



# What's the problem with reading?

Thesis in language

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Vad är problemet med läsning?

Examensarbete i språk

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Datum: 2015-06-09

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## **Abstract**

This project began with the basic preconception that there is a growing resistance towards reading among students and this has been partially proved correct. The research questions were:

In upper secondary education, what is it that encourages or hinders the students' incentives for reading?

What effect does this have on the subsequent teaching of fictional texts?

The aim of this investigation was to examine attitudes on reading among students in upper secondary education and how these attitudes affect the teaching of fictional texts. The project's research material consists of a qualitative interview with a practising teacher, and a student questionnaire which was answered by two of the teacher's classes; one studying the natural science programme, the other studying a vocational, practically oriented programme.

The overall majority of students recognise the importance of reading in their lives, seeing it as an activity that helps them understand themselves and the world. The importance of "contact points" within the texts is vital for encouraging reading, yet finding texts which have a universal appeal proves to be an impossible task. Reading is seen by the students and the teacher as an activity that contributes to the students' all-round education, although the teacher does not believe that most of his students truly understand this. A key factor which hinders reading incentives is time. Students grapple with a heavy workload of schoolwork and reading is not prioritised. Film is seen as an effective "way in" to reading as many students state a preference for films over books, which is largely recognised by the teacher. Film is used as a supplement to the teaching of fiction and is found by the teacher to be a successful method. School texts are invariably described as boring on account of the difficulties that students have engaging and relating with them, yet many texts are also described in equal measure as exciting or interesting. Reading proves to be more popular among the natural science class, yet despite some very negative attitudes in the vocational class, there are still a number of encouragingly positive ones.

## **Sammanfattning**

Förutsättningen för detta arbete är att det finns ett växande motstånd att läsa skönlitteratur bland ungdomar i dag. Detta har delvis bevisats vara korrekt. Arbetets frågeställningar lyder:

Vad är det som uppmuntrar eller hindrar läslust inom gymnasieskolan?

Vilken effekt har det på undervisningen av skönlitterära texter?

Arbetets syfte var att undersöka attityder om läsning bland gymnasieelever och hur dessa attityder påverkar undervisningen av skönlitterära texter. Arbetets forskningsmaterial består av en kvalitativ intervju med en verksam lärare, samt en elevenkät som besvarades av två olika klasser. En klass läser naturvetarprogrammet, den andra läser en yrkesutbildning.

Majoriteten av eleverna inser betydelsen av läsning och betraktar den som en aktivitet som hjälper dem förstå sig själva och omvärlden. ”Anknytningspunkter” i texter uppfattas som mycket viktiga angående uppmuntran av läslust, dock att hitta allmänna texter som alla elever tycker om verkar vara en omöjlig uppgift. Den deltagande läraren och eleverna betraktar läsning som en aktivitet som bidrar till elevernas allmänbildning, dock är läraren inte övertygad om eleverna förstår detta tillräckligt. En nyckelfaktor som förebygger läslust är tid. Elever kämpar med en stor arbetsbörda av skolarbete och således är läsning inte prioriterad. Film är en väg in till läsning på grund av elevernas preferens för mediet, som den deltagande läraren instämmer med. Texterna som eleverna läser i skolan beskrivs som ”tråkiga” på grund av svårigheterna eleverna upplever, som i sin tur inte kan engagera sig eller relatera till texterna. Fast flera texter beskrivs som spännande eller intressanta. Läsning visar sig att vara populärt bland naturvetarklassen. Bland yrkes-klassen finns det några negativa inställningar, men det finns även en del elever som är positivt inställda.

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## 1. Introduction

The Swedish curriculum for upper secondary education – *Läroplan, examensmål och gymnasiegemensamma ämnen för gymnasieskola 2011 (Gy11)* – contains several references to reading, most notably in regard to the subject of Swedish. The curriculum describes reading as an activity which is instrumental in making students understand what it means to be human. *Gy11* states that fictional literature ”shall challenge students to adopt a new way of thinking and to be open to new perspectives” to help them learn about the world. In addition, the reading of fictional literature should serve as a ”source of self-awareness” to help students understand ”other people’s experiences, living conditions, thoughts and worlds.”<sup>1</sup> *Gy11s* instructions for reading in the English subject are primarily associated with comprehension, yet that is not to say the importance of reading is understated. It states that students should be given the opportunity to use the English language in a ”functional and meaningful context” via reception, which includes reading.<sup>2</sup> It also states that by coming into contact with texts of different kinds students should be able to ”relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge” by its interpretation.<sup>3</sup> The curriculum communicates just how important reading is in terms of shaping students’ personalities and world views, via the subjects of Swedish and English. Where reading in Swedish will help students learn about the world and themselves, it can be said that reading in English helps students to do the same to a slightly lesser extent whilst improving their abilities in their second language.

Throughout my teacher training I have had numerous conversations with teachers within upper secondary education about the use of fictional literature in the classroom. Texts which are considered literary classics, as well as more contemporary ones, are used for a variety of purposes. Literary texts are often used in connection with a particular ”theme”, such as racism or love. They can be used to study and explore literary history and different time periods. Novels and short stories serve as an excellent springboard for classroom discussions. There are countless assignments that can be used in connection with these texts; writing reviews, creative writing tasks and reading comprehension exercises to name a mere few. But there is one obstacle which is crucial in the implementation of such activities in the classroom – the reading of these texts.

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<sup>1</sup> Skolverket (2011) *Läroplan, examensmål och gymnasiegemensamma ämnen för gymnasieskola 2011*. p.160

<sup>2</sup> Skolverket. p.53

<sup>3</sup> Skolverket. p.53-54

On several occasions, teachers have described getting their students to read any kind of literature as an uphill struggle. What was becoming apparent to me as I spent more time in the classroom was that students were not only uninterested in reading texts in English – their second language – but they were not enthused about the prospect of reading in Swedish either. Some students, though admittedly not all, consider reading a challenge. Furthermore, I have heard more than one teacher remark that their students read ”very little” and find it ”difficult” and ”boring”. In some cases, film adaptations are used as a substitute for the literary text as the students find the other medium easier to digest. But should it really be so hard? An underlying objective of this project was to see if there was any truth in this.

### **1.1. Aim and Research Questions**

This study shall focus on reading in the subjects of Swedish and English due to the large role the activity plays in both of these subjects, albeit with different emphases. This project has the following research questions as its basis:

In upper secondary education, what is it that encourages or hinders the students’ incentives for reading?

What effect does this have on the subsequent teaching of fictional texts?

The aim of this project is to examine attitudes on reading among students in upper secondary education and how these attitudes affect the teaching of fictional texts.

### **2. Previous Research**

As previously stated, this study will examine the motivations of students relating to their incentives for reading, or lack thereof. The books and dissertations which have been included in this study’s research touch upon a variety of perspectives where reading is the central activity. Every perspective examined here touches upon different factors which can be seen to contribute towards students’ incentives for reading and what the likely causes for these attitudes are. My criteria for text selection were: texts focusing on reading within secondary and upper secondary education; texts which served as support material for teachers where the encouragement of reading was the focus; dissertations/theses where reader-reception studies were carried out within secondary or upper secondary education; texts containing theories on reader reception. On a practical level it was necessary to include literature devoted to the subject of Swedish on account

of there being more research available in this area. Research on the topic of reading in the English subject was difficult to obtain and when found was considerably outdated. Furthermore, I believed that the literature found on the Swedish subject contained universally relevant content in relation to reading.

Before we go any further it might be appropriate to ask: *why?* Why should we read? What is in it for the students? Per Olov Svedner offers a strong argument for why reading is important in *Svenskämnet & svenskundervisningen – närbilder och helhetsperspektiv* (1999). Svedner recognises that reading fiction is not only a form of relaxation but a way of also "switching on"; an activity that is an "emotional experience" which leads to knowledge, but "makes considerable demands on the reader's stamina" as they are never rewarded immediately with this experience. Perhaps the strongest argument of all is Svedner's opinion of the benefit that reading has in relation to the development of other abilities. Literature in school can "stimulate the the students' productivity in oral and written tasks, that is to say, their ambition of creativity."<sup>4</sup> Reading plays an important role in the development of students' native language, insists Svedner. "Literature gives a knowledge of people, places, ideas and problems through the imagery that it gives and which we, as readers, process. It is what you would call knowledge through literature."<sup>5</sup> Svedner asks in what way can students find a "way in" to literature. He observes that all too many Swedish teachers find it difficult to find this way in. What is crucial, writes Svedner, is to find "contact points" that captivate the students, but he acknowledges that this is in itself no easy task.<sup>6</sup>

While it can be easy to stare at statistics blindly, one in particular stood out as a starting point for this project. Birgitta Svensson's *Gör klassikern till din egen – att arbeta med skönlitteratur i klassrummet* (2008) is an insightful book which serves as support material for teachers in secondary and upper secondary education who may require inspiration in their teaching of fiction. Svensson refers to a Danish survey carried out to examine the reading habits of children, aged between 9-15, in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. 50 per cent of Swedish teenagers aged

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<sup>4</sup> Svedner (1999). *Svenskämnet & svenskundervisningen – närbilder och helhets perspektiv*. p.42

<sup>5</sup> Svedner. p.42

<sup>6</sup> Svedner. p.49

13-15 never, or seldom, read books in their spare time the survey revealed. Girls were found to be the dominant readers in this survey. The surrounding factors of this statistic are not revealed; what are the children's social backgrounds? What other spare time activities do they participate in? What are the children's strengths in school? Nevertheless, it is a thought provoking statistic. Why are so many children *not* reading?

