



# 6. Ecodialogues about picturebooks

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**Abstract** How can reading and engaging in ecocritical literary dialogues about picturebooks in initial teacher education enhance student teachers' environmental awareness? This chapter presents results from a case study in teacher education exploring the potential for developing awareness of environmental issues through literary texts among student teachers. The case study examines student teachers' dialogues in literature circles, discussing the literary texts *The Savage* (Almond & McKean, 2008) and *The Rabbits* (Marsden & Tan, 1998).

**Keywords** ecocritical dialogues | literature circles | higher education | critical approach

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a case study involving student teachers' dialogues about literary texts and highlights the potential role literary studies may play in becoming environmentally aware. Being environmentally aware means developing an understanding of how our behaviour impacts the environment and perhaps also committing to making changes to our activities to protect the planet. Engaging in children's literature and participating in dialogues through reading and discussing literature, focussing on environmental issues, may function as a way to develop critically and environmentally aware readers. Environmental issues are complex since there are layers of approaches to identify such issues and multiple ways to address them. Thus, discourses on environmental awareness are imperative to include in education in order to develop participants' understanding of disparate perspectives on such complex issues. One way to address environmental awareness is what Greta Gaard (2008) has articulated as *ecopedagogy*. According to Gaard (2008, p. 326), ecopedagogy aims to promote "environmental literacy", which involves ecological knowledge of local, regional, and global perspectives and how

these are interconnected. Furthermore, Gaard emphasises the need to take action and to be active. Being an active participant in education may take many forms. One way can be to identify relations between humans and nature, consider the relationship between these beings, and discuss this with others. This can, for example, be done through reading and discussing literary texts in the classroom. This approach is important because reading and discussing literary texts may develop participants' understanding of themselves and the world (Nussbaum, 1997) and thus potentially lead to *Bildung*. *Bildung* is the development of Self and addresses *how* the individual develops their own knowledge and competence (Klafki, 1996). Dialogic teaching and learning (Alexander, 2020; Bakhtin, 1986; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Wegerif, 2007) is one way to be involved in developing one's own thinking and in creating knowledge and understanding. Robin Alexander (2020) holds that dialogic teaching "aims to liberate the voice and thinking of the student, so in the dialogic classroom, agency is indivisible, and the imperative of acquiring and internalising options applies to the student too" (p. 133). Neil Mercer and Karen Littleton (2007) call this talk between people in an educational setting "interthinking", understood as a way to think creatively and productively together (p. 1). Furthermore, Mercer and Littleton (2007) focus particularly on "exploratory talk", which will be addressed in this study by examining dialogues from a classroom in teacher training. Exploratory talk is when everyone in a conversation "engages critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). This will be addressed further in the theory section.

There is a need to explore practices of education for environmental awareness (Sterling, 2021), and this chapter focuses on dialogues using small-group, peer-led literature circles (Daniels, 1994) with pre-service students in English as a second language. The case study project reported on here is founded in applied educational research aiming to develop and implement a methodology for conducting ecocritical dialogues about literary multimodal texts as a way of increasing awareness of environmental issues. The encounters through reading texts and discussing the texts with peers are intended to encourage environmental awareness. Student teachers' negotiations of concepts relating to sustainability and environmental issues, addressed through reading literary texts and discussions with peers through pre-assigned roles, may develop an awareness of and interest in these issues, which is also paramount for future teachers in school. To address the need to focus more on the learners, literature circles (Daniels, 2002) were employed. Literature circles are learner-centred discussion groups which promote students' collaborative competence and facilitate student engagement. Participating in dia-

logues and actively engaging in discussions with peers may potentially promote critical thinking (Devick-Fry & LeSage, 2010; Guanio-Uluru, 2019).

The theoretical underpinning in this chapter is on reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995) and *Bildung* in tandem with dialogic education (Bakhtin, 1986; Littleton & Mercer, 2007) to address the pertinent need for ecopedagogy in the classroom (Bjørndal & Lieberg, 1975; Gaard, 2008, 2009; Garrard, 2012; Kahn, 2010). Thus, the focus in this chapter is about how students can participate in conversations and practice voicing their opinions of their understanding of environmental issues about picturebooks through ecodialogues.

