Fictional Narratives and Social Work Education: A Research Review

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES: This review covers peer-reviewed articles in international journals that study, discuss, report or describe activities around reading fiction literature in education in social work. Which aspects of pedagogy are described and what are the arguments presented? Have the results of reading fiction been studied and if so, how?

METHOD: A review with systematic approach was conducted and eight international databases were used for searching. Based on the 1863 articles from the basic search, 19 were selected for the review.

RESULTS: The research review revealed a pressing need for further comprehensive studies on the importance and the effects of reading fiction within the context of social work education. It appears that fictional narratives can be used in many ways, e.g., to illustrate and apply theories, to create knowledge and understanding of other people's conditions, for interpersonal understanding, to develop personal qualities and abilities and also to develop linguistic competence. In spite of these positive aspects, the position of fictional narratives in academic education seems weak.

FICTIONAL NARRATIVES AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: A RESEARCH REVIEW

Introduction

Two perspectives in particular motivate this research review. The first aspect concerns reports in the media which question the social worker's ability to empathize with and understand clients' feelings, thoughts and life situation. The other aspect is that many of today's students at Swedish universities allegedly lack language competence.

Regularly the media confronts us with reports on outrageous cases of neglect and the abuse of children placed in treatment or in foster care.

When reports of this kind appear it is not uncommon that the Social Services counsellors are chastised in the media. They appear, or are often depicted, as insensitive and incapable of empathy.

In recent times there has been a lot of criticism leveled at the Swedish primary and secondary school systems and university teachers often express increasing frustration over the poor reading and writing skills of the freshmen. Nine historians at Uppsala University wrote the following in a debate article, *"We have accepted that the history students lack a basic knowledge of history, but when they lack the acumen to absorb the human sciences –namely language – then we must raise the alarm."* (Enefalk et al., 01-02-2013). They argued that the majority of students on their courses nowadays have basic problems with language and the authors emphasise that it is not about students with dyslexia or students who do not have Swedish as their first language. In general, these students tend to fare better since they tend to work actively on their language skills. Furthermore, the historians note that *"students have an extremely limited vocabulary, and a truly alarming fact is that their comprehension is weak or even erroneous."* Hairrell, Rupley and Simmons (2011) conclude in their overview on vocabulary research that there is a strong link

between vocabulary and comprehension and they believe that this is an irrefutable fact in linguistics research.

One might ask how a lack of linguistic competence affects the ability to communicate, express understanding or describe and understand social problems or the individual client. In one of the articles in this research review, Margaret Turner (1991) discusses the importance of language and uses terms like "empathetic imagination" in order to point out the importance of a rich and varied vocabulary and how good communication in essential in social work.

In the wake of several reported blunders in which Social Services were involved, the question is sometimes raised as to what degree of responsibility should be shouldered by the educators of social workers. This question is seemingly both legitimate and important.

The degree objectives for Social Work in Sweden are listed in the Higher Education Ordinance (2012), and include criteria that students should "*demonstrate self-awareness and empathy*", "*use a holistic approach and demonstrate the ability to make assessments based on relevant scientific, social and ethical aspects with special regard to human rights*" and "*demonstrate the ability to exercise a professional approach and attitude.*" There are however, no specific degree requirements that focus on linguistic competence in relation to these degree objectives.

Social work programmes in Sweden deal with these goals in many ways. These include conversation training both in groups and individually, observations, reflections, video recording analysis, individually supervised field placement training, to name a few. Several methods are employed to challenge and develop the student's capacity for empathy and their understanding of the concept of vulnerability.

This study is interested in a specific educational tool in this area, namely fictional narratives in social work education.

Novels, short stories and poetry can be considered as a supplement to the regular textbooks, according to Viggiani, Charlesworth, Hutchison, and Faria (2005), and they claim that prose and poetry, properly employed, can help to stimulate reflective practice on life experiences and also reduce denial around issues of power and inequality. They also mention the possibility of using fiction to illuminate the theories in social work. They describe how fictional portrayals of people are multi-dimensional, with a depth and richness that is lacking in the traditional case studies used extensively in educational settings. Suitable contemporary literature can make students aware of different perspectives, social interactions and living conditions and can provide insights into different cultural, ethnic, racial and class conditions.

