ emotional identification with a fictional protagonist can increase their understanding of circumstances in far-off places. Scott and Huntington (2002) have shown that literature education can add nuance to general knowledge of a far-off place in a way that fact sheets cannot. In short, “[b]ooks can ... introduce readers to the history and traditions that are important to any one cultural group, and which invite comparisons to their own” (Bishop, 1990, p. xi). Relph (2016), Bradling (2024), and Ågerup (2023) provide examples that demonstrate that “vicarious insideness is most pronounced when the depiction of a specific place corresponds with our experiences of familiar places – we know what it is like to be *there* because we know what it is like to be *here*” (Relph, 2016, p. 53). Thus, *recognition*, as a reading mode, is a prerequisite for both challenging and attaining insideness through literature (Felski, 2008).

Indeed, literary fiction is especially suited to making recognition emerge as a precondition for experiences of vicarious and empathetic insideness and for facilitating a deeper understanding of the world. However, transformative learning that takes place through literature reading requires going beyond recognition, leaving the comfort zone of existential insideness behind and embracing experiences of outsideness. This is challenging for teachers to enact, not least regarding the choice of literary works, which must confront students’ expectations while responding to their experiences in some relevant way. If this condition is not satisfied, the teaching that is provided may reinforce the extreme poles of existential outsideness and insideness.

In this study, transformative learning is viewed as a means for readers to break out from their existential insideness, as the visualization and contestation of habitual thinking are exposed and enacted in the literature and the classroom (Mezirow, 2006). *Estrangement effects*, i.e., literary structures in a text that incite the reader to experience known realities from different perspectives, have proven to be a productive tool for transforming learners’ perspectives (Shklovsky, 1990; Bradling, 2020). Shklovsky’s (1990) example is taken from Tolstoy’s *Strider – The Story of a Horse* (1885), where the reader is confronted by the idea of animal ownership through the eyes of a horse, thereby adding a different perspective to the reader’s understanding of the right to property. Estrangement effects are primarily concerned with experiencing known realities anew, thus functioning as a mirror rather than a window to the world. In contrast, this study focuses on how and why student readers perceive

strange and unknown fictional realities as such and how and why such realities can become familiar through vicarious and empathetic readings of the *here* and *there*.

The overarching aim of transformative learning is to transform individual inhibition into self-awareness and agency for democracy (Mezirow, 2006; Wilhelmsson, 2005). The culturally produced inhibitions that students harbor towards the unknown, when encountered through transnational literature in translation, can evoke feelings of outsidership for some learners since they may choose to remain safe and comfortable inside a dominant interpretative community (Fish, 1980). According to Relph (2016), one can also feel alienated if one's feelings are suppressed. Thus, while conceptually, the line between insiderness and outsidership is quite straightforward, in reality it is blurred, abstract, and interiorized (Relph, 2016). Therefore, education that "transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58) must include critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2006). Mezirow (1994) argues that while critical self-reflection may or may not be part of transformative learning as a critique of society, he also emphasizes the "distinction between deliberately focusing on the beliefs of others or the world and beliefs about oneself" (p. 228). Even though transformative learning does not require a critique of society, it acknowledges culture as playing a key role in assumption-shaping (Mezirow, 1994).

Although literature can be used as a tool to challenge beliefs, it cannot easily travel from one cultural sphere to another unless it fits within the economic, social, and political boundaries of the target context or can be made to fit through translation or other forms of mediation (Locane, 2018). Readerships are formed through economic-social relations "within which particular forms of cultural activity are in practice carried out" (Williams, 1977, p. 138). To put it differently, the relational frame and the literature pedagogy activity that is performed within that frame both contribute to informing the insiderness of an interpretative community (Fish, 1980) and, ultimately, the interpretation of the literary work. Consequently, assumption-making, whether it is performed from an innate, unreflective position or from an intentionally critical position, must be subject to a meta-reflective judgment that considers the reader's starting point in terms of time and space and the reader's mind (Bradling & Lindberg, 2018). Even though a transformation of perspective does not have to change a single "comprehensive 'world-view'" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 229), being sensitive to the presence of habitual thinking (as shaped by and a shaper of dominance in culture) is essential to challenging the insiderness of L1 learners.