## CLASSROOM DIALOGUE ABOUT LITERATURE: DIALOGIC EDUCATION

Most discussions about literary texts in Norwegian classrooms are performed in full class. The teacher often initiates and leads the discussions, asking questions and giving feedback (Blikstad-Balas & Roe, 2020; Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Aase, 2005). Though there are a number of studies about literature conversations in the classroom, only a few studies address discussions about literary texts in the classroom where the emphasis is on the content of the literary texts or on the learners' own thoughts on the texts (Blikstad-Balas & Roe, 2020). What Marte Blikstad-Balas and Astrid Roe (2020) and Ida Loddingen Gabrielsen, Marte Blikstad-Balas, and Michael Tengberg (2019) found was that the primary work on literary texts in the classroom is focussed on genre, or on using the literary texts as a starting point for learners' own writing, rather than on their literary experience or on specific textural features. Moreover, only a few studies have examined smaller, learner-centred groups, particularly discussing environmental issues. Nina Goga and Maria Pujol-Valls's study (2020) shows how student teachers ecocritically engage with a picturebook. Lykke Guanio-Uluru (2019) also worked with learner-centred groups, developing ecocritical literature circles. What this means is that the learners' own thinking, their reader response and collective thoughts about the themes and emotions in literary texts, may engage learners to think about needs to be addressed more closely, to elicit creative and critical thinking. The theoretical underpinning and ontological approaches in this chapter are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, which focus on dialogic discourse, reader response, and *Bildung*.

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) concept of dialogic discourse encompasses meaning making and understanding through utterances, which is part of a chain of utterances. Bakhtin discusses the reader's relation to the text and the polyphony of

voices in the relation between the reader and the text (Helin, 2015). Similarly, in a verbal dialog the speaker and the receiver engage in conversation, which encompasses a chain of utterances and responses and the interplay between the multiple voices in which both the speaker and the listener take part, through which active participants in a dialogue together create meaning. Each utterance makes meaning and reverberates everyone's experiences, positions, and understandings of the world.

Likewise, Louise Rosenblatt (1995), renowned for reader response theory, underscores in her "transactional theory" that both the reader and the text play important roles in the formation of meaning. Similarly, there is a close relationship between reading and speaking (or writing for that matter) in the transaction and negotiation of own ideas and own thinking through the utterances of others and the relation between participants in a dialogue. Rosenblatt emphasises that the transaction between the reader – who actualises the meaning potential of the text – and the text creates meaning. This is a process which happens within the reader. The transaction between the reader and the text is crucial in the reading process and constitutes a *dialogue* since the reader is actively selecting the potential from the text, drawing on his or her own knowledge and experience. Nevertheless, in a classroom setting, the way the teacher designs and instigates learning may impact the reading experiences and subsequent dialogic spaces for the learners.

Even though impact cannot be seen immediately, the long-term effect of reading literature cannot be underestimated. Focussing on *Bildung*, or formation, and development of Self means that learning goes beyond what can be measured (Grimm, 2014, p. 253) and may have long-term impact on learners' views, beliefs, attitudes, and values. *Bildung* presupposes knowledge and competence. However, knowledge and competence do not in themselves necessarily lead to *Bildung*, since developing *Bildung* requires reflection and critical thinking (Klafki, 1996). To bridge the gap between knowledge and reflection, dialogic education, which is also part of a democratic process, may help and guide on the way. Ole A. Kvamme (2021) further emphasises Wolfgang Klafki's position in his later works on the danger of cementing national and normative views in education, and Kvamme recaps Klafki's view that education should be "initiating students in unresolved societal challenges that determine their future" (Kvamme, 2021, p. 5).