Psychological research in this field often focuses on trying to measure the effects of reading; this may involve a change in the ability to empathise for example, and they work methodically with experiments, control groups and pre / post measurements. On the one hand some scientists report a clear, positive relationship between reading fiction of any kind and the level of empathy, see Johnson (2012) and Mar et.al. (2011). On the other hand, Kidd and Castano (2013) confirmed in five experiments, that reading does indeed improve the ability to emphasize - "Theory of mind" - but they also found a statistically significant difference between reading "literary fiction" , "popular literature" and nonfiction. They argue that reading "literary fiction" by virtue of being both "readerly" and "writerly", engages the reader in creative thoughts that affects Theory of Mind (ToM). The distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" indicates that popular literature, which is merely "readerly", is intended to entertain the relatively passive reader, where as "writerly" refers to "literary texts" that also including elements of co-creation or co-authorship. "Literary fiction" was represented in Kidd & Castano´s investigation of extracts from the last years´ winner of the "National Book Award", which is one of USA´s most prestigious literary awards, and also the 2012 winner of "The O'Henry Award", which is a

distinguished award for best short story published in USA or Canada. "Popular Literature" was chosen among the current bestsellers on Amazon.com.

"Theory of Mind" is usually theoretically divided into two parts: *affective* (the ability to see and understand the feelings of others) and *cognitive* (the ability to make inferences and understand the thoughts and intentions of others). Kidd and Castano (ibid.) say it is the affective aspect that can be associated with the ability to empathise. They also cite previous research which reports that reading literary fiction increases the ability to empathise as well as the ability to recognise ourselves in the account of others. Furman (2006) points out that empathy cannot be achieved without understanding a client on the affective, cognitive and *behavioral* levels, a comment that clarifies the cognitive aspect of empathy.

Jarvis (2012) believes that there is a consensus that reading literary fiction can be a powerful teaching tool in adult education. However, she writes, little is known about the processes that lead to some people developing empathy while others do not. Using Hoffman's theories of empathy - see e.g., Hoffman (2002) - she discusses possible explanations and the character of empathy.

If someone becomes aware of suffering (in a film or a book) they often react spontaneously with so-called *mimicry*, that is to say, they imitate the emotions of the protagonist by vocal expressions, facial expressions or in other ways. This in turn triggers feelings and to some extent, results in a shared emotion with the other person. This process is directly and completely involuntary, according to Jarvis (ibid.). An additional phase in the process may result in a *direct association* with one´s own experiences of suffering or distress and in turn, it is this emotion that creates empathy.

There are, however, obstacles that are important to note. People are likely to avoid empathic concern in situations where they themselves are unable to influence the situation in a positive way. Others try to reduce the stress that can result from the actual empathic concern by reacting on a rational level and accepting the inevitability of injustice, that is to say, the short-term

empathy achieved is rationalised because it cannot be endured. Both of these aspects are important for teachers in social work to embrace since they can be dealt with in the classroom situation.

It is also important to note the link that Jarvis makes to what is called *empathic anger* that may occur provided that the experiences are processed in a teaching situation. If, as in the educational programmes of social work, one is interested in social justice and actions that can lead to them, then empathetic anger provides a good foundation for further pedagogical elements that associate this emotional experience to possible activities and actions.

A chapter in the Swedish anthology (Ottelid, 2012b) discusses the concept of mentalisation, which connects several components that social workers need to master. The discussion goes somewhat beyond the usual understanding of what empathy can be considered to encompass. They mention:

- Skills in verbalizing own and other people´s emotions

- Skills to empathize with another person's situation and experience

- Ability in making accurate observations and interpretations of other people's intentions and behaviors. (Knutagård, Krantz, & Oddner, 2012)

They embody mentalising by pointing out *skills* and they also refer to linguistic competence. The objective for this is of course, that skills can be acquired and developed.