3. Methods, Material, and Ethics

The method used in the present study included several steps. The initial phase comprised an introductory, semi-structured focus group interview based on an interview guide (Wibeck, 2010). The focus group participants included a librarian, a library pedagogue/literature teacher, and a literature teacher/researcher (Bradling), all of whom are employed at the same school. The results from the focus group discussion formed the basis for the study's second phase, namely, the construction of an in-class reading intervention. Using an initial focus group session before designing a specific research intervention adheres to the 'umbrella method' of Participatory Research (PR). PR is a collective name for research that acknowledges, grows out of, and contributes to the work and experiences of the research participants, who thereby become subjects rather than objects of knowledge (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Moreover, PR allows for "a realist construction" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 28), i.e., research that allows for research activities that are not constructed but, instead, are authentic and anchored in the field of practice's real dilemmas.

Once the 30-minute group discussion had been transcribed and thematically analyzed (see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019), it became clear to the researchers that the in-class intervention needed to include a component that examined how students understand steering document ambitions and how they relate these ambitions to their readings of transnational literary works, representing *here* and *there* in remote times and spaces. In addition, it was decided to use the short story format and, specifically, works previously used as material for national assessment. This decision was made to accommodate the practical limitations of the classroom setting and make the intervention similar to a regular upper secondary L1 class. The pedagogical choices for the intervention were made to challenge cultural insiderness among students and unveil the complex dynamics of insiderness and outsiderness that transnational literary works usually make explicit.

For the intervention, works were used written by non-Swedish transnational authors whose lives and literary works transcend Swedish national, political, and cultural boundaries (see Attridge, 2017; Lindberg, 2020). The selected literature was anchored in two different cultures and reflected the researchers' ambition to respond to exoticisation and stereotyping processes connected to the translation and circulation of literature across national borders (Cedergren & Lindberg, 2023; Locane, 2018). The selected stories also provided a pedagogical potential that supported transformative learning. The selection comprised two short stories: *The Cobbler and His Daughter* (1983) by Xingjian Gao and *A Handful of Dates* (1964) by Tayeb Salih.² These stories demonstrate a pedagogical potential

² The following Swedish translations were used: Gao, X. (1983). *Skomakarn och hans dotter*. In Gao, X. (2000). *När jag köpte ett spinnspö åt farfar*. Forum; Salih, T. (1964). *En näve dadlar*. *Karavan*, 2006:4. pp. 24-28.

insofar as they include ethical topics, such as 'honour'-based crime, cultures of silence, gender issues, greed, and explicit literary forms and structures, such as metaphors, analepses, focalisation, and anthropomorphism. Brief synopses of the two chosen short stories are presented below:

The Cobbler and His Daughter: The story takes place in the Chinese countryside and revolves around the discovery of a girl's corpse in the river. Through the filters of the villagers, an abusive and restrictive backstory about the cobbler and his now-dead daughter is revealed.

A Handful of Dates: The story is set in a village by the river Nile and revolves around a boy whose admiration of his grandfather turns into contempt as new aspects of his grandfather's personality are revealed to him. The story is told in retrospect by the now grown-up boy.

The in-class intervention took place at the participants' upper secondary school. The research participants who performed the in-class reading intervention included the literature teacher/researcher (Bradling) and the library pedagogue/literature teacher. The data that were collected after the intervention consist of 28 student responses to the phrasing used in Skolverket's steering document and the short stories described above. In this article, the responses are anonymised through the letters of the Swedish alphabet: A to Ö, without W. The intervention took place as part of a "Swedish 3" class, the final L1 course at upper secondary school with students who were between 18 to 20 years old. All students were informed orally and in writing about the nature of the study and were free to choose to sign or not a consent of participation, and withdraw from the study at any moment. Five students from the class (usually 33 in total) were absent or chose not to participate in the study. The participating students answered questions about their understanding of the steering document's focus on learning about oneself and the world through literature teaching before the reading assignment took place. The short stories were read and commented upon in written reflections during two lessons (three hours of classwork in total). At the end of the intervention, the students once again answered the same questions about their understanding of the Swedish steering document's focus on learning about oneself and the world through literature teaching. This structure of the intervention allowed us to observe if and how the students' reading experiences had changed their perceptions of the steering document. The aims of the intervention are presented in summary in Table 1.