Concomitantly, concepts such as "Bildung" and "deep learning" or "literary analytical approaches" and "reader response" thus may impact someone's beliefs, attitudes, and values (Hopmann, 2007). Hopmann (2007) asserts that:

*Bildung* reminds us that the meeting itself and its outcome are not embedded in the content or given by the teaching, but only emerge on site, then and there

where the meeting between a particular student and a particular content happens. Then, *Bildung* is what remains beyond this situated engagement. (p. 115)

What Hopmann means by “*Bildung* is what remains” is not possible for teachers to assess, but may stay with the person beyond the situation. Parallel to Rosenblatt’s aesthetic reading, where the reader may live through the characters and the emotion may stay with the person beyond the classroom situation, years later, *Bildung* happens and develops through experiences. What remains beyond the situation is not measurable. However, *Bildung*, or formation processes, presupposes activity and a living interaction not only between humans and the world, but also between all living creatures. Whether or not interventions are designed to make an impact, it is impossible to know what will remain with learners in years to come. One can only hope that teachers’ input and implications of didactic ideas may stimulate critical thinking and leave learners with understanding of Self and Others. According to Nussbaum (2016), the long-term effect on learning, particularly through reading literary texts, seems limitless, or as asserted by Rosenblatt, while reading literary texts, “the reader must have the experience and ‘live through’ what is being created during the reading” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 33).

Moreover, to participate in classroom dialogues, the ability to employ metalanguage within literary analysis (Skaftun, 2008; Skarstein, 2013) in discussions seems to enable participants to demonstrate knowledge and clarity of thinking. Those who are familiar with metalanguage not only show an ability to lead the discussion but are also able to introduce new ideas and concepts and to invite the others to take part in the conversation.

To consider how the students engage with the texts and each other, Littleton and Mercer’s three topologies of talk are useful tools. They outline three ways of talk: “disputational talk”, “cumulative talk”, and “exploratory talk” (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, pp. 58–59). “Disputational talk” allows “disagreement and individualised decision making”, whereas in “cumulative talk” speakers “build positively on what the others have said.” While engaging in “explorative talk” participants “engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas” (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, pp. 58–59). Exploratory talk is perhaps the most interesting because while engaging in exploratory talk, the participants are critical but also constructive. Exploratory talk is defined as:

- everyone engages critically but constructively with each other’s ideas;
- everyone offers the relevant information they have;
- everyone’s ideas are treated as worthy of consideration;

- partners ask each other questions and answer them, ask for reasons and give them;
- members of the group try to reach agreement at each stage before progressing;
- to an observer of the group, reasoning is “visible” in the talk.

(Littleton & Mercer, 2013, p. 16)

It is particularly interesting to consider the participants’ level of agreement. Lars Laird Iversen (2016) claims that it is okay to voice disagreement as that would enhance democratic values and develop critical thinking, rather than repeating someone else’s thinking. In the following section, what constitutes “ecocritical dialogic education” will be addressed and exemplified through ecodialogues.

## ECOPEDAGOGY AND DIALOGIC TEACHING: ECODIALOGUES

In 1975, Bjarne Bjørndal and Sigmund Lieberg introduced the concept of “ecopedagogy” in their book *Introduction to Ecopedagogy*. Internationally, ecopedagogy has gained increasing impetus in parallel with the climate crises and the necessity to identify and recognise environmental challenges at a local and global level and interconnected relation between needs. Informed by the waves of environmental issues which Rachel Carson puts on the agenda in her *Silent Spring* (1967) and Arne Naess’s theories of deep ecology in the 1970s (1989), Bjørndal and Lieberg argued that humans are inseparable from the biological and physical environment (1975).

The need to take action is voiced by Richard Kahn (2008), Greta Gaard (2008, 2009), and Greg Garrard (2012). Kahn promotes what he calls “cognitive praxis” and outlines three ways of ecopedagogy. Drawing on Freiran critical pedagogy, Khan suggests that ecopedagogy seeks to develop approaches of “the technical/functional, the cultural, and the critical” and these should be “seen as holistically complimentary to one another, overlapping, though not in a hierarchical, logical, or linear relationship” (Kahn, 2008, p. 9). The technical/functional ecoliteracy is now commonly known as “environmental literacy” (Gaard, 2009; Warlenius, 2022). *Cultural* ecoliteracy extends the understanding of nature and ecology beyond “Western science” and acknowledges “different epistemological relationships to nature” (Kahn, 2008, p. 10) such as traditional and indigenous ecological knowledge. *Critical* ecoliteracy adds a perspective of power and politics.

