The story, the self, the other

Developing insight into human nature in the literature classroom

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> *Books challenge and interrogate;*
> *they give us windows into the lives of others*
> *and mirrors so that we can better see ourselves.*
>
> – John Green

1   AIM AND SCOPE

Ever since ancient times, mankind faces questions about self and others: who are we, and how do we relate to other people? Where are the boundaries between "us" and "them"? Peeking through a window into the lives of others or taking a look in the mirror to face ourselves may add to our understanding of what it means to be human. Reflecting on how we position ourselves in relation to others in the world may be particularly important in view of fundamental developments of the past few decades, including globalization, migration, and responses thereto, ranging from tolerance to bigotry. Education has often been considered a place where people may learn to reflect on their own nature as well as the nature of others (Biesta, 2007; Nussbaum, 1997; 2010), as is illustrated by particular approaches to teaching and learning, such as social and emotional education (Elias et al., 1997), citizenship education (Derricott, 2014), and moral and character education (Nucci, Krettenauer, & Narváez, 2014).

The literature classroom pre-eminently offers a space of opportunity for adolescents to develop insight into ourselves and others. As John Green (2016) suggested, reading fictional and literary texts – novels, stories, poems – may offer us such insights. When we read, we are temporarily drawn into a simulated social world, in which we can safely experience what it would be like to be in situations that may either resemble or be very different from situations in our own lives (Mar & Oatley, 2008). This experience is considered to be "transformative": it may change our insight into ourselves and into ourselves in relation to

others (Fialho, 2012). In this dissertation, we define this insight in a broad sense: we understand it as insight into *human nature*, which may include insight into our own previously unrecognized qualities or shortcomings, insight into self-other relations, understandings of and altered attitudes toward individual others and groups of people, and considerations of difficulties or moral dilemmas that people may face. Reading fictional or literary texts may result in gaining such insights, for adults, adolescents and younger children alike, (e.g., Fialho, 2018; Fialho, Hakemulder, & Bal, 2016; Lysaker, Tonge, Gauson, & Miller, 2011; Richardson & Eccles, 2007).

We focus in this dissertation on literature classrooms in upper secondary education in the Netherlands. The Dutch literature curriculum is not subject to any nation-wide regulations: schools and teachers have much freedom in deciding on reading lists, instructional approaches, and examinations. Formal literature education starts at the beginning of upper secondary education, in grade 10, when students are about 15 years old. Up to 9th grade, students usually are stimulated to read children's and young adult literature, but from 10th grade onwards their teachers mostly expect them to read increasingly complex literary texts intended for adult readers. Students work toward three global objectives that are addressed in the final examinations: acquiring literary-historical knowledge, applying structural-analytical skills, and reflecting on their own literary reading experiences and development (Dutch Institute for Curriculum Development, 2012). Although the third objective can be considered a form of self-development, this dissertation goes beyond the concept of the self as a literary reader: it considers the self as a whole, in continued social interaction with others. As such, developing insight into human nature is not explicitly included in the global objectives for literature education in upper secondary education in the Netherlands. Moreover, in most schools, literature education does not have the status of a separate school subject. Usually, it is considered to be a subdomain of Dutch language teaching, like writing, grammar, and vocabulary. In upper secondary education (grade 10-12), a relatively small amount of time is devoted to literary instruction: of about 155 minutes of Dutch language teaching per week, students receive on average 35 to 40 minutes of literary instruction (Oberon, 2016).

Despite its implicitness in the global objectives for literature teaching and the time constraints teachers face, insight into human nature seems to be valued as a potential outcome of literary instruction by teachers as well as policy makers in the Netherlands. For example, teachers reported in previous studies that they consider personal development – including identification, empathy for others, and learning about yourself and the world – to be an important ob-

jective of literature teaching (Janssen, 1998; Oberon, 2016). Likewise, after the Dutch Ministry of Education announced a curricular reform, to be implemented in 2021, teachers in the curriculum development team for Dutch language and literature stated that literary reading familiarizes students with other worlds, contributes to moral development, and helps them to think about "why people make particular choices, and about themselves, the other and the world" (Curriculum.nu, 2018a, p. 4, translation *MS*). Along the same lines, the Dutch Institute for Curriculum Development suggested that "[...] literature education has the capacity to expand students' social and cultural horizons and to stimulate their empathetic capabilities" (2015, p. 25, translation *MS*). However, these claims remain at a rhetoric level: in the Dutch context, there is no empirical support for the assumption that literary instruction may foster students' insight into human nature. With this dissertation, we aim to fill this void. Thereby, we also intend to contribute to the development of valid intervention studies in the literature classroom, which enable us to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of a particular instructional approach. The following overarching question guides this research project:

Which instructional approach to literature teaching in Dutch upper secondary education is appropriate for fostering students' insight into human nature?

