

Developing democracy and citizenship with literary texts about the First World War

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Abstract

This article reports on an empirical study that explores the interdisciplinary learning potential of literary texts about the First World War in the English classroom. In a 9th grade English class in Norway, learners responded to an illustrated book, two poems, and an excerpt from a novel about the war in learner-led group conversations structured by frameworks. The questions in the frameworks encouraged the learners to move from the particularity of the texts towards issues of the interdisciplinary topic of democracy and citizenship in the Norwegian national curriculum LK20. The theoretical position in this article builds on historical literacy, understood as historical awareness, critical historical thinking, and affective responses to texts about history. The texts offer opportunities for historical and interdisciplinary engagement, thus providing possibilities for developing aspects of historical literacy. Emphasising historical content through scaffolding may be beneficial for developing learners' critical historical thinking and a deeper historical awareness. Encountering learners' affective dimensions of historical literacy, individual responses might provide further insight.

Keywords: *Historical literacy, First World War, democracy and citizenship, group conversations, literary texts*

1. Introduction

This article addresses the interdisciplinary learning potential of using literary texts about the First World War. It presents the results of an empirical study conducted in a 9th grade English class at a lower secondary school in Norway and focuses on ways the texts engage learners in issues important for democracy and citizenship. Four texts - two poems, an illustrated book, and an excerpt from a novel – were used, with the learners responding to the texts in learner-led group conversations. Since the texts are set in a different time to the present, historical literacy as a theoretical field and approach was used to understand the learners' responses. In this article, historical literacy concerns developing historical awareness, critical historical thinking skills and affective connections in encounters with texts about history. The aim of the article is therefore to investigate how working with these texts may foster historical literacy and thus accommodate interdisciplinary curricular purposes of the Norwegian National Curriculum, the 2020 Knowledge Promotion (henceforth LK20).

The First World War was chosen at least in part because of its immense historical significance; it has been described as “the greatest moral, spiritual and physical catastrophe in history” (Merriman, 2010, p. 926). An ambition of the study was for the learners to make meaning of and move from the particularity of the literary texts and the war to more general issues relevant to the interdisciplinary topic of democracy and citizenship in LK20. A reason for this is that teachers report that they find it challenging to know what is expected of interdisciplinary teaching and learning within each subject and what interdisciplinarity might entail (Dagsland, 2021; Haukanes & Berdinesen, 2023).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) invites a way of thinking that brings the central concerns of this study together. The focus in CLIL research has primarily been on language outcomes (cf. Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006), but approaches to and uses of interdisciplinary content in the language integrated classroom remain mostly uninvestigated. Research addressing this area is therefore particularly welcomed (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; 2011; Mahan, 2020; Ruiz de Zarobe & Cenoz, 2015). To the best of my knowledge, CLIL research using texts about history in the English lower secondary subject in Norway has primarily dealt with the Second World War, with a focus on pupils' and teachers' experiences, as well as oral proficiency (Drew, 2013; Lialikhova, 2019). This article therefore provides further insight into approaches to interdisciplinarity through literary texts about history in the English lower secondary classroom.

The article is organised the following way. The central concerns for the study are explained first. Next, the findings are presented before the discussion addresses the following research question:

- How can using an historical literacy approach to literary texts about the First World War help pupils become democratic and justice-oriented citizens?

2. Literary texts about the First World War in the interdisciplinary English classroom

In this section, I address central concerns of this study, which build on the interdisciplinary topic democracy and citizenship in LK20, historical literacy as a theoretical field and approach, the suggested benefits of working with literary texts about history in the language classroom, and reasons for reading about the First World War.

2.1 Democracy and citizenship in LK20

The compulsory English subject in the Norwegian educational system has a particular responsibility to integrate two interdisciplinary topics; health and life skills, and democracy and citizenship. The latter involves helping learners “open for new ways to interpret the world, and promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudices” (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Furthermore, like all subjects in LK20, the English subject is to help realise the aims of education as described in the Core Curriculum, namely that education “shall give the pupils knowledge about the basic tenets of democracy and its values and rules” (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). In general, the topic builds on understandings from international research and theory, such as critical thinking in general and with regard to ethical and moral dilemmas in particular; awareness and understandings of equality, freedom, independence, and democratic values; and awareness of different societies and cultures (Beane, 2013; Berdinesen, 2023; Biseth, 2014; Hogarth et al., 2021).

