Reading to Make the World a Better Place? Critical Literacy and Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract *The article explores the role of literature in advancing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), examining its potential to enhance understanding of global challenges and to foster transformative action. After the framework of ESD is outlined, UNESCO's SDG Book Club initiative is taken as a starting point for an analysis of the opportunities, challenges and limitations of reading literature for sustainability education. The authors suggest critical literacy as a way of reading with and against texts, and the approach of critical literary conversations that encourages learners to engage in democratic discourse.*

Keywords *education for sustainable development; transformative reading; children's and young adult literature; critical literacy; dialogue*

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has developed historically from environmental education and has become an overarching concept of transformative education that describes a cross-cutting objective for all subjects and all stages (Wanning 2019, 300ff.). Its goal is to promote a globally just, ecologically sound and economically viable development that meets the needs of both present and future generations. ESD raises awareness of complex global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, inequality and digitalisation, teaches skills to actively address these challenges and make responsible decisions for a sustainable future. Learners should consider their actions in a global context, be encouraged to reflect on their own values and attitudes, and deal with uncertainties, conflicting goals and crises. They do so to actively participate in sustainable design processes and develop creative and innovative solutions. The concept of ESD thus integrates three central principles: global perspectives, an interdisciplinary approach and transformation (see Wanning 2019 on the historical development and the in-

terconnectedness of these principles). As challenges such as democratisation, environmental protection, economic prosperity and social justice are considered in their global interdependence, sustainable development requires thinking beyond (national) borders. To this end, knowledge and theories from different subject areas are integrated to grasp the complex interactions between agents, systems and processes. In addition to imparting knowledge, ESD is about promoting skills and encouraging people to engage in problem-solving, critical thinking, changing perspectives, teamwork and participation at all levels of action – micro, meso and macro (KMK and BMZ 2016, 35–53).

Development and establishment

The concept of Education for Sustainable Development originated in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, where education was identified as a key to solving global challenges. It is based on the guiding idea of sustainable development, as formulated in the Brundtland Report (1987), and was globally embodied in the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – in particular Goal 4.7, which promotes quality education as the foundation (see BMBF and UNESCO for comprehensive introductions) – adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 (UNGA 2015).

UNESCO had already launched the UN World Decade (2005–2014), followed by the Global Action Programme (2015–2019), which promoted the structural implementation of ESD worldwide. In Germany, the National Action Plan for ESD was adopted in 2017, which further integrates it into educational institutions with 130 goals and 349 recommendations for action (BMBF 2017; on the evolution of the concept KMK and BMZ 2016, 26–33). In a UNESCO and Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace (MGIEP) guidebook[1] from 2017 all school subjects are called upon to contribute not only to their subject-specific content but also to a more social, ecological and peaceful world by promoting knowledge-based skills, values and attitudes towards sustainability.

The embedding of ESD in curricula, materials and training is advanced by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The 2007/2016 "Curriculum Framework Education for Sustainable Development" serves as an important basis for this goal. Here the core competencies to be achieved in education are conceptualised as *recognising*, *assessing* and *acting*. Complementarily, topic areas in learning contexts have been set to reflect the complexity of ESD's

1 The guidebook is targeted to "stakeholders in textbook development – education ministries, national curriculum authorities, textbook writers and publishers" (2017, 5).

guiding principles, take up globalisation and global development processes, and enable a personal connection and a global worldview at the same time (KMK/BMZ 2016, 86–97; KMK 2024).

The challenges of ambitious objectives

As emphasised above, UNESCO assigns a central role to education in implementing the programme: "Sustainable development requires changes in the way we think and act. Education plays a crucial role in bringing about this change" (UNGA 2014). It is assumed, according to Hoiß, that education can be an essential mediator of desirable attitudes, mindsets, values and also behaviours and is therefore extremely suitable as a means of implementing and enforcing political goals (2019, 33–34). The task that the political sphere is placing in the lap of education is an enormous one. Not least because the range of topics and global issues that ESD has to address is so diverse and complex (36). Teachers have consequently been identified as "change agents" (Wanning 2019, 309; Hoiß 2019, 21–22). The ESD programme thus formulates high expectations that not only call on institutions from politics, economy and society, but also on individuals to recognise and use their possibilities for action (Hoiß 2019, 33–34).