Table 1. The aims of the in-class intervention.

Parts of the in-class intervention and its aim
Part 1: To answer three questions about the student's understanding of the upper secondary school curriculum regarding L1 education aims and how literature education can support these aims.
Part 2: To read Gao's <i>The Cobbler and His Daughter</i> and to write a reflection on how the work corresponds with the student's own life-position and the world at large.
Part 3: To read Salih's <i>A Handful of Dates</i> and to write a reflection on how the work corresponds with the student's own life-position and the world at large.
Part 4: To answer the same three questions as in Part 1 about the student's understanding of the upper secondary school curriculum regarding L1 education aims and how literature education can support these aims.

Even though the students were allowed to complete their responses and reflections at home, there is a variation in which parts they completed, as described in Table 2.

Table 2. Parts completed by the students.

Parts completed	All parts	Parts 1, 2, 3	Parts 1, 2	Parts 1, 4	Parts 1, 2, 4	Part 1
Number of students	14	8	2	2	1	1

The lapse in data is likely due to several factors. The students' responses were not graded to ensure that they provided authentic answers and to mitigate any possible effect of the teacher-student power relationship on the responses. At the same time, the condition of free will participation most probably decreased the students' task perseverance. However, the fact that most of the students did engage with the tasks is likely due to the authenticity of the situation in terms of the presence of their regular teacher, the course context, classroom, and classmates. In addition, the intervention did not impose any extracurricular work on the participating students. In line with the PR approach, which regards participants as subjects of knowledge, both complete and incomplete contributions are treated as valuable sources of information.

In terms of its ethics, the bipartite teacher-researcher role needs further elaboration. In the PR approach, the subject-making of in-practice workers is promoted for two reasons: (i) it generates genuine questions and experiences relevant to the practice studied, and (ii) it may bring tacit knowledge to the fore and provide nuanced perspectives on practice-oriented knowledge (Hansen et al., 2001). Bourdieu and Eagleton (1994) highlight the importance of supplying tools for practitioners to gain distance to their own work. The research arrangement contributes to such distance by putting the work process temporarily on hold in order for the participants to gain meta perspectives. In the literature on teaching and learning research, a possible rapprochement in the area of literature

pedagogy between academia and school practitioners has been advocated for by Öhman and Lindell (2019) and practised by Öhman and Tornberg Pantzare (2019). In this study, self-reflexivity is a crucial practice that prevents one from being blinded by the traditions of the practice field (Bylund et al., 2021) or the research field (Salö, 2018). In addition, transformative learning centralises an acknowledging yet critically reflective approach to one's own sources of knowledge (Mezirow, 2006).

To reduce the effects of the teacher-student power relation, the data produced was not read or analysed until after the students had graduated. This measure added distance to the intervention and contributed to maintaining "a realist construction" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 28) while still keeping the student participants at an arm's-length ethically, especially regarding the assessment of the L1 course.

The data from the intervention were subject to a thematic analysis (TA) inspired by the model of Braun and Clarke (2006), which is intended to be used imaginatively and not as an imperative (Braun et al., 2019). The researchers' initial familiarisation with the data came from reading the 28 student statements in their entirety. This reading process is crucial to the initial identification of patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). "Prior knowledge of the data and [...] initial analytic interests" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16) of Bradling informed the identification of themes and subthemes in this part of the analysis. In addition, the movement back and forth between reading the data, speaking to the intervention participants, compiling results for scholarly events, and writing this article all constituted part of the analytical process, an approach which is advocated for in both PR and TA.