In addition, the role of communication in democracy and citizenship in LK20 is described as key to prepare learners “for participating in democratic processes” (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) and to let them “experience different societies and cultures” (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Some researchers (Sell, 2007; Sell & Jucker, 2000) advocate for literature as communication. They suggest that reading literature by someone from a different time or culture is also a communicative activity. By recognising this view, the topic of democracy and citizenship calls for reading and responding to literary texts about the past.

2.2 Historical literacy

The conceptual debate on historical literacy draws on theoretical and applied research, which rethinks approaches to history in texts (Maposa & Wassermann, 2009; Moje, 2008). The debate tends to focus on the concept's central components, and many overlapping terms have been put forward to delineate it (Downey & Long, 2016; Lee, 2005; Nokes, 2022; Seixas & Morton, 2013). For the purposes of this study, I focus on the following three aspects: critical historical thinking skills, historical awareness, and affective connections, as I find them to help concretise how to foster democratic citizens in encounters with texts about history.

Critical historical thinking skills are about critically approaching and understanding the relationship between the past and the stories told about it (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. v). Veijola and Mikkonen (2016) emphasise that understanding this relationship is more than “tinkering with sources”; it endorses addressing and assessing truth in texts with historical content, in which historical knowledge plays a part. Historical knowledge can be understood as facts about people, places, and events in the past. The debate finds critical thinking about history by drawing on historical knowledge to be central to how we understand and explain the world we live in today (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008).

Historical awareness concerns an awareness of oneself in history, and can be understood as the ability to see an event or text in its own time, but also in the setting of the present and the future (Lee, 2005). One becomes increasingly historically aware through engaging with the past and its influence on later events and by recognizing that people in the past lived under different circumstances and held different world views than oneself (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

The notion of affective engagement is well explained by Barton and Levstik (2004), who describe it as “a tool inviting us to care with and about people in the past, to be concerned with what happened to them and how they experienced their lives” (pp. 207-208). Scholars explain that by engaging in ethical and moral issues linked to history, learners are invited to affectively tune in on aspects such as reconciliation, reparation and painful memories (De La Paz et al., 2021; Seixas, 2017), and to imagine and engage themselves from the perspectives of others (Eisman & Patterson, 2022; Endacott & Brooks, 2013)

2.3 Using literary texts about history in the English classroom

The purposes that working with literature can serve in education have been extensively researched and there is a widely held recognition of the positive affordances that it offers (Eco, 2004; Paran, 2006; Rosenblatt 1994/2005). Also, using literature for purposes central to democracy and citizenship, such as empathy, critical reflection and ethical concerns have

gained a strong position in educational contexts (Lütge et al., 2023; Sell, 2007; Simmons, 2014). In Norway, Aase (2011, p. 124) explains that “the common rationale that underpins our argumentation for literature in school” is its value “for young people in their growth into mature human beings in society”, a rationale echoed by other scholars in Norway who have looked at the role of working with literature for similar purposes (Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Lyngstad, 2021; Nissen et al., 2021).

Further, encountering literary texts about history has been suggested as particularly helpful and “necessary for citizens to competently negotiate their lives in modern society in ways that ensure their democratic participation” (Lorenzo & Dalton-Puffer, 2016, p. 57). It has been proposed that texts set in a different time to the present open for rich discussions on ethical, social and political issues (Colăcel, 2016; Ingemansson, 2016; Redmann & Sederberg, 2017; Skjærstad & Munden, 2022; Vaughn, 2011), offering learners opportunities to explore new and different perspectives (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Ruiz de Zarobe & Cenoz, 2015; Vela-Rodrigo, 2022), purposes central to fostering democratic citizenship. Literary texts about history therefore seem suitable and appropriate and indeed almost necessary for the English classroom to serve curricular demands.