Hoiß points out that the idea of achieving ESD through cognitive-reflective educational programmes alone seems still widespread and criticises them as insufficient (2019, 90). In this context, it should be acknowledged that there is a substantial disparity between environmental knowledge and environmental action that Lawrence Buell has described already in 1995 with the term *environmental doublethink* (1995, 4).[2] This phenomenon can be seen as an example of the wider fundamental challenge that an increase in knowledge about global problems does not necessarily lead to a change in attitudes and active participation in solutions (Wanning 2023; Wanning 2019, 295–296; Niebert 2019). Reflecting a strong cognitive orientation, research has been increasingly emphasising the high relevance of emotional and aesthetic approaches, along with the importance of autonomy and dialogue (Hoiß 2019, 90; see also Wanning 2019, 308 on the newer take of connecting ESD more with empathy and emotion).

2 Niebert (2019) concludes from first studies on the impact of sustainability education that they "mainly confirm a positive cognitive effect" but show "that neither students' attitudes nor their behaviour and associated values are significantly affected by school programs for sustainability." And while adults in Europe show "a high level of environmental consciousness", "there is no – in the worst case even a negative – correlation between pro-environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behaviour. People with a high level of environmental awareness do not necessarily have a good personal ecological balance sheet." (ibid.)

With reference to the educational scientist Sascha Zinn (2013), Hoiß raises the issue of tension between individual learners' autonomy and the presetting of strong normative goals in terms of attitudes and actions. Education should enable autonomy and reflection without reducing learners to predetermined goals even those such as sustainable behaviour (see also Drerup 2021, 128). This, we argue, applies all the more with regard to the prohibition of indoctrination and the importance of democratic debate – didactic principles for political learning contexts defined in the 1970s in the "Beutelsbacher Konsens" (Wehling 1977). While, for example, the findings on climate change and the necessity of sustainability are not in dispute from a scientific perspective, the questions of which political assessments and actual responses are to be drawn from this remain legitimately controversial (Drerup 2021, 127–130). It seems possible to think of education and sustainability together only if the development of a sustainability ethos in the individual is thought of as an act of self-constitution. A credible ESD therefore requires transparency regarding the ethical foundations of the educational programme and their discursive negotiation (Hoiß 2019, 89–90). Dialogue, Zinn argues, is crucial, because experiencing plurality and difference enables people to make choices, which are a prerequisite for responsible action (2013, 369f.). Kurbacher (2008, 7), arguing from a philosophical point of view, states that the possibility of making a reflective judgment on what affects us and matters to us entails the freedom that is necessary to assume responsibility. Thus, educational processes must meet the claim of openness to the future (Anselm and Antony 2023, 225–228).

Reading literature for sustainable development

UNESCO (2014) has highlighted the productive relationship of literacy to sustainable development with the goal to facilitate change. Educators are advised "to use literature to enable learners to make informed decisions and take action as responsible global citizens" (UNESCO 2017, 172). The SDG Book Club initiative can be understood in this context.

The SDG Book Clubs

The SDG Book Club initiative was launched in 2019 by the UN in collaboration with various international organisations, including the International Publishers Association (IPA) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Aimed at children aged 6 to 12, the club promotes reading and encourages young readers to explore the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through a curated selection of books from around the world. Book lists corresponding to the

17 SDGs, selected by a committee of experts, were released in six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish; UN 2023). The UN invites communities to organise local book club meetings, providing compact technical guidance on how to do so on their website.

While there is neither comprehensive information on the criteria for book selection nor an outline of the didactic concepts the book clubs are supposed to be grounded on, the "Reading List Catalogue" gives some insight into conceptual ideas. Under the slogan "Join Read Act" the book club's goal is described as to

> take [the readers] on a journey around the world while they learn to see poverty, pollution and inequality through the eyes of their favourite characters. The stories will encourage them to take concrete actions to help others and make the world a better place for all. (UN 2023, 204)

In his foreword to the October 2023 Reading List Catalogue, Maher Nasser, Director of the Outreach Division in the UN Department for Global Communications formulates that the UN is

> excited to showcase stories from around the world that will fuel the imagination, trigger curiosity and raise awareness of new possibilities. Reading and learning are essential to children's growth and development, and the SDG Book Club reading lists aim to help them realize options others have taken to overcome challenges and to learn about the core purpose of the SDGs through age-appropriate stories and inspire them to make a difference where and when they can. (UN 2023, 2)

Literature is seen as a means to recognise new perspectives and learn about struggles and actions taken by others. Readers might develop empathy with relatable characters which are showcasing local possibilities and solutions for diverse global challenges, motivating them to make a difference which should ultimately lead to real-world impact.