In the final phase of the analysis, the collaboration between Bradling and Lindberg was crucial, not least since it introduced an external perspective on the compiled data. The overarching analytical process in this final stage was contextualist, with the primary purpose of engaging with a specific social reality in order to challenge it, in this case, the insiderness of L1 literature students. Instead of adopting a representational approach to the social phenomenon at hand, we opted to employ abductive and non-linear reasoning in the analysis. We also engaged in both inductive (empirically based) and deductive (theoretically oriented) argumentation. Relph's (2016) categories of vicarious, empathetic, and existential insiderness formed the lens through which we sorted and compared patterns in the data. The abductive approach enabled us to identify the most plausible explanation regarding the contradictory aims of L1 literature education in Sweden and the tension between insiderness and outsidership (Andersson & Balldin, 2023; Peirce, 2011).

4. Results: Uncovering cultural insiderness through reading

The analysis presented below sheds light on nuances and variations of insiderness as they appeared in the intervention tasks performed by the students. Relph's (2016) categories of insiderness were used

to reveal the qualities of the students' engagement regarding their interpretation of the steering document and the short stories that were assigned in the intervention. Our analysis identified several affordances and dilemmas that teachers need to account for in literature teaching if they aim to challenge worldviews and provide conditions for transformative learning.

4.1. Vicarious insideness

A reader's experience of a different culture through the reading of fiction is always temporary since the reader can withdraw from the reading experience at any point in time, either willingly or as a result of interference from the real world. Thus, an awareness of the precarious conditions for (i) the reading experience itself and (ii) any vicarious insideness (i.e., the ability to use one's imagination to travel to a remote time and place through the mediated means of literature) are constantly activated. Even though an awareness of the fictional aspects of the stories and their temporary enchantment are omnipresent in the data collected, the importance of a diverse supply of fictional texts at school is recognised by students, as illustrated in the following quote:

It is important that the teaching gives us fictional texts with different perspectives that show us people from different places around the world where life conditions, as well as people's ways of thinking and experiences, are different (Student T).

In this example, Student T draws on the phrasings used in the steering document and interprets them as an exhortation to use fiction as a window to the world through which it is possible to gain insight into cultures other than one's own.

The students' experiences of L1 literature teaching as a way of opening a window to the world and holding up a mirror to oneself appear frequently in the data. For instance, Student B claims that the steering document's ambitions "match my schooling: from preschool class to upper secondary school", indicating there are learning experiences of seeing oneself and the world in literature. Student A notes that there are significant differences "in views on marriage, societal organisation, and family roles" between the Occidental cultural sphere the student belongs to and the way of life presented in the short stories. In this case, to see oneself is helpful to make sense of the world as it is mediated through the works. Student A's interpretation of the father-daughter relationship in *The Cobbler and His Daughter* can be seen as an attempt to place a mirror between the reader's experiences and the text and thereby bridge the perceived cultural gap. In this context, the student asks: "Perhaps the cobbler just wanted to protect his daughter from the surrounding world?" In this way, thanks to their knowledge of an inside, Student A makes meaning of expressions of the Chinese culture as they appear in the work of fiction. Despite cultural differences, Student A highlights family bonds as universal.

Similarly, Student O uses universal interpretations to mitigate differences in their reading of the same story, focusing on the cobbler's feelings:

To feel remorse like the cobbler did is something I think many people have done. Maybe not over exactly the same thing, but you possibly could have said more or done something differently which later cannot be compensated for (Student O).

To recognize oneself and the collective experiences in the life worlds of others through reading fiction that is distant in time and place is to know "what it is like to be there because we know what it is like to be here" (Relph, 2016, p. 53). Student A and Student O's accounts reveal experiences of vicarious insiderness because their responses to the text show that they made efforts to travel to the fictional time-space presented in the short story and back again.