Questions regarding fearlessness and moral courage also deserve attention. Furness (2005, p. 254) suggests that all social work students need to become more assertive, and confident enough to always stand up against bad or discriminatory practice. The aforementioned anthology maintains that it "*would be desirable if social work students could be perceived as competent, not only in the detection of malpractice but also with the courage to deal with racism, sexism or other injustices in their prospective workplace*" (Ottelid, 2012a, p. 35).

Bibliotherapy as a concept is not explored in this research review although there is obviously a correlation. For example, Mazza (1998), whose article is included in this review, mentions the impact of poetry therapy on elderly subjects. He refers continuously to three groups: the elderly, staff in institutions for the elderly and students and these three groups represent the clear connections between the use of literature in education, in the workplace and with client groups. This is supported by Furman (2006), who in his article describes empathy exercises related to poetry and bibliotherapy.

The application of bibliotherapy is well-established in health care services in a number of countries, e.g., USA, UK and the Netherlands. It has been claimed that both reading and writing have positive healing effects in recuperating patients or patients waiting to die, in times of crisis, depression or anxiety or generally in the process of personal development. There are experiences from both children and adults. Research suggests that literature is active in all these contexts, see e.g., Mårtensson (2013), Morgan & Jorm (2008), Gregory, Schwer Canning, Lee, & Wise (2004).

An interesting Swedish example of how to actively use literature in social work is described in the Swedish journal Alkohol & Narkotika, (Höglund, 2013). Rather than call the police when drug addicts visited the library in Norrköping, the staff started a book club and began a collaboration with a nearby outpatient clinic.

In a broader perspective, there is increasing interest from the healthcare sector about culture as an untapped therapeutic resource. The Karolinska Institutet (2013) maintains "The Cultural Brain" web site supported by the Stockholm County Council and the Swedish Music Development and Heritage Sweden, where they *follow the international front of research in the field of culture, brain, health and knowledge. It evaluates the scientific development and translates important findings and trends to a language easily understood by professionals and decision makers, as well as the general audience*.

Against this background it is hardly surprising that many writers and teachers believe and assume that reading and the educational application of literary texts can contribute to future social workers being influenced in a positive way, both for developing professional practice in general and also specifically for their interaction with clients.

This research study deals with peer-reviewed articles published in international journals focusing on studying, discussing, reporting or describing activities regarding the reading of fiction in social work education. What pedagogical aspects are reported and what are the current arguments to support them? Which are the areas of application? Have they studied the results of reading fiction and if so how?

Method

Systematic searches in international databases for the Social Sciences can be problematic in several ways and the search results need to be supplemented with other methods that can be time-consuming if you aim to identify and locate all, or most of, the research in the focus area. Papaioannou et.al (2010) believe that despite applying relevant search strategies in the databases, important articles can be missed and this is often due to vague content in the abstracts and inadequate indexing. Therefore, they say, you also need to use *reference checking, citation searches and contacts with experts* in the specific field to really strive for a rigorous search result. In this overview, the three former methods were used.

The following databases were deemed relevant and were used: Sociological Abstracts via ProQuest, Social Services Abstracts via ProQuest, PsycInfo via ProQuest, PsycArticles via ProQuest, Eric via ProQuest, Web of Science, MLA and PubMed. The searches were carried out between February and May 2013[1].

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[1] "Alerts" from databases via ProQuest were active up to and including September 2013. No new articles were added during this period.

Relevant keywords were tested several times in each of the databases and the database thesauruses were used. Several searches were performed using both broader and more specific search terms. Free text searches[2] of the following type were found to be most effective:

> *(fiction OR poetry OR "short story" OR "short stories" OR prose)[3] AND ("Counselling Education" OR "counseling education" OR "Social Work Education" OR "Multicultural Education" OR "Paraprofessional Education" OR "Adult Education" OR "Nursing Education" OR "higher education")*

In total the searches rendered 1863 hits after being imported to EndNote and screened for duplicates. After relevance screening based on title and abstract, 186 articles remained. Next, the articles were selected through close reading of the abstracts and checking the articles in full text, based on the following inclusion criteria:

Articles in international journals

- must be peer-reviewed
- must deal with *reading* poetry or prose as a method of teaching (writing can be included, but not exclusively),
- must focus on education in Social Work
- should be written in English.