On the website UNESCO offers a small sample of "actions that you can take beyond just reading the books" among which are common action- and production-oriented methods like creating a poster about a character or organising a reading scavenger hunt (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sdgbookclub/). One recommended idea connects to the political sphere in a narrower sense: "Help your kids write a letter to the local government representative and tell them what you learned in the book and ask them what action(s) they are taking toward a specific Goal".

Additionally, the initiative encourages sharing the experiences and products online through social media:

> Reading is a great way to better understand what people from across the globe struggle with in their everyday lives, and it helps us reflect on our own situation. But reading is just the first step: now it's time to share your book club experiences and how you plan to take action. (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sdgbookclub/)

While the idea of Book Clubs world wide that foster sustainable development is very appealing, the didactic concepts and the methodical implementation with regard to reading literature for sustainable development could be explored more thoroughly. Therefore, we will refer to the aforementioned UNESCO guidebook and elaborate on didactic research in this context.

Didactic perspectives on reading for sustainable development

With a focus on implementation, Wanning (2019) argues that it is becoming apparent that ESD teaching in the language and literature classrooms in particular is making a significant contribution in line with UNESCO's call for a global citizenship education. Literary didactic research explores the role of literature in ESD emphasising its diverse potentials to foster cognitive, emotional and action-oriented competencies that are necessary for sustainable development (Grimm and Wanning 2021). In the UNESCO guide for textbooks, written for a professional audience that is concerned with the creation of educational materials for different subjects, it is claimed that

> students can learn, through literature, to identify multiple perspectives on a subject as well as the perspectives and values needed for a sustainable world. Moreover, students can learn to develop empathy – to 'walk in another's shoes' – a necessary ability if human beings are to live well with each other, to respect and care for each other and the planet. Literature can be used in language textbooks to deepen students' understanding of their world and, in particular, the values needed to preserve it. (UNESCO 2017, 172)

As an understanding of local struggles in global developments is a fundamental goal, it is initially relevant that, according to Abraham (2021), literature, like any text, processes existing world knowledge it conveys and "sometimes represents knowledge that is or was unavailable in other ways" (38–39; see also Wanning 2023). Literary texts also allow readers to see the world from perspectives that they would otherwise not have access to (– including that of animals; see in this volume Castellanos and Wild on whales). For instance, there are many examples of children's literature that imparts factual knowledge about nature, environmental problems and inter-

relationships through characters and settings that represent endangered habitats (Wanning 2023). Texts may introduce perspectives, environments and developments that initially seem alien, far removed from the learners' knowledge and experience (see Kruse and Kanning 2023, 27). An expanded canon can include narratives "with a sustainability/environmental focus" which allow students "to explore themes in a holistic way so they are able to recognise the connections between the social, the economic, the political and the environmental" (UNESCO 2017, 173) as well as texts from around the globe that deal with multiple regional experiences, thus challenging abstract, generalising and possibly derogatory notions of the "Global South" (see Wintersteiner 2019 below).

At the same time, literature provides a comprehensible space of possibility in which young readers can discover, try out and reflect on options for action aiming for a sustainable future (Sippl 2020; Grimm and Wanning 2021):

> The literary text presents an imagined scenario and thus provides a playground for fictional action. The reader enters into the story and crosses the boundaries of their own lived experience without having to take any risks themselves. In their imagination, readers act out what is beyond their actual experience. Reading takes them into a state of 'trial action'; guided by the hand of a literary character, with whose identity they merge in various ways in the act of reading, they are in the middle of the book's events and at the same time with themselves. (Bertschi-Kaufmann 2000, 24)

Literature oscillates between imposition and encouragement when it opens a space for experiences that challenges readers to position themselves, but the aesthetic distance relieves them of immediate responsibility for their actions (Anselm and Antony 2023, 230, 237).