If knowing here is a precondition for making meaning of there, the reader's point of view is central to literature teaching. Student T writes that, from their contemporary perspective, it seems odd that the men in Gao's story refuse to give the dying girl a kiss of life because of her virginity. However, the villagers' contempt of corporal punishment corresponds to Student T's moral standards and so did not seem odd to Student T. Student T's reflection positions the fictional text as a cultural merging point of heres and theres, a point further exemplified in Student L's reflection on Salih's story:

The text [...] carries a very important message applicable to all societies; to question what you see and think you know. I don't know whether I like what the boy's grandfather does or not. Instead, this is an ideological issue. But this is according to me, not what you should focus on in the text; but rather on how an event, in which he sees another side of his grandfather, changes the entire image of him.

With this in mind, I think this is a good text from an educational perspective, especially with regard to questioning what you believe you know but also what is right or wrong (Student L).

Reading Salih's story seems to trigger a transformative stance in Student L. This student reports that culturally derived assumptions can be negotiated through literature. Consequently, for Student L, reading the story prompted an orientation process that positioned the self in relation to the world.

4.2. Empathetic insiderness

The students' answers to questions regarding the phrasing used in the steering document about learning empathy and understanding other people generally express the idea that the students are not only expected to understand cultural differences but also to accept them. Student S explicitly writes

about receiving “insight into what life can be like outside Sweden’s borders”, thereby acknowledging the issue of bringing the world into the classroom through fiction. Several other students shared the idea that reading fiction is an activity that produces insight into diverse lives and ways of thinking in different parts of the world. For example, Student P claims that “books give us other descriptions of reality”, and thus, it is important to have “exposure to a broad range of literature which describe thoughts/ideas/cultures/people.” This example student response highlights the idea that fiction can be documentarily perceived (as if it were non-fiction) and generate insight into cultural diversity. Many of the students’ responses included the position that the literature taught at school must, to some extent, originate from many different places if the requirements set out in the steering document are to be satisfied. This position is accompanied by suggestions for teaching activities, such as collective discussions, reflection through writing, examples, and explanations of analyses to support reading comprehension.

It is evident in the data that students acknowledge the steering document’s ambitions to include ways of life in different places. The different suggestions for how to achieve such empathetic insideness demonstrate that the students have a positive attitude towards understanding cultures from outside the Occident.

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However, the data include examples of students who critically go beyond empathetic insideness. Student H finds it troubling to read fiction that strengthens ready-made assumptions about the Other:

What I think becomes problematic when you read a text about a developing country is that the picture you already have about the country is confirmed rather than challenged (Student H).

A reflection of this kind reveals that a well-meaning intention regarding diversifying literature education might result in an activity that promotes stereotypes if a text is approached purely documentarily. In the example provided, the student goes beyond empathy towards a place by adopting a critical approach to reading a literary work distant in time and place.

To address processes of exoticization, reading transnational literature can be accompanied by contextualizing frames of reference and relevant literary concepts and terminology. Students highlight the importance of frames of reference paired with a plan for the reading as a prerequisite for

transnational and world literature education. For example, Student S highlights “good pre-understanding” and “distinct guidelines” as decisive for learning through literature. In addition, Student K outlines the need for active teaching to attain empathetic insiderness:

I want to know about the background, a bit about the author, perspectives of time and perhaps a slight push in how to read the text with different glasses (Student K).

Noticeably, Student K’s request for contextualization of the reading text matches some of the other students’ problems regarding their reading of the texts. These problems are associated with a deficiency in frames of reference, not perceiving the past tense or analeptic narrative perspectives and difficulties with decoding the intentions of the text.

To some extent, the in-class reading intervention supported empathetic insiderness. When the students consulted the steering document after reading the short stories, some of the students’ previous reflections changed, developed, and concretised ideas about the role of literature education. For instance, Student Ö changed their position regarding their interpretation of the steering document as intentionally “create[ing] pity for others” to an interpretation where the student is encouraged to “understand situations from different perspectives, depending on sex, ethnicity, culture, etc.” Before reading the short stories, Student Z stressed that the teaching pace should not be too fast. However, after the stories were read, Student Z wished that many other examples of texts could be read and that they would be provided plenty of time to discuss the text. These remarks indicate a shift in focus towards time-consuming literature education. That literature is perceived as a potential source of knowledge is evident in Student D’s claim that “fiction [...] becomes a learning material [...] which teaches us more about different aspects of our world.” These examples of transformation demonstrate that empathetic insiderness (understood as a willingness to value a plurality of perspectives as a source of knowledge) emerges as some quality students would like to learn more about. Nevertheless, empathetic insiderness should be approached critically and with suitable scaffolding practices.