This screening resulted in 10 articles remaining and when the references in these were checked an additional 5 articles were included. Via renewed reference briefing in these additional articles and additional citation searches in Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) a total of 19[4] articles remained. Reference scanning was carried out in the last four articles but did not result in the addition of new articles.

These nineteen were the focus for the synthesis and analysis (Table 1).

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[2] This refers mainly to databases via ProQuest. All the keywords are obtained via the database thesauraus. Note that in PubMed the MeSH-terms were more successful in the search strings. See search strings in Appendex 1.

[3] Additional key words e.g., "auto biography", "fiction literature" and similar terms did not improve the results in the ProQuest databases, but did in MLA.

[4] It has not been possible to analyse why the proportion of articles found through reference checking and citation search was so high, usually it tends to be the lower. But it certainly strengthens the relevance of what Papaioannou et al. (2010) maintain about the difficulties experienced in searching social science databases.

Thematisation of the result has been achieved through close reading of the articles and "line-by-line" coding according to various aspects of the content linked to the review questions[5].

Results

The nineteen articles that are the focus of the study are listed here. (Table 1).

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[5] For a discussion of the pros and cons of this method, see e.g., Pope, Mays, och Popay (2007)

TABLE 1

Number	Author	Country	Year	Contents	Journal title
1	Moore (1984)	USA	1984	One-day seminar for social workers to better understnd death and dying. Reading of poetry.	Health & Social Work
2	Link och Sullivan (1989)	USA	1989	An educational model I four stages	Journal of Social Work Education
3	Cnaan (1989)	USA	1989	Reports on an experomntal course on social policy. Discusses "results"	
4	M. Turner (1991)	UK	1991	Argument, lingusistic recistence and richness, "empathic imagination"	The British Journal of Social Work
5	C. Tice (1992)	USA	1992	Reports on a seminar, 26 lectures	Arete
6	Beattie och Randell (1997)	Canada	1997	Presents different ways of using refugee stories	Journal of Multicultural Social Work
7	Mazza (1998)	USA	1998	Report, argument, discussion	Journal of Aging and Identity
8	Furman (2003)	USA	2003	Promotes the use of both reading and writing of poetry. Includes exercises and questions	Arete
9	Viggiani, et al. (2005)	USA	2005	Summarizes, argues, recommends	Social Work Education
10	Furman (2006)	USA	2005	Mostly writing for emapathy development, but also reading of poetry	Journal of Poetry Therapy
11	Collins, Furman, och Russell (2005)	USA	2005	Using childrens literature	Arete
12	Monroe (2006)	USA	2006	Reports on the use of a autobiography (a prof in social work) Appendix with study guide	Journal of Teaching in Social Work
13	Taylor (2008)	Canada	2008	Different ways of using the stories of Narnia – spirituality and religion	Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work
14	Rutten, Mottart, och Soetaert (2010)	Belgium	2010	A case study where students analyses a book and a film using a theory	British Journal of Social Work
15	C. J. Tice, Harnek Hall, och Miller (2010)	USA	2010	About reducing predudice against the eledrly.Presents a list of books to use	Educational Gerontology
16	Gold (2012)	Canada	2012	The use of poetry, ethic reflections and reflections on conversations with students	Social Work Education
17	Mendoza, et al. (2012)	USA	2012	Repoirts on a course -Human Behavior and the Social Environment – where the novel"PUSH" was used	Journal of Teaching in Social Work
18	L. M. Turner (2012)	Australia	2012	Model to increase empathy. 23 students	British Journal of Social Work Advance Access
19	Andrews (2012)	UK	2012	Uses Charles Dickens in lectures on i.e. norms	Social Work

The initial aspect that strikes you upon reading these articles is the shared and deep conviction that reading fiction is something positive; there is unmistakable enthusiasm for both reading and analysis of texts. The authors suggest a number of areas where fiction can be used and the pedagogical examples are numerous. They emphasise the importance of reading to develop a critically reflective social worker who has the capacity for empathy and who also understands the complex character of social work which is often marked by ambivalence and alternative interpretations. Many also argue that fiction sometimes counteracts or complements a one-sided focus on the "hard facts". For example, Rutten et al. (2010) speaks of a reaction against *"the positivist evidence-based paradigm"* and *"a dominant management discourse"* in social work.