The very existence of books such as *Läslust och läslist. Idéer för högstadiet och gymnasieskolan* (2005) seems to acknowledge the aforementioned problem. The article written by Birgitta Ahlén – "Livet, kärleken, döden – och så litet spänning däremellan" – addresses the initial problem of getting children to read.

How can you make reading attractive to those who don't want to read? The most important thing, I believe, is to arouse curiosity, to choose a book within an area that concerns and feels appropriate to the person in question; [...] and that the reader is generally prepared for the content of the text prior to reading. This can be done by reading aloud from the book, talking about characters, the setting and so on, showing a film which is based on the book or discussing in groups...<sup>7</sup>

Ahlén highlights the importance of preparing the readers prior to reading. Introducing the books to the students, preparing them for the content, or any aspects of the text which may seem difficult for students to grasp before any actual reading has been done is a simple method to implement in teaching.

There is more to motivating a reader than just preparation. Kathleen McCormick's theories put forward the notion that readers have an invisible criteria which they themselves are unaware of. In *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* (1994), McCormick presents two concepts which can be said to be instrumental in creating or hindering incentives for reading. McCormick writes that readers have a general repertoire, as well as a literary one. She describes a general repertoire as "a set of culturally conditioned experiences, beliefs, knowledge and expectations, about such matters as politics, lifestyle, love, education, integrity, and so forth." The reader is often unconscious of these beliefs and opinions until they "encounter interpretations

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<sup>7</sup> Ahlén, "Livet, kärleken, döden - och så litet spänning däremellan": Norberg (editor)(2005). *Läslust och läslist. Idéer för högstadiet och gymnasieskolan*. p.92



that differ from their own.”<sup>8</sup> The concept of the literary repertoire on the other hand, works on the basis that the reader – be they well read or not – has come in contact with literature in some way. McCormick writes: ”Readers’ literary repertoires consist of their knowledge and assumptions about what literature ‘is’ or ‘should be’ based on their previous reading experiences and the assumptions about reading they have absorbed from the literary and general ideologies of their culture.”<sup>9</sup> The literary repertoire is another way of defining a reader’s taste in books.

One might think that reading in a second language would be a major deterrent for students due to the potential difficulties involved with comprehension. In Sweden’s case this is not entirely accurate, writes Bo Lundahl in his book *Engelsk språkdidaktik – texter, kommunikation, språkutveckling* (2009). Lundahl makes light of Skolverket’s 2004 study, *Engelska i åtta europeiska länder*, which reveals that Swedish students had the best results in terms of English-reading comprehension. 81 per cent of Swedish students participating in the study revealed that they read English texts ”well and with ease.”<sup>10</sup> Lundahl refers to Skolverket’s national evaluation of English in primary school – *Nu-03* – where 60 per cent of students noted that they read English texts on the Internet. Lundahl makes reference to the fact that a reduced interest in reading is ”not a new problem” but has been counteracted in recent decades by the use of books available in ”light” or ”easy” versions and teachers’ use of film and computer programs. Importantly, Lundahl points out that under the curriculum’s target-based system, it is now easier for teachers to root out the weaker readers than it was under the ”relative grading system”.<sup>11</sup>

We have so far looked at why it is important to read, the students who are not reading, and the difficulties of finding books to attract them to the activity. We have also discussed what it is that may, or may not, appeal to their tastes. What happens when students interact with fictional texts at school? Gunilla Molloy’s *Att läsa skönlitteratur med tonåringar* (2003) brings us inside the classroom and examines four different classes from four different secondary schools. Her reader-reception study asks the following questions: ”Why should we read fiction in schools? Do students understand the teachers’ intentions with the reading of fiction? What *are* the teachers’

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<sup>8</sup> McCormick (1994). *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*. p.79

<sup>9</sup> McCormick. p.84-85

<sup>10</sup> Lundahl (2008). *Engelsk språkdidaktik – texter, kommunikation, språkutveckling. Andra upplagan*. p.49

<sup>11</sup> Lundahl. p.51

intentions?” and ”Why do so many teenagers find it boring to read fictional texts in school?”<sup>12</sup> Molloy’s study features extensive interviews with teachers and students, and also uses student questionnaires to support her research. The age group of students spans from the 7th to 9th grade. A 7th-8th grade teacher interviewed by Molloy in the study observes that there are various problems involved when trying to find a text to suit everyone:

It should be a text which is more than just the text, more than just a story. It should always have something, a problem or something to discuss surrounding it, so it doesn’t turn into a situation where they say ’this happened and then this happened.’ The story should have something timeless about it, something that I can apply to a situation today, or to their (the students) situation, which of course isn’t easy.<sup>13</sup>

Molloy, like Per Olov Svedner, uses the term ”contact points” in reference to the differentiation between every student and every text. Where these contact points are is difficult to determine, writes Molloy. In her discussion she highlights the students’ need to recognise themselves within the texts. Molloy observes that ”most teenagers prioritise texts that are close to a reality that they recognise.” Kathleen McCormick’s theories on general repertoires are applied to the students’ comments and are dominant in Molloy’s closing discussion.

More and more, the conversation about the text has to do with personal memories and private associations. What we can see in the different receptions in my material is that students avoid what they experience as strange in a text. The confrontation between their own and the text’s general repertoires, which should be able to challenge their own thinking, is therefore absent. It appears to me that the students’ image of what reality should look like wins over their understanding of how the text produces ”reality.”<sup>14</sup>

The overriding theme from Molloy’s research is that students need to identify with, or recognise themselves in, the fictional texts which they come in contact with.

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<sup>12</sup> Molloy (2003). *Att läsa skönlitteratur med tonåringar*. p.16

<sup>13</sup> Molloy. p.142

<sup>14</sup> Molloy. p.316

A further example in a similar vein to Molloy's study is Gun Malmgren's thesis *Gymnasiekulturer. Lärare och elever om svenska och kultur* (1992) – an interview study involving 27 students from four different classes in upper secondary education. A major aspect of Malmgren's study "deals with the pupils' opinions on and preferences for different cultural forms and activities in and outside of school" with a "special emphasis [...] placed on the question of the literary socialization of the pupils in the different classes."<sup>15</sup> What makes this relevant to this particular study is the difference in attitudes between the four classes when it comes to their reading habits. The participating students belong to classes in metalwork, consumer education, natural sciences and humanities. Where the humanities and consumer education classes display some similarities in attitudes between male and female students, the metalwork class and the natural science class appear to be polar opposites of each other. The male dominated metalwork class display "weak" reading skills and oppose any kind of "humanistic or literary content" in Swedish lessons. Apart from one student, none of the class have an outside interest in reading and prefer "violent" and "humorous" films as their preferred entertainment. Furthermore, the class are particularly vocal in their dislike of reading in school and are of the conviction that there are only "very few" good books. All books read in school are also viewed as "boring" and/or "difficult."<sup>16</sup> The natural science class on the other hand are actively engaged in reading in and out of school. The class is roughly equal in terms of male and female students and the "media violence" which is enjoyed by the metalwork class is looked down upon. Students display a willingness and enthusiasm for classics as well as contemporary fictional texts. Favoured authors named by students include Tolstoj, Balzac, Pär Lagerkvist and Victoria Benedictsson, to name but a few. On reading Malmgren's observations, one cannot help but think that these classes fulfill certain stereotypes. The male-dominated, practically oriented metalwork class display a resistance to reading and the teaching of literature. The mixed sex, theoretically oriented natural science class are more open-minded, appreciating the texts and the teaching and read all manner of advanced texts in their spare time.

The third and final classroom study which deserves to be mentioned here is Christina Olin-Scheller's doctoral thesis *Mellan Dante och Big Brother. En studie om gymnasieelevers*

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<sup>15</sup> Malmgren (1992). *Gymnasiekulturer. Lärare och elever om svenska och kultur*. p.331

<sup>16</sup> Malmgren. p.84

*textvärldar* (2006). Kathleen McCormick's theories of general and literary repertoires are used once again in an examination of students in upper secondary education and their "text worlds", as Olin-Scheller describes it. What Olin-Scheller highlights in her thesis is that the literature chosen by teachers for instruction in school is very different to that which students prefer to read in their spare time. Consequently, the general and literary repertoires of the teachers and students are "mismatched."<sup>17</sup> One of Olin-Scheller's general findings is that "the students perceived the fictional reading assigned as boring and without relevance to their lives. This was true for all fictional text instruction, but particularly true for the material used in teaching the history of literature."<sup>18</sup> Male students display a preference for texts in the fantasy genre; female students prefer texts categorised as "faction" – texts which are based on real-life events. This mirrors the points that Gunilla Molloy observed in her research, that students connect more with texts where they can identify the reality within them - in this case, true stories or ones based on reality. Like Malmgren, Olin-Scheller interviews students studying natural sciences, a programme which prepares students for further studies. Olin-Scheller discovers that these students are more engaged in literary instruction. The problem that this leads on to is how much should teachers adjust their literary instruction to fit in with their students' tastes and "everyday culture"? On a positive side, these students exhibit an interest in reading but just not for the school-assigned texts. This in turn could be hindering and not developing students' incentives for reading. Olin-Scheller also discusses the concept of the "expanded text" at length. The text by this definition is a lot more than just the written word. The expanded text is categorised not only as written and spoken literary texts but as film, still images and audio.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, literary works can be "read" via different mediums such as film adaptations or television series, which prove to be popular among the participating students in Olin-Scheller's study. The expanded text is in itself an interesting pedagogical concept due to its ability to attract students to "difficult" classics. It is also possible to explore complex literary narrative techniques with the medium of film or television. What Olin-Scheller highlights is that although the expanded text has plenty of merits, it ultimately

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<sup>17</sup> Olin-Scheller (2006) *Mellan Dante och Big Brother. En studie om gymnasieelevers textvärldar*. p.240

<sup>18</sup> Olin-Scheller. p.239

<sup>19</sup> Olin-Scheller. p.21

means there are ways that students can avoid reading books by experiencing them via a different medium.<sup>20</sup> This in turn can be viewed as leading students away from reading.