Garrard stresses the importance of highlighting that the key to student-centred learning is *responsibility* rather than *entitlement* (2012, p. 3), which means that participants should be more active. Thus, this may as such promote learners' abilities to act constructively and responsibly in an interconnected world (Fassbinder, 2012, p. 1), where questions and discussion about the environment play important roles. In an educational setting, what seems to be pertinent, or perhaps at least feasible to aim for in a classroom, is to create *awareness* of ecocritical thinking.

The study aimed to consider whether dialogues about environmental issues using adapted reading roles emphasise awareness of environmental issues and to address the question: How can ecodialogues enhance student teachers' understanding of environmental issues through discussions and dialogues with peers?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

### Research design

The data reported on here is a case study conducted in 2018 with 14 second-year, pre-service students in the second year of teacher education in Norway, studying the subject of English as a second language. The participants engaged in literature circle dialogues in groups, which were audio recorded digitally with one device on the desk for each group. The student teachers were required to speak English throughout their discussions. The discussions in the groups were not subject to assessment. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and analysed qualitatively. The participants were divided into groups of three and four, which I had selected randomly, where both genders were represented, with pre-assigned reading roles (see Figure 6.1 below), which they prepared prior to the dialogues in the group discussions. They were asked to read the text and submit a summary of their roles individually in the study platform. These summaries were meant as preparations and as a means to ensure that the students had done some ground-work but were not part of the study. Each round of literature circles lasted approximately 30 minutes per group. In total, there were two cycles of literature circles per group, each lasting 30 minutes, which equals one hour of recorded data per group. The discussions and tape recordings were carried out in two cycles primarily to allow the students to explore their roles with two sets of texts. Prior to the literature circles the students were given lectures on "posthumanism" (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016) and the "NatCul matrix" (Goga et al., 2018, p. 12). The NatCul matrix is an organic figure of thought which has two continua, in a matrix. The horizontal continuum is from anthropocentric horizon to ecocentric horizon, and

the vertical continuum is from celebrating horizon to problematising. The organic figure is circumscribed with the idea of *techne*, which accentuates how technology influences our understanding of the world around us as well as how verbal expressions develop our comprehension of representations of nature and culture.

Many studies report on the use of literature circles in higher education, including studies in English as a second language (ESL), focussing on the dialogue itself, content-based learning, and reading literacy. However, only a few studies have included adapted roles to suit a particular theme as a lens into the text (Devick-Fry & LeSage, 2010; Miller, 2007). One such study employed tailored ecocritical reading roles (Guanio-Uluru, 2019). In Guanio-Uluru's study, Daniels's reading roles were modified to suit the purpose of engaging students in ecocritical discussions in order to create awareness of concepts of nature, inviting student teachers to engage directly with an ecocritical perspective. Two of the reading roles in the project reported on here, "nature scribe" and "plant and animal watcher", were drawn from Guanio-Uluru (2019), whereas "wilderness detector" was a new role created for this project to suit the literary texts in question. The fourth role was the "word wizard", which is one of Daniels's (2002) traditional roles, which was meant to help focus on words and expressions related to the text. Below are the adapted ecocritical roles and the prompts the students responded to in their literature circle discussions:

**Nature scribe:** find places in the text depicting/describing nature and the environment/landscape. What role does nature play in the:

- a) plot
- b) characterisation (description of the characters)?

Does nature play a symbolic role in the text?

**Plant and animal watchers:** pay particular attention to how plants and animals are described/presented. Find samples for discussion.

Are plants and animals presented as valuable in themselves or are they only significant relative to their use for humans?

What role(s) do plants and animals play in the story?

**Wilderness detector:** find places of wilderness. What role does the use of wilderness play in the

- a) plot
- b) characterisation (description of the characters)?

Does wilderness play a symbolic role in the text?