The overall impression is therefore, that there is general agreement of, through many interesting and direct experiences, that reading fiction can contribute greatly to educational success.

FIELDS OF APPLICATION

As mentioned earlier, the examples of the areas of application are numerous and this is also the case when reporting on the skills, qualities or abilities that different teaching plans strive to influence. This thematisation aims to present an overall picture.

Theory – Illustrate and apply

To regard, and implement, fictional narratives as a *complement* to the standard textbooks in social science theories is a common theme which is considered by several scholars including C. Tice (1992), Beattie & Randell (1997), Taylor (2008) and Monroe (2006).

An aspect discussed is to *illustrate* theories, i.e. to discover and discuss how theories appear in literary texts. An example of a question that could exemplify this would be: What psychological theories or presuppositions can be seen in the character descriptions in the book - implicitly or explicitly?

Applying the theories is also discussed. Here the ambition is to reduce the gap between the more abstract nature of the theory and the practical skill that social work demands. There is the use of novels as in-depth "case studies" where you can try to link theory to individuals or social problems and concrete action in social work. An example here is Andrews (2012) article in which she refers to the works of Charles Dickens for social analysis. There is a lot to be learnt about social norms and family dynamics from his work, she claims.

To see other people's situation - Knowledge and understanding

Fictional narratives can be the source of *knowledge* about other people's lives while also creating an *understanding* of both the individual's life and a group; the vulnerability and life choices. Beattie & Randell (1997) for example, discuss how to use refugee stories in curriculum subjects. They speak not only of a more knowledge-related aspect but also about things that relate to understanding the emotions and distress experienced by refugees.

Viggiani et al. (2005) believes that fiction brings a personal aspect to the dry facts about human behaviour. The stories are "*alive and intimate*" (p.63) so it is possible to expose the students to the client experiences in a way that is not possible through conventional classroom teaching.

Mazza (1998) writes of poetry's place in training for work with the elderly. He says that using poetry can *illustrate* themes related to aging: loss, transformation, changing relationships. Poetry can also contribute to a greater *understanding of the needs* of the clients, since this requires a degree of emotional depth that is not easy to achieve with more traditional teaching methods.

Developing personal qualities and abilities

All the articles mention, more or less explicitly, what reading fiction can achieve on a more personal level. The examples are many.

Moore (1984) talks about *increasing social workers' awareness of their own feelings* towards dying patients, while Viggiani et al. (2005) found that reading can expose students to more vivid experiences and allow them to experience *emotions in a deeper way*. The authors also believe that

fictional narratives have the ability to stimulate *self-reflection* and to *reduce denial about issues of power and inequality*. Furman (2003) also relates to this and emphasises the ability to explore emotions and *increase one´s self-awareness* through poetry. Collins et al. (2005) go on to show that children's books can be used to explore and approach one´s own spirituality and personal belief system.

A report on a three-year education project at Ohio State University where they used an African-American professor's controversial autobiography, Alexander (2001), emphasizes *the development of critical thinking* (Monroe, 2006). This report presents results that show the teacher's improved ability to work with the material as the project developed and in time how the pedagogy changed and worked better.

Mendoza et al. (2012) also deals with the question of critical thinking.

Gold (2012) too mentions critical thinking and emphasises the importance of developing this ability in specific fields of social work where there might be a lot of uncertainty and ambivalence. She believes that one must learn the value of *humility* and a *not-knowing* position in client relationships (p.760). One may have to abandon the all-knowing "expert role" and instead focus on cooperation.

C. J. Tice et al. (2010) highlight literature's ability to reduce prejudice ("bias") regarding the elderly.

Andrews (2012) proposes that studies of Charles Dickens's life and works can help students to understand their own personal relationship using their "*personal lens*" through which to observe and understand the world and furthermore, the students can apply what Andrews calls "*a professional lens of social work* ".