2.4 The four literary texts about the First World War

Building on from the idea that working with these types of texts may be useful for interdisciplinary purposes, I address the reasons for choosing texts about the First World War. The texts belong to different genres and are written in different times and for different purposes and audiences, but these aspects will not be dealt with nor discussed in the present article. The selection process will be explained in the methods section. The chosen texts were: The picture book *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha* (Foreman, 2013), the poems “The soldier” (Brooke, 1914) and “Does it matter?” (Sassoon, 1917), and an excerpt from the novel *Stay where you are and then leave* (Boyne, 2017).

The amazing tale of Ali Pasha is based on a true story about Henry Friston, who found a tortoise, Ali Pasha, when he fought in Gallipoli. The battle of Gallipoli was a costly and failed military campaign by the Entente powers that lasted for nine months in 1915 and resulted in approximately 500 000 casualties. The children’s book is written by Michael Foreman and illustrated with photographs and his own watercolours. The story is told through the eyes of the fictional journalist Trev and is based on Foreman’s own conversations with Henry. The poem “The soldier” was written by Rupert Brooke in 1914 and is a patriotic and idealistic poem, reflecting the sentiment and glorified ideas of the early days of the war. Brooke enlisted with the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve but saw little combat as he died in 1915 of septicaemia

following a mosquito bite. Siegfried Sassoon wrote the poem “Does it matter?” in 1917, an anti-war poem describing the long-term physical and mental injuries caused by the war. Sassoon served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and saw combat several times. *Stay where you are and then leave* by John Boyne is a fictional children’s novel that follows nine-year old Alfie Summerfield and his search for his father who went to war as a soldier and did not come back. The excerpt in this study is the first chapter, where Alfie looks back on the day his father left.

The reason for choosing texts about the First World War was threefold. Firstly, it concerns how the war has been described as a total war that caused the “unravelling of social norms, political order and economic stability” throughout Europe (Abbenhuis & Tames, 2021, p. 157), and resulted in global political and social transformation (cf. Strachan, 2023). Secondly, even though it had a relatively limited impact on Norwegian society (Fuglum, 1995; Furre, 1992), the war caused a “significant rupture in younger generations’ understanding and experience of life” (Kjeldstadli, 2005, p. 56, my translation). The years 1914 – 1918 therefore mark an important time in Norwegian history where many of the ideas and values of our social democracy manifested themselves (Kjeldstadli, 2005), values and ideas that education should protect and maintain through its teaching and learning (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). A third reason is that a collective memory of the war has been lacking in Norway. Suggested explanations for this are the declaration of neutrality in 1914, the relatively low number of Norwegian casualties of approximately 2000, and how the labour movement of the 1930s and the Second World War have overshadowed and dominated national interest instead (Brandal et al., 2014; Fuglum, 1995; Furre, 1992; Riste, 1965). These premises therefore build on a desire to investigate how learners approach texts from an important period in world and Norwegian history, where a national collective understanding has been lacking.

3. Previous research

In this section, relevant empirical studies with regards to interdisciplinarity through encounters with literary texts about history in language classrooms are presented. Firstly, a study by Redmann and Sederberg (2017) provides a particularly interesting discussion of the learning potential of the First World War in language lessons. They taught the war as a topic in German and found that reading literary texts about it shifted “the level of discourse beyond functional oral language use (typical of most communicative classrooms) to classroom discussions that cultivate competence in critical framing, interpretation, collaboration, problem solving, and reflection” (Redmann &

Sederberg, 2017, p. 50). Another study, by Evans and Midford (2021), found that literary texts about history are more accessible to learners than factual historical texts and they argue that literary texts engage learners in the historical backdrop the texts are placed in.

