

Forskning om undervisning och lärande har bjudit in Janice Bland, professor i English Education vid Nord universitetet i Norge och professor II vid OsloMet universitetet, att reflektera över temanumret *Litteraturdidaktiska perspektiv på barn- och ungdomslitteratur*. Hennes forskning ligger primärt inom Engelsk språk- och litteraturdidaktik med fokus på barn- och ungdomslitteratur. Hon har publicerat flera böcker på detta ämne och är chefredaktör för *Children's Literature in English Language Education (CLELEjournal)*.

Reflekterande kommentar – Literary apprenticeships for young readers and writers

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The significance of story and responding to story is at the centre of this issue: the importance of literacy and literature for children's own worlds in the here and now, the meanings shared through their readings and writings, and their reflective and critical response to the creations of storytellers. The child is at the centre, not their languages or their skills practise for functional literacy alone, but their discoveries in becoming participants in the text and in the world.

Through an age-appropriate apprenticeship into reading literary texts over several years, we see how young school students can learn eagerly, progressively and cumulatively – *lager på lager* as Anette Svensson expresses it in her contribution. When elementary students share in literary conversations, or booktalk, the resulting collaborative classroom environment can initiate a literary apprenticeship, which supports in-depth learning, engagement with language and with characters' perspectives. Above all, learner autonomy can grow. For, as Frank Smith has put it: "By joining the club of readers, even as beginners, individuals can learn to become readers and writers. ... Reading is the club of clubs, the only possibility for many experiences of learning" (2012, p. 190).

Elementary students already know the centrality of story, and through encounters with children's literature, young readers have opportunities to practice what Keith Oatley has expressed as the "psychological process of making mental models of others that is the same in fiction as in the interactions of real life" (2017, p. 265). This is due to theory of mind (ToM) – the ability humans acquire to develop a *theory* of another's mental state – and that the thoughts and feelings of others are different from one's

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own. Children instinctively animate inanimate objects – their soft toys and dolls, for example – revealing the tendency in humans that is clearly important for developing ToM. Literary texts, when read deeply and dialogically, with exchanges on literary characters' motivations, feelings, and intentions, can exercise ToM powerfully by challenging the reader again and again to perspective-taking. This insight into others' minds is essential for empathy and reflecting on moral dilemmas.

Complex characters gradually reveal aspects of their identity to the engaged reader, encouraging thoughtful feelings, whether the characters are purely fantasy or, in the case of biography, also exist or have existed in the real world. While reading and listening to compelling story, children generate mental imagery, their vicarious ethical experience is embodied and tangible. Responding to story, the vision system in the brain activates to create a virtual visual experience and the auditory system activates to virtually hear in a dynamic and creative process. In this way, when the reader enters the world of the book both cognitively and imaginatively, their response is real and vibrant.

Our actual lived contact with diversity will always be limited by the number of different local and global contexts we can visit. This reduces opportunities for rehearsing interculturality – which focuses on dialogue and mutual respect, and a fluid notion of culture and diversity. However, we can learn vicariously and discover mutualities through a multitude of literary characters and storyworlds. Emotions are modelled in well-crafted stories, which tend to generate thoughtful feelings in the reader, listener, and beholder. Thus, a rewarding literary apprenticeship takes place when children are allowed to express both a creative and emotional response to compelling story and reading, often communicated in performance and drawing as well as words.

Children's natural curiosity – which is vital for their learning – is contextualized and encouraged through story. In-depth learning cannot begin too early – this involves the students as agentive and motivated participants, working collaboratively and with empathy while preparing for and confronting the challenges of today and of times ahead. Meetings of minds cannot begin too early, when young students discover different perspectives and windows on unknown worlds. At the same time, critical literacy is an essential part of a literary apprenticeship. Vasquez, Janks and Comber suggest a definition of critical literacy as “a stance or attitude toward literacy work in schools at all levels and irrespective of whether students are working in the languages they are fluent in or languages that they are adding to their linguistic repertoires” (2019, p. 302). Critical literacy helps unlock the agency and autonomy of the reader; children can become a critically aware participant in the text when they strive to discover how worldviews have been, potentially unconsciously, imported into a text.

The early scaffolding supplied by a literary apprenticeship and critical literacy is an important support against *antinarrative*. This is a term that is increasingly used to refer to stories that lack integrity, character development and carefully crafted story patterns and that permeate social media (Rose, 2012). Critical literacy can also build students' resilience against echo chambers and disinformation, which these days endanger young children quite as much as adolescents. Education is multidisciplinary and complex; a critically aware literary apprenticeship is an educational must – to

support children's vital curiosity, their embodied understanding of others' story contexts and their own, and as child-friendly sustenance for creativity, interculturality and critical literacy.

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