Literary works may also foster a closer connection between cognitive and emotional processes (Grimm and Wanning 2021). They open up imaginative spaces in which global issues can be experienced on a more personal level. This makes it easier to understand complex topics such as climate change or poverty not only rationally, but also emotionally thereby becoming more attentive. Empathy as a key competence can be strengthened: literary texts invite emotional bonds by allowing readers to identify with characters. This makes it possible to establish an affective connection between personal lives and global challenges, between one's own situation and feelings and those of others as well as animals (Wanning 2023; UNESCO 2017, 175).

When it comes to the application, as outlined in the recommendations of the SDG Book Club for example, Sippl (2020) points out the parallels to the action and production orientation of literary didactics (Spinner 2013). Action-oriented methods – students design posters, write letters, develop role plays or organise discussions – promote active engagement with texts: students should not only respond to

them in a receptive way, but also produce their own (creative) responses to them (Spinner 2013, 319). The creative and participatory tasks, combining text analysis with actual challenges which stimulate reflection and encourage activity, create a link between theory and practice that is supposed to support transformative educational processes and inspire genuine behavioural change (Sippl 2020).

While all of the above approaches can make a plausible contribution to ESD, the action- and production-oriented methods also with regard to acting, the question remains, what else literature classes could contribute to ESD in a subject-specific way: It cannot be a narrow skill-based approach, precisely because overarching educational goals are at stake. Using literature only as a thematic source does not correspond to its aesthetic potential. This also applies to using literature to initiate political activism which anyway could not be justified if it was dictated or if a situation arose in which social pressure demanded participation. What we are looking for are learning arrangements that meet subject-specific goals and ESD goals that can be systematically aimed at even in the narrow curricular and temporal constraints of the classroom. We argue that with regard to ESD literature classes can and should contribute to the development of critical literacy as a specific goal that also addresses the broader goal. In order to provide an approach that responds to the challenges identified above, we propose a didactic model of critical literature reading developed by Sander (2024) for sustainable education and the idea of participation in dialogue. The model is based on two approaches to political (literary) didactics: research on Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and critical literacy research. It understands critical reading as an actualisation of relations between reader, text and world with and against the text and within the backdrop of the core democratic principles of freedom, equality and solidarity in a global decolonial perspective (see Fig. 1; Sander 2024; Sander and Jäger 2024). Critical literary conversations are suggested as a way to implement critical literacy in the literature classroom to promote democratic discourse.

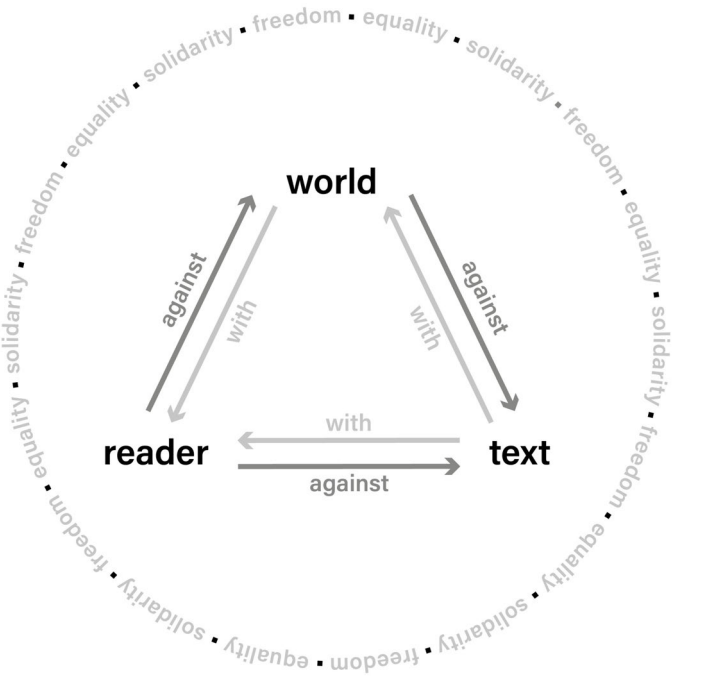
Critical literacy as reading with and against texts

It is a broadly shared assumption, that literary reading is a privileged field of (critical) self- and world-experience. Literature, according to Wintersteiner, slows down our perception and can make it easier to see through things, processes, structures and behaviors that we have previously regarded as natural, in their contrived and relative nature, in short – to recognise the world as changeable (Wintersteiner 2019, 493).