4.3. Existential insiderness

As observed in the previous sections, several students interpret the aims of the steering document as a call for vicarious and/or empathetic insiderness. However, several students expressed scepticism regarding these aims. For instance, Student N does “not understand how fiction can contribute” to achieving the ambitions expressed in the curriculum. The necessity to explain the meaningfulness of a policy is challenged by Student X, who confronts the steering document with the critical question: “WHY is this important? If I get an answer to that question, I will follow the course with great interest and initiative.” This student (and others) expresses an inhibiting existential insiderness, highlighting

how important it is to explain to the student the nuances of insideness as they relate to the texts that are to be read if they are to free themselves from inhibiting existential insideness.

The notion of fiction as a window to a world far away and something distinct and separate from the homeliness of existential insideness also appears in several of the students' readings of the two short stories. For example, Student D notes that *The Cobbler and His Daughter* is told in past tense and that the author uses markers such as "at that time." Consequently, Student D concludes that the story takes place in a time gone by and adds that the event where rice is rinsed in the river indicates that the story is set far from Sweden. It is crucial that teachers observe such documentary readings of the stories when they occur with insufficient standards of comparison. For example, Student V inaccurately places *The Cobbler and His Daughter* in the 18th century even though a cinema is mentioned in the short story, and Student R concludes that *A Handful of Dates* takes place "in an undeveloped Muslim country in the Middle East." If nothing else, this is incorrect since Sudan is located in Africa.

The conclusions that Student V and Student R draw reveal a lack of frames of reference. In turn, a lack of frame of reference is explicitly mentioned by Student A, who writes: "I have absolutely no knowledge about what society, culture, or history look like in China." However, after reading *The Cobbler and His Daughter*, Student A deduces that "they live in a capitalist society with great state control", which is a statement that does suggest some previous knowledge about China. However, it is apparent that the student's remark is based on a more modern image of China as economically reformed (but still communist) than what is pictured in Gao's work from 1983.

Observations concerning moral judgments and dynamic characters are central to the students' reflections on the two stories. For example, the 'honour'-based violence and the culture of silence depicted in Gao's story draw the students' attention, as does Salih's narrator's realisation of his grandfather's profound greediness. For example, Student Q describes how the narrator in *A Handful of Dates* sees "how his whole view of his grandfather falls apart, and he doesn't know what to believe. He quickly hurries to the river where he feels safe and knows nothing has changed." This interpretation of the narrator's reaction to the story's climax indicates how a fictional character's development can illustrate that transformation may come reluctantly since a painful insight can be challenging to cope with. Such insights into transformative learning stem from Student Q's ability to adequately analyse the short story and view the river symbolically. This insight illustrates the importance of orienting the existential insideness of a classroom towards an *interpretative community* in which subject-specific language is expected (Fish, 1980).

The epic journey a character undergoes to gain self-insight is not necessarily experienced in the same way by every reader. For example, while Student O notices the same character development as

Student Q, Student O explicitly withholds a static view of common values and trains of thought, claiming that these are individual and, therefore, resistant to outside influence. For Student O, existential insiderness is thus essentialised, hindering the dynamic growth of reflective judgment. In this regard, an explicit refusal to break with one's insiderness is expressed by Student N, who interprets *A Handful of Dates* as a didactic reinforcement of moralism:

I see the content of the text as being shit [...] I understand where they are going with this. [...] The text wants you to pity someone who doesn't manage his assets in a good way. [I]n the culture I come from, you don't pity someone who doesn't deserve to be pitied (Student N).