Finally, a text which is worth discussing is *Läsa bör man...? den skönlitterära texten i skola och lärarutbildning* (2009), edited by Lena Kåreland. The book includes a number of articles and surveys where the focus lies with teacher students. What gives this book a unique perspective in relation to this study is that its participants are talking about their experiences of literary education *after* they have concluded their upper secondary studies. The central question in this study is how do teacher students remember *their own* literary education. The chapter in question, written by Margareta Petersson, begins with another remarkable statistic: "According to the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2007, the percentage of men who never read books is increasing, and today this group constitutes 31 per cent."<sup>21</sup> This leads on to a survey of teacher students' reading habits which reveals that a small, but significant, number of male and female participants do not read fiction in their spare time. A larger number of participants read fiction only once or twice a month. 421 teacher students took part in the survey and another interesting result came from a questionnaire where teacher students were asked the following questions: "Why did you read fiction in upper secondary school, according to your Swedish teacher?" and "Why did you read fiction in the Swedish subject according to *your* own understanding?" 30 per cent of the students did not remember what motivation for reading fiction they received from their teacher, or maintained that they did not receive any at all. A further 8 per cent recalled that reading was included in the curriculum and it was understood that it was something which they were forced to do. 5 per cent (constituting 18 individuals) did not read *any* fiction in school, aside from the occasional extract. One student complained that there was no obligatory reading in upper secondary school, remarking on how "unfair" it was. Petersson summarises the survey by saying that "almost half of the students have no reasonable answer to the question, which implies that the goals, or the communicated goals, with the teaching of fiction are unclear."<sup>22</sup> Although it is

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<sup>20</sup> Olin-Scheller. p.243

<sup>21</sup> Persson, "Jag kan inte komma på nåt jag läst på gymnasiet, det måste ju betyda nåt, eller hur? - om blivande svensklärare som läsare." - Kåreland (editor) (2009) *Läsa bör man...? - den skönlitterära texten i skola och lärarutbildning*. p.18

<sup>22</sup> Kåreland, p.26-27

easy to jump to a number of rash conclusions on the strength of this survey, it is possible to make the following observation: the students' teachers in these examples did not emphasise enough the importance of reading, or not enough for at least the students to remember. One could claim that this is having a knock-on effect on the participating students' incentives for reading later in life.

In summary, let us look at some of the main points again. Teachers experience difficulties in finding a common text which appeals to everyone. Students' motivations and interests in texts are connected with how much they identify, or see themselves in the text; either in the characters, events or themes of the story. These in turn make the texts relevant to the students and anything which deviates from the students' perceived norms are viewed as challenging and not confronted. A way in or contact point needs to be found to draw in unwilling or inexperienced readers in to reading. Again this entails finding a text which is relevant to the reader which can depend on their general repertoire – their own beliefs and ideological positions – and/or literary repertoire – their reading history and knowledge of literature. Attitudes towards reading follow certain patterns. Students reading practical subjects, such as metalwork, display a resistance to literature, whereas students reading more theoretically oriented subjects, such as natural sciences, display an enthusiasm and active interest. There are of course a great deal of students who enjoy reading, yet perhaps not the texts which they come in contact with at school. Texts are increasingly experienced through the medium of film which does have several advantages but it does result in reduced reading activity. Lastly, the importance of reading *must* be communicated to students to develop an active interest in the activity. This responsibility lies, first and foremost, within the parameters of literary teaching.

### **3. Disposition**

This project's main research material consists of an empirical study in two parts. Part 1 is a qualitative interview with a practising upper secondary teacher. Part 2 comprises a questionnaire answered by two different classes in upper secondary education. The objective of this approach is to see the difference and similarities of opinions that a teacher and his classes share, side by side. The results of the interview and questionnaires will then be compared and analysed in the 'Discussion' chapter.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Interview**

The purpose of the interview in this study was to examine a practising teacher's experiences and opinions relating to reading in the classroom. What I deemed to be important was to interview a teacher whose subjects were Swedish and English in upper secondary education. This was primarily because these are my chosen subjects within teacher training. Secondly, these subjects provide many opportunities to involve reading. Regarding how I would carry out the interview, formulate appropriate questions and other practical advice, I referred to Runa Patel and Bo Davidson's *Forskningsmetodikens grunder. Att planera, genomföra och rapportera en undersökning* (2003). The method that I chose to apply in this project is called a qualitative interview.<sup>23</sup> Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann's *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* (2009) also proved to be helpful in this stage of planning my research. The book is dedicated to the variety of permutations in which a qualitative interview can be conducted. Kvale and Brinkmann write that the "qualitative interview is a method of research that gives a privileged entrance in to people's experience of the lived world."<sup>24</sup> It was a priority for me to create a relaxed atmosphere during the interview. From previous interview experience, I had discovered that it is more important for it to appear to be a conversation, rather than an interrogation. Patel and Davidson write that during an interview "to facilitate the conversation, it is important that the interviewer can converse with the interviewee so they are not inhibited."<sup>25</sup> The objective of the interview was to provide a platform for the interviewee to put forth his thoughts, opinions and ideas. An aspect which proved challenging was formulating questions that were not too leading. In my role as a researcher it was important for me to remain impartial and to not steer the interviewee towards a particular answer. A question which could exemplify this would be: "Do you think students have a negative or positive attitude towards reading?" This could result in a one word answer – yes or no. As stated earlier, my intention was to give the interviewee plenty of space for voicing their opinion. A more neutral formulation of the same question is: "From your own experience, what is your view on students' attitudes towards reading?" This question does not search for a positive or

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<sup>23</sup> Patel & Davidson (2003). *Forskningsmetodikens grunder. Att planera, genomföra och rapportera en undersökning. Tredje upplagan.* p.78

<sup>24</sup> Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun. Andra upplagan.* p.45

<sup>25</sup> Patel & Davidson. p.78

negative response, rather an open-ended answer which gives the interviewee sufficient room to reflect.

## **4.2. The interviewee**

In accordance with the participants' right of anonymity, my interviewee will be known as "Sven". Sven received his teaching degree in 1984 and has an equal amount of experience in secondary as well as upper secondary education. Sven was chosen as an interviewee on the grounds of his wealth of teaching experience in the subjects of Swedish and English. He works at a modern upper secondary school and teaches within the natural sciences programme. The school has somewhere in the region of 1,500 students and is situated in a town where the population is around 50,000. Sven has students in grades 1, 2 and 3 and currently teaches the following courses in upper secondary education: Swedish 1, 2 and 3; English 5, and 6. The interview was conducted in English, recorded on my mobile phone and transcribed shortly afterwards. I have chosen to summarise the interview with Sven as best as possible and have quoted him verbatim where appropriate. A full transcript of the interview would reveal some more personal details of Sven's life which, under his right to anonymity, I have excluded from the results. In addition, some of the details were not wholly relevant to this study.

## **4.3. Questionnaire**

The other research method which this study uses is a questionnaire. The questionnaire was written in Swedish to facilitate the students' ease of response. The reason for doing this was that I did not want whatever shortcomings that the students may have in the English language to inhibit their answers. How well would students be able to respond in their second language? Would students feel restricted in some way? Such questions were thought of in my formulation of the questionnaire. My preconception was that if a particular nuance of one of the questions was misunderstood by a student, this would in turn effect the results. I deemed this an unnecessary risk and opted for a questionnaire written in Swedish. The results were translated afterwards. The questionnaire featured a variety of question-types. Patel and Davidson yet again proved a helpful resource in this phase.<sup>26</sup> It was necessary to formulate questions which featured a variety of

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<sup>26</sup> Patel & Davidson. p.76-77



answer alternatives; either/or questions (yes/no questions); questions involving frequencies or amounts ("How often do you...?"); and questions which were more open, asking the student to provide information about themselves. Patel and Davidson's tips on formulating questions were adopted for the interview as well as the questionnaire. Finding a balance of impartial questions that did not steer the students towards a particular answer was difficult. It was my belief that some questions had to give a choice of answer alternatives to account for as many answers that were possible. With questions involving several answer alternatives, I thought it relevant to include an "Other answer" option for students, in the eventuality that they may have something to say concerning their reading habits which I had failed to address in the answer alternatives. My preconception was that students were not used to taking part in such studies. Furthermore, I was conscious of the fact that students are not asked about their reading habits very often (or, in fact, at all). Upon filling in this questionnaire, this could very well have been the first time for several students to address their attitudes on reading. It was my philosophy that I should not steer students towards a particular answer alternative, rather help them to formulate their opinions. I was also wary of the fact that many answers would be returned either blank or with "Don't know" as a selected answer alternative. This in itself would have provided something to analyse, but be of limited interest in relation to the scope of this study. Guiding the students towards a particular answer was unavoidable if one is to provide them with a choice of answer alternatives that they may not think of directly.