Both literature and reading processes, it is assumed, can explore alternatives, expand spaces of imagination, and make power and inequality, dominance and injustice perceptible and negotiable. But, just as they are able to question existing re-

lationships to the self and the world and to create perspectives of alternative possibilities, they can also be problematic, discriminatory and hurtful. With regard to the teaching of critical literary reading we see it as productive to think of the respective focus of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and critical literacy together as reading with and against the text (see also Janks 2019)[3].

Fig. 1: Didactic model of critical literary reading



Source: author, first published in German in Sander 2024, 187

In this way, critical literacy can be understood as a disposition and ability – "a way of being and doing" (Vasquez, Janks and Comber 2019, 300) – to realise relations,

3 Even though the formulation is not new (see Janks 2019), the didactic model we work with focusses more explicitly the reading with the text as critique. In critical literacy theory, a reading with the text seems generally to be conceptualised as understanding. Janks (2018, 96), for example, writes "Ideal readers read with the text; critical readers read against the text." Also in Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP), reading with the text is assigned to "familiar approaches" and "traditional standards" of reading contexts (Borsheim-Black/Macaluso/Petrone 2014, 124).

- on the one hand, to adopt the perspective(s) of the text and, on the basis of literary constructions – i.e. with the text – to examine and disrupt certainties and to reflect on conditions, alternatives and thus possibilities of change of self and world, and
- on the other hand, to scrutinise texts as a whole, aesthetic forms, characters, their socio-political environments, also authors and their contexts on the basis of own and others' experiences and knowledge (Sander 2024, 194–195; Sander, Jäger and Wild 2024, 150).

Critical literacy in the context of sustainability education takes place in relations between reader, text and world (Fig. 1). These relations are realised with and against the text, since the objective is both: the use of the potentials that literary texts and their readings offer in their specific quality and effect for self-criticism and critique of the world and the deconstruction of power relations that are embodied in literature (ibid.).

On the potential of reading with the text

Literary works of art can encourage a critical examination of globalisation processes and how learners can relate themselves and their lives to local and global challenges, critically question themselves, open new perspectives and develop ideas of what is not, but could be. Global Citizenship Education asks learners to focus on the global in the here and now and "encourages students to develop a critical understanding of globalisation, to reflect on how they and their nations are involved in local and global issues, and to explore intercultural perspectives" (Pashby 2012, 9 cited in Wintersteiner 2019).

A focus can be on the role of literature in the acquisition and negotiation of values and responsibility (Sippl 2020; Anselm 2021). Literary texts can express and convey core global values like sustainability and social justice, raise environmental awareness, showcase a sustainable way of life or promote ethical reflection, for example by exploring the discrepancy between norms and reality, which is particularly relevant in the context of ESD. Through identification with certain characters, their attitudes and behaviour, values might be taken up, and a disposition be created to question existing patterns of thought and perception as well as values (Kruse and Kanning 2023; Grimm and Wanning 2021; Anselm and Antony 2023, 237).

In addition, literary texts are thought to encourage sustainable behaviour (Wanning 2023). The conative dimension of literary reception highlights the reader's disposition and intention to become active, which is based on motivation. Texts may offer literary role models, who actively address global problems, for imitation and thereby foster motivation to take action. Literature may also foster an understand-

ing of "futures as a variety of alternatives" (Bianchi et al. 2022, 23 cited in Sippl 2023, 125). So positive alternative (future) scenarios might provide an incentive for a sustainable behaviour (Sippl 2020). While futures literacy can be understood as a collaborative form of participation in the discourse of performing future design (Anselm and Antony 2023, 228), Sippl (2023, 219) argues more far-reaching that in the interplay between aesthetics and knowledge, future narratives emerge that lead from the formation of ideas to the "doing future" (Assmann 2022) of imagined futures.

Kruse and Kanning (2023) point out that the effects of children's literature are difficult to measure empirically. Changes in perception and behaviour and social transformation can hardly be attributed directly to reading. The effects are often subtle, individually different and long-term. It remains unclear, for example, whether a particular action – such as empathic interaction with others – actually results from a literary encounter or is due to other factors. At the same time, there is strong confidence in the impact of literature, which is based on its functions of individuation, socialisation and enculturation that have been thoroughly examined in literary didactics (Abraham and Kepser 2016, 26f.).