Several of the authors mention the *development of empathy*. L. M. Turner (2012) presents an interesting pedagogical approach (see below) and Furman (2006) presents exercises related to poetry. Furman, like the other scholars, maintains that the *capacity for ethical reflection* is associated with empathy. Taylor (2008) also discusses how to learn to understand the other's

perspective under the heading *self-reflection*. She uses the Narnia books in order to highlight issues of meaningfulness, spirituality and religion.

Margaret Turner (1991) discusses the ability *to see without turning away; that we can be more responsive, less prone to defence and rationalization*. It is impossible, she claims, to relate *reductively* to oneself and one's peers after having studied King Lear's anguish in Act IV of Shakespeare's play.

Overall, therefore, there is a broad consensus that reading and working with fiction can influence areas of personal development.

Developing linguistic competence

Margaret Turner (1991) claims that scientific language is characterised by abstraction and generalisation and it is based on factors that can be verified, measured and categorised. In relation to individuals, it tends to become dogmatic and reductive, and it is based solely on the cognitive. She also points out the deployment of dehumanising language that characterises social work in many organisations today. Clients are reduced to "consumers", what happens is called a "process", answers are "feedback" and the work is assessed based on "cost-effectiveness". Without directly mentioning it, the reader is able to discern a direct link to leaner organisations characterised by market-liberal thinking. It appears obvious that insensitivity and low empathy can thrive in organisations that are characterised by ordered structure, efficiency thinking, a results-orientated approach and economism; in short, the new age of New Public Management.

Fiction offers counterbalance, resistance and correctness to this way of thinking and speaking, according to Turner.

Human life is complex and the variations are endless and social workers need a language that can reflect this. Poetry and other fiction can help to *enrich language, increase vocabulary* and thus contribute to what may be called "*empathic imagination*" (ibid. p. 235). Empathy cannot exist between people unless it can also be expressed, linguistically. It is not enough to be

understanding; one must be able to provide a suitable and appealing response in words. Language must therefore be "*expressive, personal, evocative and concrete*" (p. 239) and also rich in metaphors and expressions. Turner´s obvious conclusion is that fiction has a lot to contribute.

The pedagogical method follows a similar pattern for all articles:

- selection of literature (by teachers and/or students themselves)

- sometimes focusing on specific aspects of reading texts

- individual reading

- oral and/or written presentation /processing/analysis. Often seminars.

Sometimes, regarding poetry, reading out loud (in the classroom) is combined with their own writing (Furman, 2006).

Linda M. Turner (2012) reports another interesting approach. As a guest lecturer at a university in Australia, she allowed students to choose a book. The only stipulation was that the main character should be someone who was very different to the student. During the seminars the students were to reflect on

- what have they learnt from the main character

- did they have anything in common with the main character

- what it would be like to meet the main character in a professional role of social worker

Turner believes that students learned a great deal about understanding differences and also how to reduce the importance of these in a relationship - we are all relatively similar and despite differences, we basically always have a lot in common.

On the whole, classical pedagogy is centred on student activity and the communication skills the teacher displays during the seminars. The teaching format is based on the teacher being well

versed in current literature and it is certainly an additional advantage if they can master some literature analysis tools.

THE LINK TO EDUCATION PROGRAMMES OR COURSES

It is striking that most of the articles do not touch at all on how the various educational elements are established in training programmes or courses. These appear largely as individual projects that risk being abandoned when the individual (enthusiastic) teacher disappears. Neither is it clear how the organisation is involved; where do the resources come from? Does the management support the project? Are there resolutions and intentions?

One of the articles describes a three-year strategy to use a controversial autobiography in a course, however it does not elaborate on a continuation, whether the strategy is integrated into the syllabus or otherwise integrated into the training activities of the institution (Monroe, 2006). On the other hand, the presentation of the strategy is very well documented and there is an appendix with a study of extensive writing. This appears to indicate that there is good documentation held at the department where they carried out the relevant educational strategy. However, this article is an exception.

CHARACTER, QUALITY AND REFERENCE TO RESEARCH

Quality assessment in research reviews generally aim to strengthen the results by excluding those studies that do not reach the standard previously set out. In this case one can consider the character and quality of the articles, as an interesting result.