### **4.3. The classes**

Class 1 are studying the natural sciences programme and are first year upper secondary students. The class consists of 27 students - 19 females and 8 males. Class 2 are studying a practically-oriented vocational programme which carries an eligibility for higher education. Class 2 are second year upper secondary students. The class consists of 25 students - 9 females and 16 males. Sven is the teacher for both classes in the subjects of Swedish and English. I informed all students of the focus of this study prior to handing out the questionnaire to them. All students were made aware of the fact that the survey was anonymous and only their sex and choice of educational programme would be divulged in the study.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1. The interview**

Reading is very important to Sven and something which he believes develops your personality.

He says that:

It forces you to think. When you read, you think. You can see things from different perspectives. That's one of the main reasons why I want the students to read because you need to see things from different perspectives, it's not just your own. Sometimes from perhaps an unexpected perspective that you haven't thought of.

The activities and tasks that Sven uses in connection with the reading of fictional texts are study questions, reviews, group discussions and the viewing of films which are connected to the texts which he uses in the classroom. Sven defines study questions as "questions which make them think." He elaborates by saying that when students read "difficult" books, he must give them questions to make sure they really understand what they have read. This concerns texts in both Swedish and English and older literature, in particular. One of the main reasons that Sven cites for reading is that he wants his students to think and to analyse what they read. He also wants students to see the "parallels between today and yesterday." The key, or the "way in", Sven believes, is film.

Sven puts a lot of emphasis on reading in his teaching and goes on to say that he tries to concentrate as much as possible on it when time will allow. That doesn't always seem to be possible, he finds. Sven refers to the multitude of subjects that students have in their respective programmes:

But my subjects – Swedish and English – are not the only ones. They've got other subjects, they've got a *lot* to do. I was just talking to two of my students and it's very hard for them to sort out all these tests coming up and all the assignments to hand in. It's kind of a mountain for them to climb. I can just imagine what would happen if I put a book in front of them and asked them to read it now. It wouldn't be possible.

Sven usually tries to concentrate the reading of whole novels in both subjects at the beginning of each term on account of the fact that the number of tests which his students have to do are

relatively few at that time. "I know at the end of the term it's impossible to get them to read," he says. In a way, Sven feels that this approach does restrict him slightly from doing what he wants to do, when he wants to do it in the classroom. "Yes, I think we read less than we should," he says. This gives Sven a moment to reflect. He briefly discusses what it was like for him when he was at sixth form college. He remarks that when he was at school, teachers did not pay as much consideration to the students' heavy workload as teachers do now. Sven recalls being given a lot of literature to read in the busiest moments of term time. He makes an observation on the type of literature that he read when he was at school and the books which his students are reading now:

But on the other hand, I don't remember that we read any English books at all when I was at sixth form college. We read quite a lot of Swedish literature. But now we read a lot of English books, and the students studying Spanish and German, they read novels in those subjects too. Easy ones, but yes they read. So there is an emphasis on reading in not just Swedish, it's also in other languages.

When I ask Sven about his view on the students' attitudes towards reading, he answers that the great majority of his students are bored:

They're bored with... When I say that we're going to read a book they... (makes grimace and rolls eyes)... you know, they really show me how bored they are, just the thought of reading a book. They find it very hard. I suppose it's time consuming for them. I mean, I take their time from doing other things that they find more enjoyable.

Regardless of the students' grades or strengths in other subjects, Sven is met with this reaction on a regular basis. He mentions that there are, of course, students who enjoy reading but they are admittedly fewer nowadays than they used to be. He goes further by saying: "It's hard to explain to them that reading *helps* them in school, in other subjects. They can manage their studies better if they are readers. It's very hard, very difficult to make them understand and see the connection between reading and being successful in other subjects." Sven is convinced that students need to read to improve various skills, such as improving their vocabulary. This in turn helps them improve in other subjects.

I ask Sven if there are any particular texts that work well with students. As an example of the kinds of novels that Sven uses in the English subject, he mentions *Of Mice and Men* by John

Steinbeck and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. But even these texts are not altogether problem-free.

Well, they work, but I wouldn't say they work *well*. I remember when they worked with one novel – *Rani & Sukh* – at the end of the reading of that book someone said "Can't we read anything that we can relate to?" That is perhaps the key. When they can relate to things. But it's almost impossible to find one book that relates to all the students in the class. Of course they can read their own books and report it to me, but sometimes I want to read the same book and have the same experience.

I ask Sven whether he thinks this could depend upon the programmes that students are studying. Sven's view is that although he hasn't taught within the social sciences or humanities programmes at his school, he doesn't believe it to be a problem exclusive to one particular programme: "I think this attitude is all over the school. It doesn't depend on what programme you are on." What Sven believes to be important is getting students reading because they *need* to, coupled with the aspect that there are certain books that he feels they *should* have read. These books, says Sven, are the ones you are *supposed* to read for cultural reasons. Sven talks about texts which belong in what he considers the literary canon, citing authors such as William Shakespeare, August Strindberg and John Steinbeck, among others. He explains by saying that there are certain characters from literature which he feels the students should meet because "they will meet them in one way or another in life." These books, Sven admits, are the ones that students are seldom enthusiastic about. A difficulty that Sven encounters when teaching older texts regards the comprehension of old Swedish. He cites authors such as August Strindberg, Selma Lagerlöf and Vilhelm Moberg and describes how it takes the students a long time to "get in to the book."

When I started with the project that I do with Moberg and *Utvandrarna*, they were supposed to read the whole book. I've changed that now. Those who haven't got the time, or are bored, or find it hard to read, I say that I want them to read *these* chapters. At least these five or six chapters, that would be enough. Then I've got questions for these chapters. And then they will probably fill in the gaps when I show them the film, they get the story anyway.

Sven again emphasises how film is the key in drawing in the students. "When you first start using film in teaching, you feel almost ashamed," he laughs. He says this is because showing films

takes up so much valuable lesson time. He now however feels comfortable using lesson time that way as he sees it as an opportunity to give the students "common culture." Although choosing films can be just as problematic as choosing books, he admits. "If it's a film that is not good in their eyes, they will be as bored as when I put a book in front of them. So it's an attitude of easily being bored. If it doesn't stimulate them, then they turn it down." Sven also mentions that he has just recently started screening the film *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) in English lessons for the students as it has a similar theme to a novel called *Matched* by Ally Condie which one of his classes is in the process of reading in that subject. Sven comments that he was at first sceptical about using the film in the classroom, but admits that after seeing it for the first time he was surprised by how much he liked it. "There are things that the film deals with that are worth discussing," he says. Sven thinks school and society are responsible for encouraging reading but acknowledges that this is easier said than done. He says: "What could happen, *really* happen that would change their attitude from being bored to suddenly being enthusiastic about reading? I can't think of it." Sven remarks upon the popularity of television programmes and how he believes that these have taken the place of reading for a lot of students, but he acknowledges: "A good TV series is as good as a good novel."

Another factor which pulls students away from reading is the rise of social media, Sven believes. He makes an interesting observation of the role that social media plays in their lives.

I suppose it's popular because you can interact, you get a response. You say something and you're always confirmed in a way, or you're liked or disliked or whatever. It's the chance to interact that I think they enjoy. Reading a book is not interaction for them, as I suppose it is for you or for me and older generations. Social media is *their* kind of interaction. That's today's arena, in a way, where you meet people. We met them in literature, but they meet them in real life, out there on the social media. It's also got to do with information. You can be informed at the same time as you are interacting with someone. It's a give and take situation, in a way, that I think stimulates them more than books.

Regarding how Sven chooses his literature and whether his students influence his choice of texts, he says that he takes on board the students' opinions but, ultimately, he decides what is read in the classroom. This choice is based on what he thinks is good for them to read, regardless of whether it is relevant to the students' lives or not. Sven says that teachers have a common sense

when it comes to text choice. The books used are often ones that contain what Sven describes as "eternal questions" which gives ample opportunity for discussion. Sven's criteria for text choice are books that are educational which involve aspects of society or events around the world that are in some way relatable. What Sven sees as a challenge is all the different aspects connected with reading:

You've got the reading skill, you've got the cultural heritage, you've got the eternal questions, what it's like to be a human being. You're trying to combine all these things in one, but now we have to focus on the reading skill which we, well .. we didn't have to do that before.