On the importance of also reading against texts

In addition to the preceding considerations, the basic assumption of critical literacy research that texts "are never neutral" (Vasquez, Janks and Comber 2019) must be taken into account. A literary text always represents a (selection of) perspective(s). Also in literature – broadly understood – there are possibly distortions, questionable and potentially harmful representations. In response to this diagnosis, critical literacy focuses analysis on power relations and aims to empower learners to understand and question the systems in which we live, and to make the world a more just place. Readers should learn to deconstruct texts and, in their critical engagement with (not only) literature and other media ask, whose stories are told and how, and whose stories are not told, and what interests a text might serve (Sandretto in this volume; see Sandretto and Klenner 2011 for a comprehensive introduction). The question is also raised as to how texts, images and practices can be revised, rewritten and (re)constructed to formulate different and more socially just messages that have an impact on people and their lives (Low et al. 2021, 311ff.; Vasquez, Janks and Comber 2019, 302). Guiding questions and criteria serve to support readers by directing their attention to the analysis of the text under aspects such as inclusion and exclusion, representations, multiple readings, power and interest, context, influence and author (Sandretto and Klenner 2011, 69ff.; Janks 2019, 561). Then characters and their socio-political environments, as well as authors and their contexts might be called into question based on their own and others' experiences and knowledge. The values on offer can be negotiated and might be opposed.

For learning settings that focus on reading against texts, a "reading against the grain" is suggested, which aims to develop "resistant readings" as strategies that "scrutinize the beliefs and attitudes that typically go unexamined in a text, drawing attention to the gaps, silences and contradictions" and "adds the experiences of less represented individuals and groups into the textual discourse" (Southern Poverty Law Center). Suggesting another approach, Wintersteiner (2023) points to Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading", which allows to unfold colonial and hegemonic structures within (canonical) texts and to develop alternative readings. To reveal that history is always polyphonic but often told from (only) one perspective, different works may be read alongside each other: "The imperialist power imbalance that silences the voices of the colonized is attempted to be reversed by placing the voices side by side on an equal footing" (Gatzweiler 2014) which is a fundamental goal in ESD when it comes to the representation of global developments and the discussion of possible solutions. Contrapuntal reading can also involve reading a text

> with an awareness of the simultaneity of the imperial experience on both sides of the empire [...] continuously undertaking a change of perspective, an inner movement, so to speak, to take into account the different points of view. This enables one to grasp the text and its narratives in a completely different way, especially that which is often silenced and forgotten from an imperialist perspective: the experience of the colonized (ibid.).

Critical literacy as participation in dialogue

For literature and reading education we would like to specify with a somewhat humble approach Niebert's (2019) claim that "effective sustainability education is political education": The realization of relations between reader, text, and world with and against the text can be understood as political participation in a constant struggle for democracy – not only as an existing system but as an ideal measured against global standards for a peaceful, just, and democratic world society (Wintersteiner 2014, 13). Drawing on interdisciplinary research, democratic theory identifies democracy's core principles – freedom, equality, and solidarity – as subjects of continuous negotiation in both formal politics and everyday life (Rajal, Maier and Landkammer 2020, 11–14; Marchart 2020, 23–25). Participation, from this perspective, extends beyond institutional mechanisms to encompass social interactions, including those in digital spaces and smaller communities. This broad view of participation highlights the growing influence of active citizens in shaping democracy – "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1930, 101). Through critical reading and discussion of literature in learning contexts students engage

with democratic values by negotiating their meaning in relation to themselves and society (Sander, Jäger and Wild 2024).

The goal of critical engagement through dialogue with and about literature is for learners to experience reading and the political as something vital and meaningful (Wintersteiner 2019c, 8). Critical literacy practices with and against the text can create space for experiencing critique, despite all the challenges,[4] as an important and attractive task in the construction of democratic perspectives (Sander 2024). Developing critical literacy skills requires texts and characters with whom and about whom one can argue. It requires students who are willing to share their perspectives on a literary text and the political and to engage with other perspectives. It requires a setting and a teacher that promotes democratic debate.