The abstracts of the selected articles are very different and on the whole, do not meet with the more stringent requirements expected in abstracts of scientific studies i.e., clarity regarding the purpose, methods, results and conclusions. This has implications regarding the search process which becomes more time consuming. A possible explanation could be that none of the nineteen articles were based on an actual study.

In cases where there is an explicate cohort (students), whose thoughts and opinions are documented or referred to in some way, the data is not reported in full. Most often there is

reference to "discussions" with "students" without any specific details about the students or how and when the discussions were conducted. A prime example is Gold (2012). There is no documentation as to who thought what, which means that the reader does not know if it the cohort can be considered to have "representative" reflections or opinions that the author finds important to highlight. There is just one case where there is a clear record of the number of students who were included; Rutten et al. (2010) mention figure 75, for example, but fails to extrapolate or offer any kind of comment on the "results".

Cnaan (1989) offers a more clear "result" by referring both to course evaluations (very positive) and his own assessment of student performance in a final analysis. Cnaan concludes that the students gained many new insights on a range of socio-political issues, but he encourages some caution when it comes to drawing conclusions from the course's implementation. It was, after all, an educational experiment with an enthusiastic teacher and also it was an elective course for the students. They were only eight in number and furthermore, they were exceptionally interested and ambitious. You would need more information in order to assess the educational benefits, according to Cnaan, but he is still keen to see further development regarding pedagogy to include narrative fiction.

L. M. Turner (2012) thematises 23 student entries in web-based discussion forums; these were rated solely by checking that they had uploaded a certain number of posts. Exactly how Turner selected what the student wrote in their accounts is not clear; thematisation was based on the teacher's questions that in turn guided the discussions. (See section: Pedagogic plan.)

Monroe (2006) is an example of how to combine an unidentified cohort study (unknown number of students in a "course") with distinct percentages:*"… over 90 % of the students made very strong comments about white privilege in their final papers…"* (p. 226). This comment is undeniably rather strange.

Sometimes the students are fictional, as in the case Beattie and Randell (1997), who describe a pedagogical approach regarding different ways to use refugee stories. They talk about how the different parts *purport* to relate to the students, but without reference to any "real" students.

The reason for the vague accounts of cohorts or "data collection" and "results" is certainly due to the fact that the authors see their contribution not as a regular study but more of a report or discussion paper on one or more educational element, intended or completed. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the strength of argument suffers markedly when one cannot rely on studies conducted in the tradition of good research.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a great deal of psychological experimental research that suggests that reading fiction can have a positive effect on empathy, for example. Since the articles examined in this study cannot be regarded as academic research, one might think that the references cited would be both reasonable and appropriate to strengthen their own exposé.

Only a handful of the nineteen articles provide clear references sources: L. M. Turner (2012) and Viggiani et al. (2005). The latter initially has at the form of a literature review. One reason which might clarify this situation is that none of the articles really set out to check any "outcome" of reading fiction, for example, an increased empathy which could be measured with any internationally recognized and validated instrument. Instead, they illustrate various applications where the "outcome" might possibly be recognized in the form of grades in exams, more specifically for example, how well the student can extrapolate a theory linked to a novel in a written or verbal statement. However, no such outcomes were reported in any of the articles (e.g., proportion of students who received the highest ratings or the like). Only examples of the student answers are reported, which in itself is interesting, but it provides no research of scientific stature. Cnaan (1989), as mentioned previously, is in exception since he alone expresses caution in drawing conclusions about his report through the usual scientific

reasoning, e.g, "selection bias." Students took the course as a separate option, and it was easy to see that they had a particular interest in fiction.

It should probably also be said that much of the psychological research is relatively recent, and nine of the nineteen articles in this study were written before 2006.

Discussion

It has been both worrying and exciting to read all these articles. A cause for concern is that the arguments are rarely established as studies of scientific stature. This includes the experiences illustrated; they are indeed clearly conveyed, yet highly personal and individual. The fact that they did not study their own disciplines using more stringent scientific methods is undeniably a major flaw and probably contributes to the fact that the status of fiction in education seems to be weak. This is a conclusion to be drawn from this research. No matter how favourably the introduction of novels and poetry is acclaimed to be, there is no strong support for it in organisations and in educational programmes.