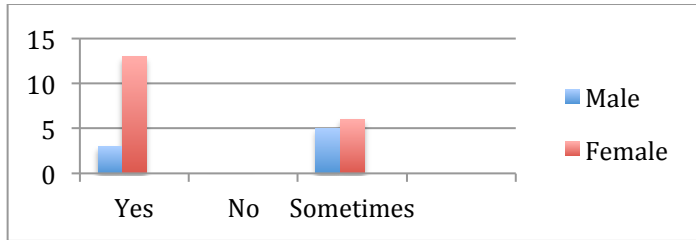
Sven says that this problem stems from the varying levels of students' reading proficiency when they arrive at upper secondary school. He explains that some students display weak reading skills which has a knock-on effect in other subjects: "I mean, when they're doing maths, they read and they don't understand what they read, they don't know what to do when they're trying to do the maths assignments." What it comes down to, in Sven's eyes, is "a question of attitude." Sven believes that students do not prioritise simply because "reading is not on the top of their list of what they like". He laments also the fact that students are reading newspapers less and less. When he asks students where they get their news from, the most common answer is: "Facebook." He adds that those who do read newspapers on mobile devices tend to skim through the texts, checking pictures and the headlines: "They don't actually read." Sven concludes the interview with the following observation:

The most crucial question perhaps is that there are students of course who read, and they read newspapers, they read novels. They are good readers. They will always manage, they will get the good jobs. But those who do not read, what will happen to them? I think it's a kind of class question in a way. It would widen the gap between the classes I think, those who read and those who don't read. I think that's the most crucial question.

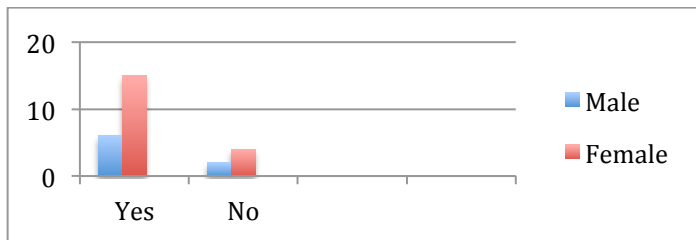
## **5.2. The questionnaire: Class 1**

Class 1 consists of 27 students – 19 females and 8 males. They are studying the natural science programme in their first year of upper secondary education. Graph 1.1 below shows a mostly positive attitude towards the reading of fiction within the class. However, 11 students reveal that

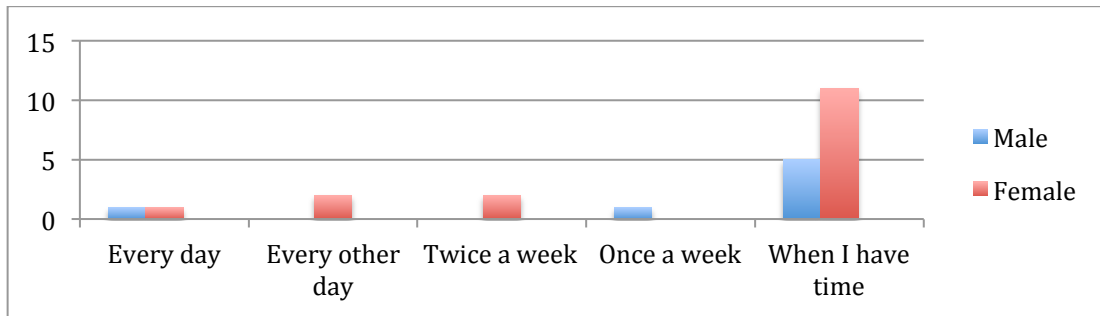
this is only sometimes. Graph 1.2 reveals that the majority of students read in their spare time, with only a handful saying that they do not.



### 1.1 Do you like to read fiction?



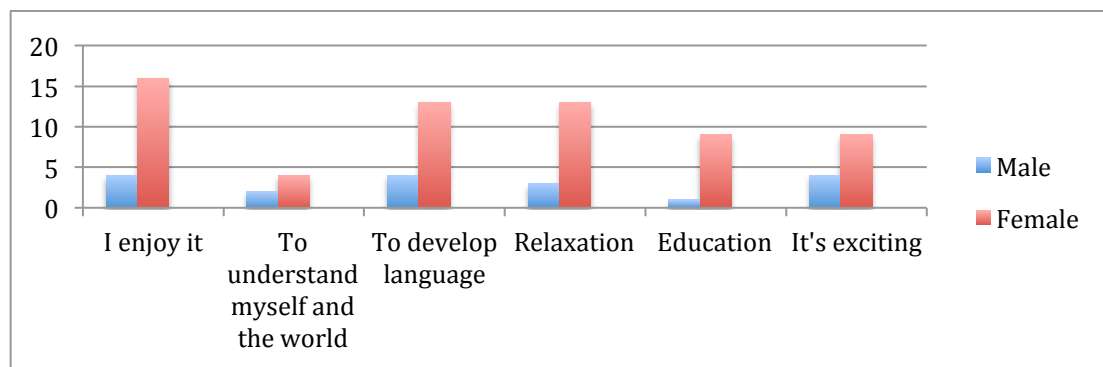
### 1.2 Do you read in your spare time?



### 1.3 How often do you read?

Graph 1.3 shows the amount of time those students who *do* read devote to reading. The most popular answer by a clear margin is "When I have time." The students who do not read in their spare time were asked to explain their reasons for doing so. Some sample answers from the female students include: "I feel that I have other things to do and I get bored quite quickly. I find it hard to see reading as relaxation"; "I never have time. If I do, then I prioritise other things"; "I usually read a lot and I love books but I have so much to do with school that I don't manage it"; "I don't have the time or the patience." A male student wrote: "I used to read when I was younger, but I've lost interest lately."

The students' reading preferences are dominated by Young Adult fiction. Series such as *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth are mentioned frequently by most of the females and some males. Popular genres within the class are fantasy (J.R.R Tolkien, J.K Rowling, *Game of Thrones*), reality-based stories, horror and thrillers. However, a handful of female students reveal an interest in the classics, citing Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë as personal favourites. Books that have been read at school include *Ondskan* by Jan Guillou and *Utvandrarna* by Vilhem Moberg as part of their Swedish course. *Rani & Sukh* by Bali Rai, *Chalkline* by Jane Mitchell and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck were read as part of the English course. From these novels *Ondskan* appears to be the clear favourite. The majority of books are described as "good", "interesting" or "exciting" by the students with only a few describing them as "a little boring." *Utvandrarna* is referred to positively by a number of students but is singled out as difficult by a couple on account of the old language. Students were asked which books they would prefer to read at school. The most popular answer was "more modern" or "newer" books, such as *The Hunger Games*, or ones similar to *Chalkline*. Several students state a preference for reading fantasy books in school. One female student would prefer to read: "Teenage books that you can relate to" in school.



#### 1.4 Why do you read?

Graph 1.4 shows the students' reasons for reading. A selection of answer alternatives were provided within the question and they were permitted to answer more than once, where applicable. They were also given the option of providing their own reasons for reading. One student writes: "It takes you to another world." Class 1 read, on the whole, because they find reading enjoyable.

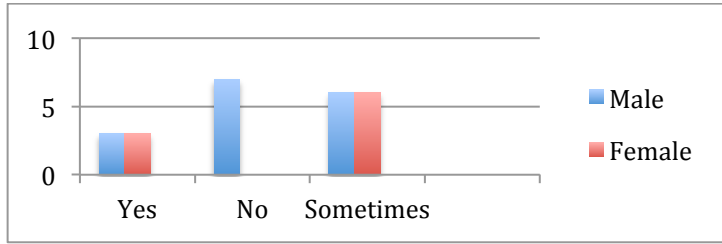


The students' hobbies are dominated by a variety of physical activities; running, swimming, dancing, tennis, football, "working out" or "training" are among those mentioned. Also of note, two students list "chilling" as a hobby, while another simply writes "sleeping." "Spending time with friends" is also a popular answer. Only four out of the 27 students list reading as a hobby. The majority of students study at home every night, or every other night. One student writes: "Almost every night", while another answers: "As soon as I have the chance." Six out of 27 students reveal that they do not read any newspapers where the remainder of the class list a great variety of publications. Among the most popular newspapers read, roughly a third of the class list three local newspapers. *Aftonbladet* is the most popular tabloid (eight students) followed by *Expressen*. Five students list broadsheet newspapers such as *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Göteborgs Posten*; a further three students indicate that they read the news online, via Youtube or social media. Several female students list a number of fashion magazines such as *Elle*, *Veckorevyn* and *Vogue* while "gossip magazines" are mentioned, in addition.

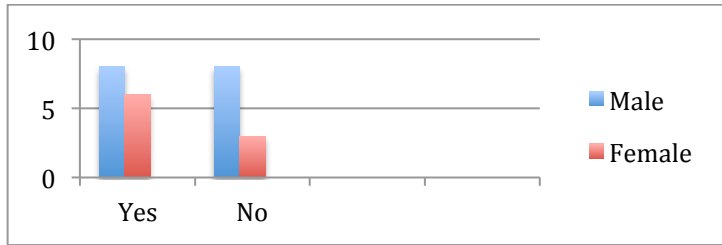
Class 1 were asked if they thought it was important to read literature and why. Only two female students responded "no". One writes: "It's quite important but there are things which are more important." Among the most popular answers were "it develops your language" and/or "it develops your vocabulary." A recurring answer was the aspect of reading providing an "all-round education". The improvement of education and language was a recurring theme within the answers. Four students make reference to reading's ability to offer new perspectives. One student writes: "To see a glimpse in other worlds. It's good for education, as well as your imagination and perspective." Another student responds on a similar theme, but on a more succinct note: "I think you become a better person from a philosophical perspective."