In the extract above, Student N refers to the character Masoud, the narrator's grandfather's neighbour, who has lost his land because of debts and can no longer taste his dates or sell them. Student N's reflection on this story reveals their culturally bound worldview. However, it is unclear

Among the 17 students who completed both tasks, few of their responses revealed instances of transformation. This result is not necessarily connected to a disbelief in the potential of literature education to break with insiderness, since, in the first round of responses to the steering document, several students observed how literature supports the aims of the steering document.

whether the undefined *they* in the student's response above refers to the author's intentions, the teaching/research situation, student N's notions of a politically correct establishment, or someone/something else. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, this example presents existential insiderness as an impediment to a multi-

perspectivist understanding of the world. The transformative potential of the reading is obstructed, and personal values are favoured over open-mindedness.

The difficulty in enacting transformative learning and challenging existential insiderness is further highlighted in the students' reflection tasks related to the steering document before and after the reading.

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For instance, Student M reproduced the same response before and after the intervention, whereas Student F and Student N explicitly wrote that nothing had changed. These responses indicate that existential insiderness is omnipresent in the classroom and is not necessarily added nuance to by the

reading of fiction. As several students suggested, active teacher measures to improve student readings and scaffolding in their interpretative endeavours and a discussion of pedagogical implications for literature education are called for.

5. Concluding discussion and pedagogical outlook

This study has examined how students' insideness is exposed and challenged by their reading of transnational literature in a Swedish upper secondary L1 classroom. While acknowledging several dilemmas associated with this activity, the results of this study reveal how literature that does not immediately correspond to the student's expectations and existing knowledge can broaden and deepen their relationship with the world, thereby rendering the subject-specific knowledge found in transnational literature transformative. Using aspects of insideness as distinct analytical categories served to reveal (a lack of) transactions of values tied to the reading of transnational literature. In the context of literature education, mirror and window effects (i.e., seeing oneself and the world from renewed perspectives) can take on a more nuanced and powerful role if they are addressed through the conceptual apparatus of insideness. An important educational insight to bring from this is that the ideal form of the mirror-window relationship as a melting pot of the readers' selves and the surrounding world (Bishop, 1990), can be realised and/or refined if supported with scaffolding teaching practices which enable students – without force-feeding – to reach multi perspectivist understandings of the literary text, themselves and the world.

Consequently, the results of this study highlight a need to approach literature education as a *cultural activity* (Williams, 1977), where communal reading is supported by measures taken before, during, and after the reading. Such measures allow meta-perspectives on the cultural context in which the reading activity is performed to emerge and can encourage students to move away from habitual thinking. As observed in the students' reflections, existential insideness sometimes hinders the students' openness toward transnational literature and adopting multiple perspectives. Even though transnational literature reading can bring mirror and window perspectives to an attentive reader, it also entails a risk of reinforcing exoticism and inaccurate conclusions, for example, the students' geographical and political misconceptions of Sudan and China.

Educationally, this insight calls for literature teaching not to be carried out in a void. Rather, literature teaching needs settings that supply frames of reference relevant to the choice of literature. Even though applying such frames may be at odds with pedagogical practices underscoring aesthetic reading, it is justified to reduce the risk of exoticisation when teaching transnational literature. Besides, if threaded carefully, contextualizing can add to experiential reading, and to transformative learning.

For school-related participatory research, the methodological experience of this study underscores the importance of carefully evaluating participants' points of departure. Not only to add transparency to potential biases but also since awareness of preconceptions is equally critical for transformative insights among teachers (and librarians). For instance, transnational literature does not automatically transform the views of the readers towards open-mindedness, but might, specifically in school-situated reading, cause a backlash of self-righteousness. Ideally, participatory researchers can address such risks in both design and writing, to prepare for and heighten transformative outcomes among practitioners. For similar studies, the advice is to add a forum for post-study reflections, such as a follow-up focus group session, or write an individual meta-focused journal entry. Also, an additional analytical step regarding the preconditions, in this case, students' initial responses to the steering document, can further specify the needs within the target student group.