Not a single article included in this review has been uncertain about the positive effect of reading fiction. The critics might attribute this apparent unity as a kind[6] of "publication bias" i.e. it is only the authors who are positive that write the texts that get published (Booth, Papaioannou, & Sutton, 2012; Gough et al., 2012). Of course, this eventuality also strengthens the need for more comprehensive studies. Whether there is additional publication bias, e.g., that more critical articles or comprehensive studies will not be published even though they were submitted, or not, is beyond my ability to judge. This research review has focused on international journals and has not looked at grey or other literature.

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[6] I choose to express this as "a kind of" because the term "publication bias" is mostly associated with quantitative data: "... Statistically significant 'positive' research results ..." as Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2012, p.111) write. But the analogy seems to me reasonable.

As I stated earlier, it is exciting to read the articles and this is because the authors show such enthusiasm and conviction when it comes to the beneficial effects of reading fiction in social work education. They provide many good and interesting examples of pedagogical features and they vividly discuss the reactions of individual students. There is no doubt that these scholars have both practical and intuitive experience that reading has influenced the students in many positive ways.

Margaret Turner's (1991) discussion on linguistic competence is very impressive. While not claiming direct links to linguistic research, her text is still strongly grounded in linguistics. It appears to be irrefutable that reading fiction strengthens vocabulary and provides greater linguistic diversity. Margaret Turner presents a clear and logical argument for the need for a rich and literary language in social work, a language and linguistic diversity that enhances the ability to describe life and portray human complexity. Although her work is over twenty years old it appears surprisingly contemporary. Another conclusion to be drawn from this is that when choosing standard text books greater notice should be paid to the linguistic aspects. Textbooks are after all different, and even some dissertations might have minor literary qualities. However, obviously this cannot be compared to the ability and capacity of fiction to animate people and their lives.

As mentioned earlier, and this is borne out by the articles in this study, reading fiction really does not have a strong position in the training and education of social workers. Given the knowledge that there is unanimous consensus as to the advantages of reading fiction, this might seem strange. However, a full assessment of this question would require a completely different kind of investigation.

It is clear however, that a premise of the systematic use of fiction in educational programs is that there are clear learning objectives in courses as well as mandatory reading containing fictional narratives. Educational elements must not be too dependent on the interests of individual teachers but rather, they must be fundamental for the entire teaching group. That of

course means that teachers themselves need to read fiction and furthermore that the organisation should encourage or even reward such reading. Lunchtime book clubs have become a common feature in many workplaces and surely there are many other ways to strengthening the position of fiction.

If reading novels and poetry collections is to be effective, then work needs to be done to establish thematic lists tailored to courses and disciplines. Expanding the selection of texts should also be considered. Perhaps music lyrics, hip-hop and the like can also be used. Which novels which can function as "case studies"? What texts give a picture of the welfare state and its downsides? Are there texts that illustrate specific theoretical concepts? Cnaan (1989) suggests such a list in which he groups the novels based on social policy issues, including racism, poverty, sexism and mental health. A similar list has also been compiled by C. J. Tice et al. (2010) based on work with the elderly.

This research review has discovered a significant need for comprehensive studies into the importance of reading fiction in social work education. Perhaps there is a need for more "hard facts" of various kinds to make an impact for more systematic implementation. There are validated instruments to measure emotions such as empathic growth and sense of coherence.

However, linguistic competence is probably the easiest to work with, and possibly even the most important. Margaret Turner's argument has emerged as perhaps the strongest element and argument for fiction in education in this research when she describes the need for a language, a vehicle if you like, for social work which would enable practitioners to capture the spirit of life and portray human complexity.

Without doubt it can be relatively easy to evaluate increased vocabulary. At universities in general there is great concern over the students' language skills. Implementing reading fiction could address this issue if translated into easy and practical ways of measuring skills development. Certainly no one would dispute the importance of a rich, comprehensive language for professional social work.

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