## **Class 2**

Class 2 are studying the second year of a practically-oriented vocational programme. The class consists of 25 students – 9 females and 16 males. Graph 2.1 illustrates that although Class 2 do not respond as positively to the question as Class 1, 18 students have answered either "Yes" or "Sometimes." The real difference however is that 7 students (all male) have answered "No."

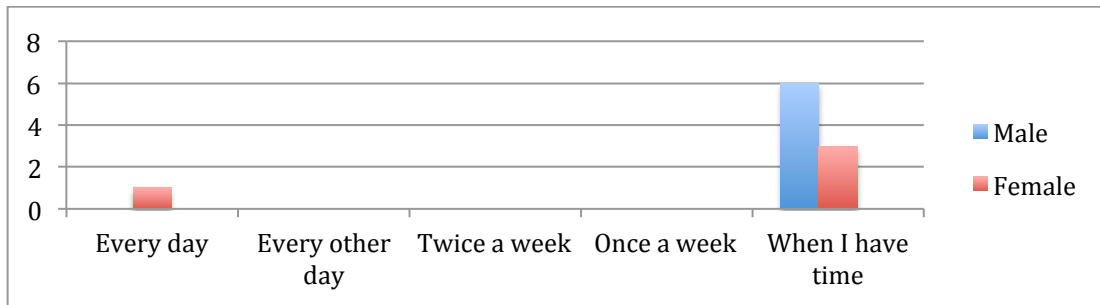


### 2.1 Do you like to read fiction?



### 2.2 Do you read in your spare time?

Graph 2.2 reveals a divide among the male students; half of the class choose to read in their spare time where the other half do not. Female students who do read in their spare time win over those who do not, by a small margin.

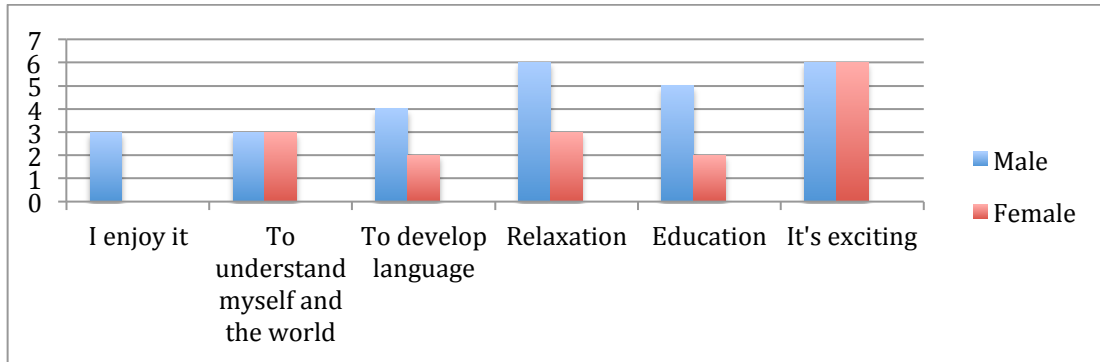


### 2.3 How often do you read?

Graph 2.3 illustrates that only 9 out of 25 students revealed how often they read. The most common answer among those is, like Class 1, "When I have time." However, some students chose to write their own answers. Some sample comments from female students include: "Once a month"; "Seldom, once a month"; "Quite seldom"; and "Some time each year." Some male students have answered: "Once a month"; "Often on holiday and when I take the bus home and to school"; and "I read sometimes in the summer when I'm sunbathing, max 2 books over the summer." The students who had answered "No" to the question "Do you read in your spare time?" were asked to explain why. "I don't have the time and I think it's more enjoyable to watch

a film instead of reading a book,” answered one female student. The male students write that reading is ”boring”, ”not interesting” or ”not fun.” One writes: ”I usually read only on holiday, like on the beach to have something to do.” Another answers: ”I think it’s easier and more enjoyable to watch a film or something similar.”

Class 2’s reading habits are dominated by romance, thrillers and ”teenage books” among the females. These include Denise Rudberg’s *Tillsammans* trilogy and the *Baristas* trilogy by the same author. The male-favoured genres in Class 2 include thrillers, adventure and fantasy, citing authors such as George R.R Martin, J.R.R Tolkien and Stephen King and books such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Hunger Games*. Three students (two males, one female) make reference to political books.



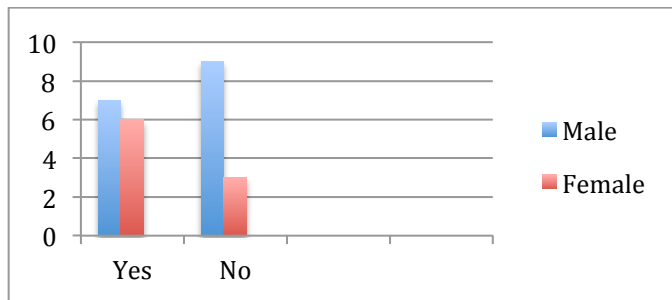
## 2.4 Why do you read?

Graph 2.4 illustrates a relatively even spread of reasons for reading among the class. As Class 1, Class 2 were instructed to indicate more than one answer if they thought it was applicable. An interesting statistic from this graph is that none of the females perceive reading to be an enjoyable activity. As with some of the previous questions, students were offered the chance to write their own answers. Some comments from female students include: ”In some books I feel that I recognise myself. I like that”; ”Something to do when you sunbathe”; and ”To discuss it with friends and siblings.” One male student writes ”Just to have something to do and it feels good”, where another leaves this intriguing comment: ”You have to.”

The books that have been read by Class 2 at school include *Ondskan* by Jan Guillou and *Utvandrarna* by Vilhem Moberg as part of their Swedish course. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and *Matched* by Ally Condie were read as part of the English course, to name

but a few. A notable observation was that all the female students and the majority of the males remembered at least three or more of the books that had been read in school. Three male students, however, could only recall one of the books that were read in either subject. The recurring opinion of these books is that they are "boring" and "hard to get in to." One female student writes "especially the Swedish ones." *Matched* (which was being read by the class at the time) is frequently mentioned, but only thought of as "good" by a couple of students. A handful of other students refer to it as "tedious". Although it is difficult to gauge a favourite among the class, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is referred to as the best by two students where opinions on *Ondskan* vary from "really good" to "I didn't like it at all." One male student writes of all the books: "Of course I thought they were all good in different ways. I prefer books that are about things you can relate to", while a female student offers a comment along similar lines: "Some are quite boring and old. Some are good when there's a lot happening and they're fairly new so you recognise yourself in it." The second most popular opinion among Class 2 is that the books are simply "OK." A lot of the students state a preference for wanting to read thrillers or "exciting" books in school. Another common view in Class 2 is that students would prefer to read about "teenage life" in school. The majority of the class simply write: "I don't know" in response.

Class 2's hobbies are dominated by physical activities such as football, handball, training, tennis or sport in general. The second most popular hobby is "spending time with friends." Playing computer games, watching films or television series are the third most popular spare time activities. Not a single student lists reading as a hobby. Students in Class 2 study at home on average three times a week, where only two students declare that they study every night. Otherwise, most students state that they study at home only when necessary. One male student writes: "Max once a month." Six out of the 25 students (five males, one female) indicate that they do not read newspapers. As with Class 1, the most popular newspapers with Class 2 are local publications. *Aftonbladet* is the second most popular, followed by *Expressen*. There are also a number of specialist sport and automobile magazines noted among the male students where the females list fashion magazines such as *Elle* and *Veckorevyn*.



### **2.5 Do you think it is important to read fiction?**

On whether the students of Class 2 consider reading fiction to be important, there is a clear divide in their opinions. Half of the class believe reading to be unimportant. Some of the comments from these particular students include: "I don't think it's important. You can learn things in other ways"; "It's really old and uninteresting"; "I don't think you will have great use for it in the future"; "As long as you can read, I don't see any point in doing it in school"; and "You can develop your language in another way, and these days young people don't like to read these kind of books." One student writes that fiction is "not always interesting, and often not realistic." Among those students who did perceive reading to be important, the most common theme within their comments indicates the benefits they feel reading has on a person's language, knowledge and all-round education. Two students in particular make almost identical points about being able to develop your language whilst relaxing at the same time: "You develop your vocabulary, can relax, learn about different emotions, learn to know yourself." "It's important for knowledge and work in the future," writes one female student, while a male student answers: "You gain a bigger perspective on things."

### **5.3. Results – A Summary**

Sven sees reading as an important activity which is pivotal in shaping a person's personality and the understanding of what it is to be a human being. He tries to incorporate it into his teaching as much as possible, but is limited sometimes due to the students' hectic schedules and workloads. His view is that, in general, students consider reading to be boring because it is not an activity which is among their main interests. Sven realises that most students want to read literature that they can relate to. Nevertheless he perseveres with older, challenging texts on account of their cultural importance. Sven accepts that film is the way in to reading. He also observes that social media has taken the place of reading due to the immediate gratification it provides. A problem

that Sven highlights is the concerning drop in reading proficiency within upper secondary education.