Further, the studies by Davison (2017) and Schaar and Wen (2021) provide insight into how an approach inspired by historical literacy may contribute to the development of democratic citizenship. Davison (2017) found that focusing on empathy, exploring historical evidence, and building contextual knowledge in textual encounters were important to enable students to form critical and informed opinions about the past. Similarly, Schaar and Wen (2021) found that providing instructions on how to encounter a text and concrete questions targeting both affective and cognitive dimensions were essential to help their students reflect and discuss ethical issues.

There has been little relevant research in this field in Norway. However, a study conducted by Drew (2013) addresses teaching about the Second World War from a global to local perspective in a 9th grade English classroom. Drew found that the learners focused on facts about the Second World War rather than linking the conflict to their local perspective and their own experiences (2013, p. 75). He concludes that learners may engage differently in CLIL-based projects if other texts than those in their subject textbooks are used (pp. 75-76).

Thus, research indicates that there is learning potential in literary texts about the First World War when used in a way that accommodates development of democracy and citizenship through an approach inspired by historical literacy. The next section addresses the methodological considerations that were made to accommodate the premises and suggestions from the field this study navigates.

4. Method

In this section, I present ethical considerations made, the participants, the text-selection process, the stages of collecting the data, the recorded group conversations, and the process of coding the data.

4.1 Ethical considerations

Several ethical considerations were made in this study. Most importantly, before any teachers or learners were approached, permission was sought and granted from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). With regards to anonymity, the names used for learners and the teacher are pseudonyms. By being aware of the ethical aspects of transcription as presented by Cohen et al. (2018, pp. 523-524), all verbal-interaction was transcribed. Since authenticity was sought, linguistic errors were thus not corrected. For the sake of making

meaning of the provided examples, errors in quotes from the learners are corrected using brackets in this article. The learners spoke almost only in English, but the few occurrences of Norwegian were also included in the transcript.

4.2 Participants

After contacting teachers and schools in my professional network, where they received information about the project, teacher Anna and her class were recruited. Anna has been a secondary education teacher for more than twenty years, and is qualified to teach Norwegian, English, and Social Sciences. She teaches Norwegian and English in this 9th grade class. The class comprises 22 pupils in English classes, and nineteen gave their consent to participate, thirteen girls and six boys.

4.3 Selecting texts

The process of choosing the literary texts had several stages. Firstly, a broad selection of First World War literary texts was compiled. Secondly, these texts were discussed with regards to suitability and learning potential in an informal meeting with a group of lower secondary school English teachers. Based on their input and suggestions, nine texts were chosen to pilot. In the pilot study, learners read and responded to the nine texts in groups where they were guided by a set of questions made by the researcher. The next step of the text selection process was planning with Anna. Based on the findings from the pilot and the conversations with her, we settled on the four texts. Anna thought *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha* would be an interesting and engaging book to try with her class and that it would differ, in a positive way, from the kinds of texts they usually read in English. She had previously found her class to be hesitant towards poetry and thus wanted to see how a different context would play out in her class using the poems “The soldier” and “Does it matter?”. The excerpt from *Stay where you are and then leave* was in part selected for the classroom because of Anna’s familiarity with the author of the novel – he is widely known for his Second World War story *The boy in the striped pyjamas* (Boyne, 2006) - as well as the child’s point of view.

4.4 The stages of collecting the data

The study was carried out over a period of five weeks and fourteen English lessons. The part of the study reported on in this article had four stages. The first stage of the research was prior to reading and responding to the literary texts, where the learners were asked what they remembered about the First World War, a topic they had recently worked with in Social Studies. They recalled

key dates and the alliances of the belligerent powers, and we repeated what they had talked about in Social Studies. However, they admitted that they knew and remembered little about the First World War in Norway, the war's social impact, and what the warfare was like. They said they had not reflected on why or how the conflict might be relevant for them or society today.

The second stage of the study was reading aloud *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha* while the learners followed in their own copies. Anna and I took turns reading, and we provided as little interpretive input as possible. We only answered questions about vocabulary or showed on a map places mentioned. Four groups were then formed to talk about the text. The recorded conversations based on the text spanned from six and a half to eighteen minutes.