**Word wizards** find words and expressions that are important references to and of nature in the text as a whole.

**Figure 6.1.** The adapted reading roles and their prompts.



The “nature scribe” and “wilderness detector” ask the students to identify and find signs of “nature” or “wilderness” in the text, and the students were asked to relate their findings to “plot” and “characterisation” and whether they play a symbolic role in the text. Plot and characterisation are literary devices, known from literary analysis. The “plant and animal watcher” role is meant to detect and recognise plants and animals in the text. The prompt about whether plants and animals are valuable in themselves or only significant relative to their use for humans highlights the subversive view of posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019), underpinning the question. The posthumanist (Braidotti, 2019) views all living and non-living creatures to be equal. The “word wizard” is somewhat more recognisable from language acquisition in the classroom. This role is meant to tease out and primarily identify words or expressions the students perceive as important references to and of nature (see Figure 6.1), which likely will be related to nature themes due to the prompt of the role. The intention with the pre-assigned roles is to open up collaborative learning for readers to read better and discuss better. The roles are descriptive, yet open-ended, allowing interlocking and interconnecting discussions.

The reading roles were presented to the students a week prior to the literature circle dialogues. The questions making up the roles were meant to help and guide the students to understand how to focus on a particular role. Follow-up instructions (see Figure 6.1) for each role were designed to inspire ecocritical thinking (Guanio-Uluru, 2019). These were meant as guidelines rather than being descriptive and normative.

The prompts’ potential for instigating ecocritical dialogues among students seemed considerable through connecting with the texts themselves (Bakhtin, 1986; Iser, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1995) while reading and ultimately engaging in dialogues with their peers (Littleton & Mercer, 2013).

## Material

The two literary texts, *The Rabbits* (Marsden & Tan, 1998) and *The Savage* (Almond & McKean, 2008), served as the material to exemplify texts that may stimulate discussions on ecocritical questions and that have potential with respect to education of sustainability. The texts were chosen also because of their potential for engaging in ecocritical thinking, particularly as both texts may be interpreted as ways of challenging the nature-culture dichotomy (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016; Goga et al., 2018). Though the picturebook *The Rabbits* may be understood as an analogy of the British invasion of Australia and can thus be read as a reiteration of historical events, it can also be read as an analogy of anthropogenic impact

on Earth and the devastating implications of the Anthropocene, the time of the humans (Rimmereide, 2018). *The Savage*, a hybrid graphic novel, is about Blue, where Blue narrates the story about Savage as a way to come to terms with the grief of having lost his father. Savage, who is narrated as a story within the story, lives in the woods. Blue visits the woods, the wilderness, where Savage lives. Initially, Blue may be said to represent culture, whereas Savage represents nature. The development of the characters and the meeting between the two protagonists not only merge the two stories but potentially challenge the nature-culture dichotomy (Mallan, 2018).

The dialogues prompted discussions about animals, nature, and humans and connections between these with both texts. The dialogues about *The Rabbits* also included notions of intercultural competence as the participants made historical references, whereas *The Savage* inspired discussions about cognitive and emotional processes that children go through. The importance of the close relations and experiences with nature for children was also highlighted in the discussion, which is important for growing up and developing as humans (Bildung).

### *Data analysis*

The selected transcripts, which are full transcripts of the dialogues, were chosen to include samples of dialogue from disparate groups engaged in dialogues, including both texts. The samples of dialogue include instances where the students engage in conversations demonstrating environmental awareness. The ecodialogues are discussed using Littleton and Mercer's three topologies of talk: "disputational talk", "cumulative talk", and "exploratory talk" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, pp. 58–59), exploring instances of these in the dialogues to consider how the students engage with the texts and with each other.

### *Ethical considerations*

All participants signed an informed consent form, and relevant documentation regarding the research project was approved by the Social Science Data Services (NSD). Potential limitations of the study may be caused by two factors. The fact that conversations were tape recorded may have impacted some of the participants' free speech. Furthermore, the researcher's presence in the room may also have impacted the participants' performance, referred to as the Hawthorne effect (Parsons, 1974). The researcher was present in both rounds of data collection and functioned primarily as a source of technical help with the tape-recording devices which were provided for each group.