Research on conversation-based literature teaching has emphasised the possibility of individual empowerment and social impact but offered only few ideas for a critical-participatory approach to literature in a political sense (Sander and Alt 2025). Critical literary conversations may offer just that. Dialogic Literary Gatherings (Flecha et al. 2024) and the Heidelberg Model of Literary Conversation (Steinbrenner and Wiprächtiger-Geppert 2010) are proposed here as a starting point for their conceptualisation – an open format that enables the exchange of reading experiences and interpretations without striving for fixed results. It emphasises a balance between self-refence, text reference, and the acknowledgement of others' perspectives. The teacher as a participating leader facilitates the discussion by providing impulses and contexts, setting boundaries to protect where necessary, and encouraging reflection on values. In the long term, students should take over the role of discussion leader in order to anchor participation as a goal and method.

Wintersteiner (2020) has already expanded the Heidelberg model to include a transcultural perspective emphasising the importance of conflict and how to deal with otherness and ambiguity. Critical literary conversations, which continue this line of thought, foster discussions about values such as freedom, equality and solidarity, as well as promote the practice of tolerating openness and dissent. Students engage in democratic debate when they interact with the text, exchange their perspectives and engage with different viewpoints. In such a setting, the text as a whole, along with its characters and other elements, serve as a counterpart, as a partner or as an opponent to the collective of learners. It can incorporate the perspectives of the

4 Grappling with core values is a challenging task for everyone involved, and conflicts can always pose a risk. In addition, McKenzie and Jarvie (2018, 298) have pointed out that critical literacy practices ask "readers to take up a detective-like orientation to literature, treating texts as suspects" and might "promote a specific set of affective orientations towards a text, asking readers to cultivate scepticism and vigilance". One can confidently object that "critical literacy is essential for citizenship" (Mackey 1993, 69) but must acknowledge the tension that can arise with regard to the general goal of promoting reading.

absent (Arendt 2012, 342), thereby enabling a broad range of (self-)reflective insights and democratic negotiation processes (see on critical literary conversations Sander, Jäger and Wild 2024; Alt and Sander 2025, Sander and Alt 2025).

Concluding remarks

Literature may provide (new and otherwise unavailable) knowledge and perspectives, relate them to emotions, convey values, encourage reflection and even create a disposition to act. Reading literary texts thus ideally makes an indispensable contribution to sustainable transformation. At the same time, texts are never neutral, present limited perspectives and may convey distortions, questionable and potentially harmful representations.

To promote reading literature to make the world a better place, we need to aim for critical literacy in learning contexts. Therefore, we suggest a didactic model of critical participatory reading that emphasises reading with and against texts in the form of reflections on self, text and world against the backdrop of the core principles of freedom, equality and solidarity (see Fig. 1 above). Critical literary conversations which we have referred to can be thought of as spaces of possibility for participation in the endless task of shaping social orders under conditions of uncertainty (Flügel-Martinsen 2020, 106).

When promoting critical literacy in the context of ESD, the focus is on texts that enable students to negotiate core democratic values, hold polyvalence and offer different perspectives. In this way, they provide a wide range of possibilities for reflection by addressing crucial developments and global challenges. It is vital to learn from Global Citizenship Education that literary canons need to be expanded or rewritten so they include narratives from all over the world that deal with multiple regional experiences – past and present: Literature from the "Global South" or generally texts without direct reference to European literature not only bring new content, different role models and world views to the literature classroom, but also alternative narrative styles. This challenges conventional concepts of literacy and creates space for irritation and discussion (Wintersteiner 2023, 65).

It is evidently relevant that books like Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987) travel (see Vogel, Bläsi and Kölling in this volume). In the context of book selection, youth book publishers are said to also have the potential to act as agents of change (Vogel 2024). There are also numerous catalogues that recommend books to read like the *Kolibri* list from *Baobab Books*, a charitable association that suggests "books for children and youths, which give an insight into unknown worlds" and can be "the beginning of a dialogue" (https://www.baobabbooks.ch/en/kolibri).

It stands to reason that texts should matter to students (Kämper-van den Boogaart and Hamelmann 2013) and match their reading skills, so they have suffi-

cient capacities to engage in discourse. The political experiences and the knowledge that the selected texts evoke need to be relatable to learners. When the stories are relevant and accessible to readers, they also serve to build a positive reading self-concept, promote reading skills and foster literary learning which lays the foundation for any form of participation in a globalised world. For all the importance of critical reading, due emphasis should therefore also be placed on identificatory reading (Anselm and Antony 2023, 244).

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