Thirdly, the poems were introduced to the learners by Anna and shown on a whiteboard. She found it necessary to read them aloud several times and to explain vocabulary, and she showed the poets' names, a picture of them, their date of birth and death, and she said that the two poems represent different views on war. However, she did not provide her own interpretation of the poems nor made any explicit comment on ethical and emotional issues the poems raise. After her introduction, four new groups were formed. The recorded conversations based on the poems spanned from nine to twelve minutes.

In the fourth stage, the excerpt from *Stay where you are and then leave* were read aloud by Anna while the learners followed in their own copies. She explained vocabulary when learners asked her to do so. Five new groups were formed, and the final set of recorded group conversations lasted from six and a half to twenty-eight minutes.

4.5 Recorded group conversations

The learners responded to the texts in group conversations that were recorded. Cohen et al. (2018, p. 527) suggest that group conversations may lead to participants building on each other's comments to further explore texts and thus provide richer responses than individual answers might. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) argue that a conversational structure provides a setting where teenagers might be comfortable with sharing and speaking together. They suggest that groups should preferably include people with ongoing social relationships. With this in mind, it was agreed that Anna decided the composition of the groups. The groups were to be different each time in order to avoid pupils feeling placed in possibly a constraining social role (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2015), we agreed that there would be no adult present at the recordings. Anna had used learner-led conversations before and found that approach to work well, as long as the learners were provided with a clear framework.

4.6 Frameworks

Frameworks for each of the conversations were designed. The first questions were asked to simply get the conversation started, and were based on Anna’s previous frameworks and the piloted questions. Next, questions about characters and feelings were asked to engage the learners’ affective responses and to help them take the perspectives of others (Davison, 2017; Juzwik, 2013; Schaar & Wen, 2021). The last questions were asked to help learners consider issues of democracy and citizenship, and validity and relevance of the stories (Davison, 2017; Redmann & Sederberg, 2017; Vaughn, 2011). The questions for each of the literary conversations are presented in the table below.

The text(s)	Questions
<i>The amazing tale of Ali Pasha</i>	1 First of all, could you please tell us what the book you have just read, <i>The amazing tale of Ali Pasha</i> , was about?
	2 What did you like about this book?
	3 Do you think this book tells the truth about the First World War?
	4 What do you think Ali Pasha meant to Henry during the war?
	5 If Ali Pasha and Henry had been alive today, what do you think they would feel and think about the society we live in today?
	6 If you got a chance to talk to Henry in person, what would you ask him?
	7 Is it right for one country to decide what another country can or cannot do?
	8 Based on this book and Henry’s experience, what were the good and the bad things about the First World War?
“The soldier” and “Does it matter?”	1 First of all, could you tell us what “The soldier” was about?
	2 What was “Does it matter” about?
	3 Who wrote the poems and when were they written, and is this information important? Why/why not?
	4 What do we learn about the First World War from these two poems?
	5 Whose experience do you think reflects the reality of the war the best and why?
	6 Do you agree that not fighting for your country makes you a coward?
	7 Do you agree that emotional scars can be just as bad as physical scars?
<i>Stay where you are and then leave</i>	1 First of all, we will talk about <i>Stay where you are and then leave</i> , the story is about.... (explain)
	2 Alfie’s dad says he had to join the army. Why do you think he felt like he didn’t have a choice?
	3 Granny Summerfield said “we’re all finished”, why do you think she said that?
	4 Could you say that this text is about history? Why, why not?
	5 What questions do you want answers to after reading this excerpt from <i>Stay where you are and then leave</i> ?

Table 1: Frameworks for group conversations

4.7 Thematic analysis

The conversations were transcribed, coded and analysed based on a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), inspired by the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Codes were inductively generated from the conversations and four themes were identified and used: 1) Truth, 2) acknowledging voices of the past, 3) relevance to the learners' lives, and 4) democratic values.

5. Findings

This section provides an overview of the thematic analysis of the thirteen recorded group conversations.