## FINDINGS

In the findings section, extracts are selected on the basis of the students' responses to the prompt structure of the literature circle roles, the turn taking in the dialogue, and content in the conversations.

The approaches that the different groups underwent varied. One of the groups was rather systematic about how they approached the task as they simply prompted each other about what they had prepared and went to the next role with limited interaction and engagement with each other. Only towards the end of the dialogue did the students start engaging with the texts there and then and engaging with each other. This lack of interaction with each other leans more towards what Mercer and Littleton (2013) refer to as disputational talk. The students did not disagree with each other; rather, they simply did not interact with each other's statements. On the contrary, they were quite supportive in a limited communicative way through a lot of "hmhm" and "yeah" (see Exchange 1 below). Despite all the agreeing, by not being in opposition, the students did not challenge each other to critically think too much about what the others said. They seemed to be studying and discovering the book together, uncovering references to nature as they discussed and engaged with the text. One instance of metalanguage (Skarstein, 2013), a reference to "ecocriticism" (Exchange 1, S3), did not lead to further discussion at a meta level. Having said that, the students almost inadvertently displayed analytical competence as they comment on the plot and characterisation and were being analytical about the book's theme. They comment that instead of the environmental reading of the text, they see the text more as being about human nature, which is also a valid analysis considering the book's themes. Both in groups 1 and 2, there are instances of cumulative talk, where the students agree on every aspect the other students bring in, thus building positively on what the others have said, such as S1 who states that "I agree with you" and gives the supportive "hmhm" and "yeah".

### **Group 1, *The Savage***

S3. But I kind of feel, well thinking back to like about ecocriticism and things like that, I don't feel like the author is trying to make us think that much about nature...

S1, S2, S4. No!

S3. I didn't get the impression of that.

S1. No, I agree with you. The only thing I kind of found was the cigarette and the littering of that. I couldn't find anything especial, especially about ...

S2. ... nature.

S1. The environment or nature.

S2. It's almost like more human nature, that like...

S1, S3. Hmhm, yeah.

However, most groups interacted more and responded with their peers, such as Group 2.

In group 2 they also confirmed and strengthened each other's utterances, though using "yeah", as a way to concur. Group 2 may be said to be somewhat more exploratory as their utterances were more developed and elaborated and explored further, such as the concept of "wild", moving from wildlife (Group 2, S1) to wild, and raw and being a savage.

### **Group 2, *The Savage***

S1. But why do you think he chose to write about the Savage, living like this wildlife?

S3. Yeah, I also wrote that, creating the character, *The Savage*, is probably his way of showing strength and anger on the inside, because in the story he stands up to his bully, which is his fear, but also, he shows kindness towards his mother and his sister Jess. And that's why I think he creates this Savage, but yes, you can start with the Wilderness...

S4. Yeah, because I think that the title, *The Savage*, is like only in the title that you can hear that it has something to do with, like it's wild, it's raw, it's ...

S1. The Wilderness is savage.

S4. Yes, that's correct. And a lot of the things that just happens, especially in the stories that Blue are writing, I think is wild, like it's in the woods, he's eating animals, raw, he's watching people, having a knife and an axe in his hand, and he can't speak.

S2. Well, he is a savage.

S4. Yeah, he is a savage.

Group 3 employed extensive use of metalanguage in their dialogue, which enhanced the level of their thinking and ability to be analytical. They referred to the NatCul matrix, using words like "problematizing", exploring "techne", and also

mentioning “ecocentric” and “anthropocentric”. S1 in Group 3 prompts the others for how to understand these concepts. Through their expressions “This is like...” (Group 3, S2) it seems as if they have the NatCul matrix at hand and are actively trying to draw the concepts into the conversation about the literary text. Thus, they seemed to have grasped some of the ideas presented to them in the lecture preceding the literature circles. Group 3 seems to comply with all aspects of exploratory talk. The students engage constructively with each other’s ideas, offer relevant information, ask and answer questions, and provide reasons, and the group seemed to reach agreement (Littleton & Mercer, 2013, p. 16).