In conjunction with other meta-perspectives of literary texts, the interpretative community (Fish, 1980) of the classroom can exploit the different aspects of insiderness as analytical categories in an in-depth analysis of the world as it is mediated through literature, thereby leading to transformative learning through which cultural insiderness is uncovered and challenged.

Theoretically and pedagogically, the concept of 'insiderness', including its vicarious, empathetic, and existential aspects, provides a subject-specific language that can be used to speak about literature and reading as a transformative process, even though transformations, for example, a new insight or a shift in perspective, are not always achieved.

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Even though the students who participated in this study can be said to exist within a relatively homogenous insiderness, differences regarding their culturally produced perspectives can be identified. Thus, a dialogue about different points of departure before they read a text might be beneficial for revealing their insiderness.

This study has presented examples of what Locane (2018) describes as an exoticising process of texts as they journey from one cultural context to another. The transnational literature presented to the students tended to be interpreted as something distant and exotic for them. Encounters with the unknown, strange, or unfamiliar triggered feelings of outsidership and immediate reactions to remain in the safe space of insiderness. Instances of resistance to transformation have revealed how transformative learning in Swedish LI literature education is a difficult task since it requires the

students' recognition of the value of multiple perspectives and effort and openness on their part if transformative learning is to be achieved. Teaching to overcome these obstacles is a delicate matter, and educators are urged to exercise caution not to teach *for* "multi-perspectivism" but *through* "multi-perspectivism" (Helgesson & Rosendahl Thomsen, 2020, p. 158) if they wish to avoid moralistic didacticism.

Every reading experience depends on both the reader and the text, which places teaching in a crucial bridging position across the spatio-temporal gap between the cultures that affect the reader and the text. According to the Swedish steering document (Skolverket, 2012), finding one's relation with the world lies at the core of teaching and reading literature in upper secondary school, an observation that corresponds to the experience of several students in this study but not all. If a teacher is to effectively assume the bridging position described above, transnational literature needs to be enacted in the classroom to serve a displacement of oneself through imagination and by experiencing fictional characters' positions. If this does not take place, literature risks being stripped of its fictionality and will be read as a mere documentary representation of 'other' places and people.

A multi-perspectivist approach will prepare students to achieve the curricula goals and strengthen their democratic agency based on open-mindedness while still maintaining a critical approach to the insideness and outsideness of the students' experiences. In terms of teaching practice, "multi-perspectivism" (Helgesson & Rosendahl Thomsen, 2020, p. 158) can be supported by (i) choosing fictional texts that offer some degree of dissonance in their portrayal of people and cultures; (ii) supporting the students' reading by introducing literary concepts that explain the text they are

Existential insideness, as a way of feeling at home, can be strengthened, nuanced, and challenged if it is visualised and tested through literature reading. Relph's (2016) axiom is reversible: to know a *here*, you need to know a *there*, and vice versa.

reading; (iii) supplying factual background information relevant to the text; and (iv) allowing time for communal discussion and individual reflection. As several students remarked, this teaching approach should be repeated during their L1 education with a broad selection of texts from around the world.

Ultimately, New Public Management ideals regarding reading for proficiency and the political Tidö-agreement that is supposed to inform national literature teaching through pre-approved reading lists and official national cultural canons are challenged by the presence of transnational literature in the classroom. Existential insideness, as a way of feeling at home, can be strengthened, nuanced, and challenged if it is visualised and tested through literature reading. Relph's (2016) axiom is reversible: to know a *here*, you need to know a *there*, and vice versa.

If literature education is allowed to breed reflective and critical judgment in students, it will contribute to their development of multi-perspectivist understandings of the world. Such reflective work necessarily includes de-automating habitual thinking, whether such thinking is caused by existential insiderness or empathetic insiderness that addresses the target culture uncritically. Challenging cultural insiderness in L1 literature education will enact conditions for transformative learning, an aim that is specified in the Swedish L1 curriculum.

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