5.1 Truth

The theme truth concerns how the learners believed the stories to be true, and they pondered over this issue in all conversations. Initially, they dismissed the questions concerning truth, an example being Jenny, who said we cannot know if the stories are true "because we were not there". However, during the conversations, the learners came back to the issue several times. They contemplated the validity of the encountered stories and whether they could be trusted as accurately representing history or not. When trying to reach a conclusion, the learners made use of what they remembered about the First World War, but also drew on information in the texts. As an example, Ruth and Astrid recalled that the war was expected to be over by Christmas. They therefore found the conflicting feelings about enlistment to likely be accurately described in the texts, as they thought it credible that men had gone to war trusting to be homeward bound within a few months. Another example is Martha, who believed *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha* to be a true story, "because it seems like something that could have happened" during that kind of war.

Several of the groups puzzled over the issue of how one could be sure of the truth of history, and different perspectives were presented. An example was provided by Margit, who believed that a story is only about history when a person who has experienced it tells it. However, she problematised this view herself, as she was not quite sure whether someone's experience was the same as truth about history. Another view was presented by Ruth, who explained that they had heard a lot about "one of the most brutal [battles], like the [battle] in Gallipoli" in *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha*. Because she knew the battle of Gallipoli had happened, she thought the descriptions must be true. Another group distinguished between historical information and stories about people:

Rolf: We didn't learn anything about the First World War.

Georg: No, that is actually kind of true.

Karl: Can you explain that more?

Rolf: They didn't write about the war, only, like,

Harald: Only about their war.

Further, the groups found the knowledge they had about the lives of Brooke and Sassoon to legitimise the experiences conveyed in their poems, and thus to be trusted. Astrid explained that we could surely learn the truth about history from the poets because “they know what a war is and have been through it”. They affiliated the poets' war experiences with their poems, and several learners discussed which one had the most correct and honest portrayal of war. They suggested similar ideas to that of Lilly, who explained that “The soldier” “glorifies the actions of war and dying”, which she believed would make the poem a less reliable account, apparently finding warfare unthinkable as worthy of praise. The groups were therefore in general united in finding “Does it matter?” to represent the more accurate narrative of war.

5.2 Acknowledging voices of the past

The theme acknowledging voices of the past is about addressing and understanding how and why people in the past acted the way they did. In general, the groups emphasised the importance of listening to others' experiences, Astrid explaining that we should always recognise what others say and be careful about judging, because we “never know what people have been through”. Some of the learners even seemed to find it more important to accept the voices and stories than to verify them with historical information. As an example, when talking about *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha*, Ester stated that “the most important part of the book is, of course, the tale from Henry and his perspective of the war”.

In addition, the learners were curious about and wanted to know how Henry, Alfie, and Alfie's father had felt and thought. They would have wanted to ask Henry about his mental health, if he missed his comrades after the war, if he regretted joining the navy, and what life would have been like without his friend, Ali Pasha. They wanted to know if Alfie's father came back, and what not knowing where his father was did to Alfie. They seemed cautious about delegitimising the stories and were instead open-minded and interested in learning about what the characters had experienced.

Another line of thought from the learners was how they recognised that the texts concerned situations removed from their own. They seemed to be aware that people in the texts had different intentions and purposes than them. They acknowledged that a person's situation affects their own decisions, and some wondered what they would have done in a similar situation. This is particularly evident regarding military duty. An example is what Ruth said, who found that people had "wanted to be there for their country and their families", something she did not believe to be the case today. In general, the learners criticised today's society, suggesting that we are more ungrateful, lazy, and selfish today than before. However, when discussing Alfie's father joining the war, learners in every group expressed something similar to Klara, namely that "you have no choice" in those situations, implying that if confronted with the dilemma of enlistment, they might have acted in a similar manner to the characters in the texts.

5.3 Relevance to the learners' lives

This theme is about how the learners were able to relate the texts to circumstances in their own lives. They did not refer to personal issues or stories, considering instead aspects of warfare, friendship, and mental health in a current context.