Class 1 and 2 contain many students that display a positive attitude towards literature. Class 2 (on the vocational programme) are roughly divided in their opinions with half viewing reading as unimportant. Class 1 are mostly positive towards the literature they come in contact with at school, as are a number of Class 2. The remainder of students view school texts as boring or tedious. The great majority of students in both classes see that reading is beneficial for all-round education and the development of language, vocabulary and learning. A good many students state preferences for reading literature in school aligned with their own interests, such as teenage fiction or fantasy. Both classes are heavily involved with a variety of sports and physical activities which dominates their spare time, while Class 1 (on the natural science programme) devote a good portion of free time to studying. Class 2, on the other hand, study only when necessary. Four out of 52 students list reading as a hobby.

## **6. Discussion**

The downside of a study of this kind is that it involves the opinions of a mere 52 students and only one teacher. The students are from two different educational programmes which is not representative of all the programmes available in upper secondary education. To reach a broader perspective it would have been more ideal to feature a larger number of classes from different programmes. Alternatively, one could say that *one* natural science class does not necessarily represent the views of all natural science students. Similarly, a broader perspective could have been reached via several interviews with practising teachers. Sven's views do not represent the views of *all* teachers. It can also be observed that the questionnaire only provides a cursory glance at the students' opinions via that particular research method. To interview students as well as teachers would provide a much deeper understanding of the issues discussed in this study. Due to the time constraints of this project it was necessary to implement the methods used, which at least go some way in investigating the project's issues.

In light of Sven's interview and the results of the student questionnaires, let us look at the points raised which encourage or hinder the students' incentives for reading. In *Svenskämnet &*

*svenskundervisningen – närbilder och helhetsperspektiv* (1999), Per Olov Svedner writes about finding a "way in" to literature. In Sven's case, this way in is the use of film and based on the students' comments it is apparent that films are more appealing to them than books. "I don't have the time and I think it's more enjoyable to watch a film instead of reading a book", writes one student. Incentives for reading are encouraged via the medium of film. What is revealing about the results is the popularity of certain books among the students. Books such as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Lord of the Rings* (1954), *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1991), *Divergent* (2011) and *Twilight* (2005) have all been adapted for film or television in recent years and all are now established Hollywood franchises. Adaptations of *The Hunger Games* (2012), *A Song of Ice and Fire (Game of Thrones - 2011)* and *Divergent* (2014) are yet to release their concluding instalments in cinemas and on television, thereby making the books increasingly popular. What this signifies is that film and television are influencing students' reading choices, which can be seen to be a way in to the literature. Films based on books are a stepping stone to the books themselves. Where texts in the fantasy or science-fiction genres may not be some teachers' first choices, one must recognise that the films are inspiring the students to read the source material. Many students state a preference for wanting to read these kind of books in school. Most notable is that Sven had in fact just begun to screen the film of *The Hunger Games* in association with the novel *Matched*. Even though he was admittedly sceptical of it at first, he was ultimately surprised at its relevance in the classroom. In other words, it is important for teachers to keep abreast of what is popular with their students as it could be utilised in the classroom at some point. This is exemplified by Sven's use of the film *The Hunger Games* which shows that he is open to adopting new methods when choosing texts.

What does this mean if teachers are to base their teaching of literature on these assumptions? If a literary classic, or indeed any novel, has been adapted for film or television does that essentially make these works more viable in the classroom? Are those the texts that teachers will consider looking to before literary classics which are yet to be adapted? If teachers are to adopt this approach in the teaching of literature then one is to assume that a teacher's knowledge must also expand to film as well as literature. The danger is that students will focus more upon the film than the text itself, paying more attention to their preferred medium. As Sven describes his methods for teaching Vilhelm Moberg's *Utvandrarna*, he asks his students to read only a few chapters of

the book. The rest of the story is given to the students via the film, which demonstrates that less of the book is being read as a consequence. However much time it may take for Sven to screen a film in lessons, it does result in students experiencing the "text" in a much shorter space of time. As a teaching resource, that is surely to be valued in the students' busy schedules. *Att arbeta med skönlitteratur i skolan – praktik och teori* (2005) by Bengt Brodow and Kristina Rininsland is a questionnaire study involving 26 teachers in secondary and upper secondary Swedish education. A chapter on film in teaching reveals numerous ways in how film is incorporated in the teaching of literature, cited by the participating teachers.<sup>27</sup> As well as using film as a way in to the text, film is used to introduce literary periods in history. It serves as a replacement for difficult texts and it functions as preparation for literary analysis. In other words, film is used not just as an easier version of the text, but as a resource which facilitates the study of its content and themes. Above all, the film must serve as a path to the text.<sup>28</sup>

It is worth examining how Kathleen McCormick's theories on general and literary repertoires fits in with Sven's use of *The Hunger Games*. There seems to be a blending of student-teacher literary repertoires. As McCormick writes in *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* (1994), literary repertoires consist of a reader's "knowledge and assumptions about what literature 'is' or 'should be' based on their previous reading experiences and the assumptions about reading they have absorbed from the literary and general ideologies of their culture."<sup>29</sup> By capitalising on the students' tastes in Young Adult fiction, Sven is benefiting from the use of the students' literary repertoires, even though they are quite different to his own. On the whole, Sven seems to rely on his own literary repertoire when choosing his texts. He says: "I make a choice, that's my opinion, that this is a good book, I think you should have read this book. You should have met these characters [...] You will meet them in one way or another in life." Sven's text choice is informed by what he describes as "cultural heritage" which speaks not only of his own

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<sup>27</sup> Brodow & Rininsland (2005). *Att arbeta med skönlitteratur i skolan – praktik och teori*. p.184-188

<sup>28</sup> The focus of my D-assignment was the use of film in Swedish teaching which highlighted many aspects which are discussed here. The main findings of my research was that film is often used as a complement to fictional texts and a resource to facilitate the teaching of literary history. In short, my previous research also proved that films were utilised to great extent as a way in to literature.

<sup>29</sup> McCormick, p.84-85



literary repertoire, but a universal literary repertoire that he believes the students have a right to come in contact with. However, he also makes several references to what can be categorised as his general repertoire. To return to McCormick's definition, a general repertoire is "a set of culturally conditioned experiences, beliefs, knowledge and expectations, about such matters as politics, lifestyle, love, education, integrity, and so forth."<sup>30</sup> Sven talks about how literature should reflect "what it's like to be a human being." Several students write in their questionnaires of their reasons for reading and whether they see the reading as important. One student writes: "I think you become a better person from a philosophical perspective"; while another responds "You gain a bigger perspective on things." The fact that some students – albeit only a few – recognise that reading helps them to understand the world and themselves must be seen as a key point in this discussion.

Gunilla Molloy and Per Olov Svedner both raise the issue of "contact points" in their respective texts. Contact points are what draws a student to a text; its appeal and overall relevance. A contact point is the characteristic of the text which makes the student able to relate to it. Sven says that "it's almost impossible to find one book that relates to all the students in the class." A female student from Class 1 would prefer to read "teenage books that you can relate to" in school. One of the curriculum's directives for reading fiction is to offer students different perspectives – an aspect Sven addresses in the interview. This presents something of a "catch-22" situation. Students want books they can relate to. The curriculum emphasises the issue of showing students a variety of different people's perspectives through the reading of literature. However, the teacher – in this case, Sven – cannot truly fulfill this criteria because many students are only interested in reading texts wherein they can recognise themselves. Therefore, a teacher could see themselves as limited in their choice of texts if they are only to choose ones which offer a perspective similar to that of a Swedish teenager's life. Despite this conundrum Sven perseveres with Moberg's novel because he believes it is something that should be taught. Finding a text or contact point for a class of students is problematic to say the least, but it does seem to be a key aspect of encouraging reading.

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<sup>30</sup> McCormick, p.79

But relating to the texts are not the only problem. A preferred genre of the female students in Class 1 is described as "reality-based" or "true" stories. This particular theme is the focus of Annette Årheim's thesis *När realismen blir orealistisk* (2007). Årheim recognises that reality-based or autobiographical texts – otherwise known as "faction" – are growing increasingly popular with young people today. On the other hand, a great deal of students are interested in the fantasy and science fiction genres, such as *The Hunger Games* or the *Game of Thrones* books. These are texts which are very much unrealistic. When it comes to the reading preferences of the students, their tastes seem to veer from one extreme to the other. Sven's classroom texts are met with mixed reactions; some students remark that the novels such as *Ondskan* by Jan Guillou (1981) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini (2007) are excellent, where others view them as simply "OK" or "boring." The texts that students read in school are a departure from their own reading tastes which is leading to a lukewarm reaction to the literature. A teaching method that could prove effective is incorporating students' reading preferences by finding possible parallels with literary classics. This would not only capitalise on the students' own interests, but renew and encourage their own incentives for reading. Understandably, this may be easier said than done. Bengt Brodow and Kristina Rininsland examine how texts are chosen in their questionnaire study. The three most important factors surrounding text choice among those participating are: the teacher's didactic goals; the teacher's knowledge of the students' maturity and ability to engage with literary texts; and lastly, the students' own recommendations and wishes.<sup>31</sup> Brodow and Rininsland reveal that letting students be involved in the process of text choice is certainly viewed as democratic by most teachers, but several teachers believe they have a responsibility to offer texts that will offer some kind of challenge and that it should ultimately be the teacher who chooses. The topic of text choice appears to be a tug of war between getting students to read something appealing but, above all, educational.