2   STRUCTURE OF THIS DISSERTATION

This dissertation consists of five studies, as shown in Figure 1.1. The research project as a whole can be characterized as a form of educational design research. The design of an instructional approach lies at the heart of the project. Study 1 and 2 provided an empirically grounded framework for designing two subsequent versions of an intervention, in Study 3. The effects of the two versions were tested in two intervention studies (Study 4 and 5). Here, we introduce the five studies included in this dissertation in closer detail. Each study is set up as a separate journal article. As a consequence, when presenting these five studies in this dissertation, some overlap in theoretical frameworks and discussion sections is inevitable. On the other hand, the advantage for the reader is that each chapter can be read on its own.
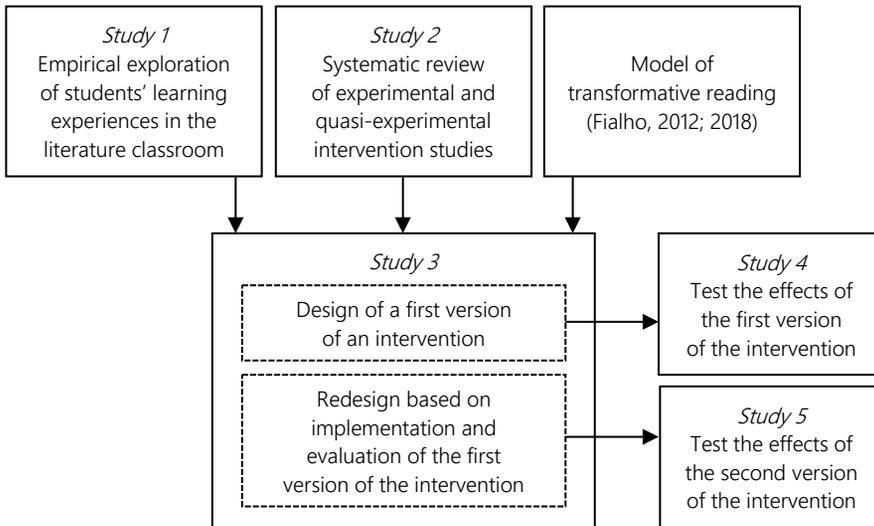
Figure 1.1. Overview of the research project.*

2.1 *Coming to Terms*

As a first step, we needed to explore the context in which the research project were to take place. Therefore, in Study 1 (Chapter 2), we conducted an empirical exploration of current practices and learning experiences in Dutch upper secondary school literature classrooms. We investigated whether students reported to gain any insight into themselves and others as a result of regular literature education, and whether those experiences varied among classrooms, depending on the instructional approach taken by the students' teachers. The findings – relations between learning experiences and characteristics of literary instruction – provided first indications of parameters that might play a role in the design of an instructional approach.

In addition to the outcomes of empirical explorations of the field, the framework for educational design research consisted of instructional design principles. In Study 2 (Chapter 3), we identified these principles via a systematic review of previous experimental and quasi-experimental literature classroom intervention studies that aimed to foster students' insight into human nature. In this review, thirteen studies were included. Nine of these provided empirical support for fostering students' insight into human nature – that is, insight into themselves, fictional others, and/or real-world others. The outcomes of Study 1 and 2 informed the design of an instructional approach for literature education in 10th grade classrooms in the Netherlands.

2.2 *From Design Principles to an Intervention Design*

In Study 3 (Chapter 4), we developed an instructional approach in an iterative design process. As Figure 1.1. shows, the design was informed not only by the outcomes of Studies 1 and 2, but also by a theoretical-empirical model of transformative reading (Fialho, 2012; 2018). The model of transformative reading includes self-other insights as a component, and indicates that several other components underlie these insights – reading experiences such as vividly picturing the setting and characters in a story, and feeling sympathy or compassion for characters. These and other transformative reading components are given particular attention in the design of the instructional approach. In the design process, we collaborated with teachers of Dutch language and literature who, for example, suggested titles of literary texts to be used, and pointed out time constraints they face in their everyday teaching practices. We designed two subsequent versions of an intervention, in which the second was a redesign of the first, by focusing in particular on the validity and practicality of both versions.

2.3 *Testing the Interventions*

Study 4 and 5 are mixed-methods intervention studies in which we tested the effects of the two versions of the intervention on students' transformative reading experiences, including – most importantly – their insight into human nature. In these studies, we relied on questionnaire data as well as writing task data. These two studies added to Fialho's (2018) work with adult readers, as we developed instruments and coding schemes to detect adolescent students' transformative reading experiences. For example, the newly developed Transformative Reading Experiences Questionnaire (TREQ) for adolescents was used in both intervention studies and yielded consistent validity indices for both samples of students, across measurement moments.

   More specifically, Study 4 (Chapter 5) focused on assessing students' perceptions of their own learning as a result of the first version of the intervention, as well as on effects of the intervention on students' insight into human nature. Study 5 (Chapter 6) investigated the effects of the redesigned version of the intervention on students' insight into human nature as well as their support of eudaimonic motivations for reading, that is, reading for meaningfulness and insight into human conditions. In addition, we aimed to alleviate prominent challenges that students face in the literature classroom: their limited capability to deal with difficulties that may emerge during reading literary texts, and their

rather low motivation for literature education. Therefore, we assessed whether the intervention enhanced students' reported use of strategies to deal with difficulties during literary reading, and, as indicators of their motivation, the extent to which they experienced autonomy, competence and relatedness in the literature classroom.

2.4 *General Discussion*

In the General Discussion (Chapter 7), we bring together our main findings by providing answers to the research questions addressed in Studies 1 to 5. Subsequently, we discuss four key concepts that guided these studies: insight into human nature, transformative reading, literariness, and dialogic learning in literature classrooms. Next, we address potential validity issues in our studies regarding the intervention-as-designed and the intervention-as-implemented, the instruments and the research designs we applied, followed by discussing the external validity of our studies and the risk of a potential researcher bias. Finally, we discuss directions for future studies as well as the implications of our research for educational practice.