Some of the groups recognised the war in Ukraine as comparable to the 1914 – 1918 conflict, but they did not expand on or explicitly compare the wars. A reason might be that they were concerned with answering the questions in the frameworks, and expanding on the Russo-Ukrainian war might have been thought of as off topic.

In general, the learners reflected on consequences of war, particularly with regards to loss of friends, family, and health. When reflecting on this, the groups seemed curious about whether Henry would be disappointed in today's society or not. They proposed plausible answers and Martha suggested that because "we are still making the same mistakes", Henry would not have found the world to have improved.

The groups spoke of the importance of friendship for good mental health. They mentioned the friendship between Henry and Ali Pasha in particular, and Margit even suggested that Ali Pasha was the reason Henry survived the war, both physically and mentally. Ruth believed that the tortoise was Henry's "lightness in the dark", and several of the groups thought that having friends and family for support in war is important to avoid severe trauma. Another view on mental health was presented when the learners discussed the poems, where Lilly suggested that mental illnesses were probably dismissed at the time and the group agreed that they are recognised differently today. They supported their claim by explaining that it is significantly easier to talk about and receive help for mental health issues today than before.

5.4 Democratic values

The theme of democratic values deals with freedom, equality and peace in particular. As an example, in the framework for *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha* the learners were asked what the good and the bad things about the war were. They seemed to find the question a bit strange, and Olav firmly explained that “there is never a good thing about war”. Several of the learners found that the texts suggested friendship and comradeship as positive aspects of war, but they stressed that even though there might be aspects of war considered ‘nice’, war is never a good thing.

Being treated equally was considered by several of the groups as important in a democracy. An example is how some of the groups discussed treatment of wounded and disabled people in depth. Several of the learners found it particularly important to demonstrate genuine kindness and respect towards people affected by war, and it almost seemed that equality was a given to them, and to question the importance of it for a well-functioning society appeared strange.

The topic within this theme that caused the most engaged conversations was fighting for freedom. In general, the learners seemed to grasp the complexity of enlistment as they recognised the challenge of only relying on those willing to fight to defend a country. They found fighting fundamental in defending peace and freedom and as an example, after Mary, Elizabeth and Ruth had spent some time discussing the matter, Ruth concluded that if people want their country to maintain its independence, its freedom and its democracy, “people have to fight”.

6. Discussion and concluding remarks

This section considers how an approach inspired by historical literacy to literary texts about the First World War can help pupils become democratic and justice-oriented citizens. It reflects first on the responses to the four literary texts as expressions of the learners’ historical literacy.

Secondly, it addresses the extent to which the texts and the conversations contributed to reflections necessary for democratic citizenship. Throughout this section, the shortcomings of this study are discussed in light of the findings and previous research to provide further suggestions and insights into how the interdisciplinary approach in this study may be adapted and thus contribute to the development of democracy and citizenship.

Firstly, historical literacy, understood in this article as developing historical awareness, critical historical thinking skills, and affective dimensions, were expressed in the learner responses through acknowledging voices of the past and concerning truth. The learners demonstrated a certain awareness of history, particularly that people in the past lived under different circumstances. Using the texts allowed the learners to be curious about past lives, an example being the questions

the learners wanted to ask the characters. However, while the findings are in line with what Evans and Midford (2021) suggest, that working with texts about history may promote curiosity about the past, it is evident that the learners' limited knowledge of the First World War restricted their in-depth development of historical literacy. Nevertheless, the texts opened up for learning about history, and an example is Ruth who referred to Gallipoli. Prior to reading *The amazing tale of Ali Pasha*, the learners were asked if they had heard of the battle, but they seemed unfamiliar with it. Ruth's description may therefore indicate that her impression of it as a ferocious campaign was drawn from the texts and illustrations. Then again, unlike Drew's (2013) study, the learners in the present study did in general not focus on historical content and thus struggled to critically engage with the encountered stories. Considering that historical knowledge is seen as particularly important in understanding and explaining the world we live in today as well as the past (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008), the extent of the learners' background knowledge should have been considered differently when designing this study. To allow learners to dig deeper into encountered stories, a stronger focus on historical background content is needed.