An aspect that was absent from the chapter 'Previous Research' but notably apparent from Sven's interview and the student's questionnaires, is the issue of time. Sven feels limited as to when he can introduce the reading of novels due to the students' busy schedules. This in turn limits him in when he can incorporate fiction into his teaching. "I can just imagine what would happen if I put a book in front of them and asked them to read it now. It wouldn't be possible", he says. The

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<sup>31</sup> Brodow & Rininsland. p.130

great majority of Class 1 state that they study every night. One student writes: "There is so much to do with school." Another writes: "I don't have the time." This is perhaps the one *practical* reason within this study that is preventing the students from reading, as opposed to a reason that deals with, as Sven describes it, "a question of attitude." An abundance of schoolwork seems to be the common issue. On the other hand, one is to only glance at the variety of hobbies that the students have to realise that they also *make* time for a good deal of other things. The question seemingly comes down to priorities. Reading is not prioritised because students deem studying, training, football or other sports as *more* important. "I prioritise other things" writes a student in Class 1. In this respect, it is difficult to know how to go forward when faced with such a problem. Some students find time to read fiction every day. Most, however, do not. Reading may be viewed by the majority of students as important, but just not important enough.

A critical, contributing factor to this debate is that reading is seen by so many students as "boring". One student writes: "I usually read only on holiday, like on the beach to have something to do." Another describes reading as "something to do when you sunbathe". Non-readers see reading only as a last resort activity – something to do when there is nothing else to do. Reading is considered arduous, time consuming, difficult, tedious and unimportant. Several students write of how difficult it is to "get in to" books, having neither the time, nor the patience. Students prefer the immediacy of social media for the interaction it provides, as Svens says. As Per Olov Svedner writes, reading is an activity that "makes considerable demands on the reader's stamina".<sup>32</sup> Reading requires focus and concentration, something that social media requires only in short bursts. This in turn seems to have affected Sven's approach to classics such as Vilhelm Moberg's *Utvandrarna*, as was discussed earlier. Sven's students no longer read the whole text, but five or six chapters. The rest of the book's content is communicated via the film adaptation, yet more proof of film being used as a supplementary "way in" to the literature. One might argue that this is giving the students a watered down version of the text. Or, it could be said that Sven has adapted his teaching methods on account of the students' reactions to *Utvandrarna*, making use of the expanded text concept which was discussed in the 'Previous research' chapter.

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<sup>32</sup> Svedner. p.42

Sven observes in the interview that students who read novels and newspapers are the ones who will get the "good jobs." He asks a vital question about the ones who do not read: "What will happen to them?" As the results of the questionnaire show, Class 1 studying the natural science programme have a more positive attitude towards reading. Several of the students count reading among their spare time interests. Class 2, studying the vocational programme, are divided in their opinions, but the ones who do not read are adamant that it is not important to them. These results are strikingly similar to Gun Malmgren's interview study *Gymnasiekulturer. Lärare och elever om svenska och kultur* (1992) which was discussed in the 'Previous research' chapter. Malmgren's research with the male-dominated metalwork class showed students who disliked reading fiction, much like Class 2. The natural science class in Malmgren's study also proves similar to Class 1. The majority of students in Class 1 read in their spare time (when time allows) and consider reading to be important. Some students name Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë as their favourites, much as Malmgren's natural science class who counted authors such as Tolstoj and Balzac among theirs. What the results of the questionnaire reinforces is that those students who are more interested in theoretical education programmes are more likely to read than those reading practically-oriented ones. Sven believes that this particular social phenomenon will "widen the gap between the classes." One could argue that Sven is suggesting society is split into how he describes "those who read and those who don't." What is encouraging is that despite Class 2's unfavourable views of reading, these account for roughly half of the class' opinions. Half of Class 2 considers reading to be important and therefore this gives a little hope to break down the aforementioned "stereotype", if it can be described as such. What should be examined further is those who do not see reading as important. What can be said to those students who feel that reading will not benefit them in the future or do not even see the point of reading in school? What can be said to these students to make them think otherwise?

Perhaps the strongest argument for reading lies in the notion that it enhances other skills and abilities. Reading fiction helps students in other subjects, not just Swedish and English. Reading helps develop a heightened understanding of language, which is a universally helpful skill. An article from Skolverket's website – *Läsning handlar inte bara om svenskämnet* (2011) – highlights research carried out by professor Caroline Liberg at Uppsala University which

addresses this problem.<sup>33</sup> Liberg states that many Swedish teachers fail to incorporate a variety of tasks connected with reading that actually helps develop the reading skill. These tasks include such things as identifying the central message of the text; getting students to explain that they have *understood* what they have read; comparing the text with the students' own experiences; and predicting what will happen next in the text. All such tasks can be utilised to boost students reading skills, writes Liberg. When the students of this study were asked about why they considered reading to be important, the most oft-cited reason was because it provides an "all-round education." To return to Per Olov Svedner's words on this theme, he writes that the reading of fiction in school can "stimulate the students' productivity in oral and written tasks" and "their ambition of creativity." He also summarises reading as the attainment of "knowledge through literature."<sup>34</sup> Sven believes that "it's hard to explain to them that reading *helps* them in school in other subjects. They can manage their studies better if they are readers. It's very hard, very difficult to make them understand and see the connection between reading and being successful in other subjects." It is probable that Sven has many examples of situations to reinforce his comments here but, based on the students' responses, the results show that a good deal of students understand how much reading helps them with their overall education, in contrast to Sven's view. When asked why they choose to read literature, one student writes: "You have to."

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<sup>33</sup> Skolverket (2011). *Läsning handlar inte bara om svenskämnet*.

<http://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/forskning/amnen-omraden/spraklig-kompetens/undervisning/lasning-handlar-inte-bara-om-svenskamnet-1.121753>

<sup>34</sup> Svedner (1999). *Svenskämnet & svenskundervisningen – närbilder och helhets perspektiv*. p.42

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## **7.1. Appendix 1 : Interview questions**

- 1) What activities/tasks do you do in connection with the reading of fictional texts?
- 2) How much emphasis do you place on reading in your teaching?
- 3) From your own experience, what is your view on students' attitudes towards reading?
- 4) Are there any particular texts that work well with students?
- 5) What kind of texts do students find the most difficult?
- 6) In your opinion, is there anything that could be done to encourage students to read more?
- 7) Can you think of any reasons outside the classroom why students may encounter difficulties with reading?
- 8) How important is reading to you personally?
- 9) What do you read and does this have an influence on your choice of classroom texts?

## 7.2. Appendix 2 : Questionnaire

1. Tycker du om att läsa skönlitteratur? **Man ( ) Kvinna ( )**

Ja ( ) Nej ( ) Ibland ( ) Vet ej ( )

2. Läser du på din fritid?

Ja ( ) Nej ( ) Om du har svarat Ja gå vidare till fråga 4.

3. Hur ofta läser du?

Varje dag ( )

Varannan dag ( )

Två gånger i veckan ( )

En gång i veckan ( )

När jag har tid ( )

Annat svar \_\_\_\_\_

4. Om du har svarat Nej på fråga 2, förklara varför du inte läser.

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5. Vad läser du för böcker? Ange gärna titlar, författare, genre.

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6. Varför läser du? Gärna sätta kryss i mer än ett svarsalternativ.

Det är roligt ( ) För avkoppling ( ) Vet ej ( )

För att förstå mig själv och omvärlden ( ) För bildning ( )

Att utveckla språket ( ) Det är spännande ( )



Annat svar \_\_\_\_\_

7. Vad tycker du om böckerna du har läst i skolan? Gärna sätta ett kryss i mer än ett svarsalternativ.

- |               |     |             |     |            |     |
|---------------|-----|-------------|-----|------------|-----|
| Bra           | ( ) | Relevant    | ( ) | Dåligt     | ( ) |
| Intressant    | ( ) | För lätt    | ( ) | Tråkigt    | ( ) |
| Lärorik       | ( ) | Lagom lätt  | ( ) | Jobbigt    | ( ) |
| Känslomässig  | ( ) | För svårt   | ( ) | Irrelevant | ( ) |
| Tankeväckande | ( ) | Lagom svårt | ( ) | Okej       | ( ) |
| Spännande     | ( ) | Roligt      | ( ) | Vet ej     | ( ) |

Annat svar \_\_\_\_\_

8. Vilka böcker har du läst nyligen i kurserna Svenska/Engelska?

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9. Vilka böcker skulle du vilja läsa i skolan?

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10. Vad har du för fritidsintressen?

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11. Hur ofta pluggar du hemma?

Varje kväll ( )

Varannan kväll ( )

Två gånger om veckan ( )

Tre gånger om veckan ( )

Annat svar \_\_\_\_\_

12. Läser du tidningar eller tidskrifter? I så fall, vilka?

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13) Tycker du att det är viktigt att man läsa? Förklara varför eller varför inte.

Ja ( )    Nej ( )

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**Tack för din medverkan!**