A contributing factor to why a stronger focus is needed may be the lack of a national narrative and collective memory of the First World War in Norway. It is likely that this had a greater impact on how invested and engaged the learners were in learning about the historical backdrop of the texts than anticipated. A comparative study, where literary texts about the First and the Second World Wars are read and responded to, might provide further insight into the role of national narratives and collective memories in the development of historical literacy.

Further, in line with the students in the first phase of Schaar and Wen's (2022) study, the learners in the current study did not question the validity of the experiences in the texts. After Schaar and Wen (2022) had reviewed and developed their approach, their students "were able to (more) critically examine and actively deal with content, narrative and perspectives presented" (Schaar & Wen, 2022, p. 61). An important adjustment they made, was establishing a shared understanding of what constitutes 'history'. This should have been considered more carefully and integrated into this study, and I believe this adjustment to be beneficial and important in future research on the interdisciplinary learning potential of literary texts about history.

Moreover, developing the learners' historical literacy in-depth may be done by acknowledging the tension between affectively tuning into the history and comprehending historical knowledge that Davison (2017) explores. It was believed this gap would be bridged in the encounters with the literary texts, based on the conclusions in Drew's study (2013). However, the learners did not share personal stories in the conversations. Instead, they acknowledged current problematic aspects of society and relevance to their own lives. As an example, Henry and Ali's friendship

and mental health aspects of friendships were frequently mentioned. A reason for this might be that adolescents care significantly more about their friendships than any other relationships (Bernasco et al., 2021; Uink, Modecki & Barber, 2017), and their mental health is recognised by themselves and society to be of pivotal importance in life (Bang et al., 2023; Madsen, 2020). Building frameworks on the learners' contexts and current topical issues to a greater extent may therefore contribute to strengthening affective involvement and thus create opportunities for in-depth development of historical literacy. This would accommodate the findings in Vaughn's study (2011, p. 60) to a greater extent, that the overall context needs to speak to the learners to allow them to approach the texts with engagement and "deft analytical ability", which again would strengthen developing empathy and understandings of others in particular, key to democratic citizenship.

Secondly, the findings indicate that these four literary texts allowed the learners to ponder and puzzle over complex issues linked to military service, freedom, and independence, contributing to reflections necessary for the development of democratic citizenship. This corresponds with what Davison (2017) found, that reading texts about the First World War allowed learners to consider different sets of beliefs and shared human concerns.

Furthermore, the learners held democratic values in high regard, while appearing to find the issues strange to address at all. This might be explained by Biseth (2014, p. 41), who suggests that democracy and democratic values have manifested themselves in Norwegian society in such a way that educational policymakers, teachers, and learners find them superfluous to even discuss. However, without focusing on, talking about, or discussing fundamental principles in our society, we run the risk of democracy and civic participation being taken for granted. Thus, these texts seem to lend themselves well to create openings for developing core aspects of democracy and citizenship and using them to provide potential for maintaining and protecting core democratic principles.

In this concluding remark, I take inspiration from Redmann and Sederberg (2017), who suggest that we should strive towards capitalising the "interdisciplinary network connecting individual feelings, collective drives, historical reasons, geographical contexts, social issues, [and] ideologies" that reading about the First World War offers (p. 55). To accommodate the changes suggested, a stronger teacher involvement may allow for deeper explorations of relevant issues. Seeing that some of the inconsistencies in the learners' answers were simply glossed over, such as Martha who did not expand on what she meant by "that kind of war", follow-up questions and adult presence at the conversations may be needed, since such questions could develop rather than interfere with learner responses (Krueger & Casey, 2015). I suggest that these types of literary texts can be used in the English subject by welcoming, contextualising

and exploring voices and perspectives about the past to develop historical awareness, critical historical thinking skills and affective responses, accommodating development of democratic and justice-oriented citizens.

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