### **Group 3, *The Rabbits***

S2. Yeah, because I think the whole book is kind of problematising.

S1. Yeah, human intervention into nature, right?

S2. Yeah. Then what do you think about this?

S1. Could we just do a quick recap on the anthropocentric versus ecocentric, because I do not really remember the difference of the two. Do you?

S2. This is like...

S3. Focus on the human.

S2. And focus on the nature. So I think it starts with, like, focus on the nature in some ways, and then the humans take over and the focus is still on the nature because it’s getting destroyed, but the humans are the ones destroying it – or the rabbits in this case.

S1. So what about the “techne”. Would you say that this is very technological or the reason that it goes from ecocentric to anthropocentric, is because of the techne, the technology that comes with the rabbits, the fact that they start building cities, they bring new animals that they have never seen before, they start harvesting the grass and they, as you said, yeah ...

In the dialogue of Group 4, S1 is the nature scribe and S3 is the word wizard. S1 introduced the role at the beginning of the dialogue, where the student commented on pollution in the introductory comment, which the student came back to in the continued conversation. The word wizard (S3) included images as part of being the word wizard. The images should have been a part of the role since the texts were multimodal texts, and this shortfall was emphasised by this student’s comment.

In the dialogue they explored and delved into discussions of the broader issues of climate change and the cultural ecoliteracy (Kahn, 2010), including references to other cultures beyond the Western, acknowledging the impact of colonialism.

#### **Group 4, *The Rabbits***

S3. As the word wizard are we supposed to find things that were about nature, so I was wondering how the reader – how does the reader feel about the environment *reading* the book? Does this book bring some awareness to climate change?

S1. I guess so because in the end ..???, you know one of the last ...

S2. But I think it comes throughout the colours, more than the words,

S1, S3. Hmmm.

S2. Because I don't think the words are very descriptive of ...

S3. No, it doesn't say in words but the colours and the pictures do show. This is very grey and white.

S1. I thought this is going to (be?) where we end up, when I read the book.

S3. Darkness?

S1. Darkness and oil and pollution.

S2. Mmh – yeah.

S3. There are some quotes which I wrote down: “They ate our grass,” “They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends.” And I thought that was directly linked to climate change, that after the rabbits, or who they might be, came to this country, they changed the country, they started interfering with pure nature, removing grass, removing trees, adding machines.

Further into the conversation:

S3. And at the end they say “Who will save us from the rabbits?” So, if you're going to save them from climate change and they are going to save them from colonisation.

S2. Rabbits might also be a symbol of pollution. So, who is going to save us from pollution? Because at the last page they are like standing together, it's not a divide I feel.

S3. Yeah.

S2. They're like realising their mistakes.

S2 in Group 5 initiates and changes directions of the conversation, inviting and gearing the others in new directions. "Do you have anything further to add? If not then, I'll ask a question to the rest of the group." Then the student frames the question within nature and environment and makes the other students think about this within a city. S2 keeps prompting the others: "So could you..." and "Well let's think of the Savage. Would Blue's imagination of creating the Savage be anything alike? Would he have made an imaginary [*sic*] person with the same nature-like features if he was in the city, do you believe that?" Finally, S2 asks, "Why not? I don't have the answers for it, I'm just trying to reflect on it."

### **Group 5, *The Savage***

S2. Yeah. Do you have anything further to add? If not then, I'll ask a question to the rest of the group. Ehm ... Since this is a book that is placed in a nat-, very nature-like environment, how would you, how do you think this book would have been if this was in a very urban city-like environment instead, would it have had the same effect?

S3. I think in a big city, I don't think it would have been a forest. Like a dumpster or some other back alley-place, so ...

S2. So could you ...

S3. It could've had another feeling to it, than the little like "out in the woods" that Blue and Jess have, instead of, yeah.

S2. Well let's think of the Savage. Would Blue's imagination of creating the Savage be anything alike? Would he have made an imaginary [*sic*] person with the same nature-like features if he was in the city, do you believe that?

S1. No.

S2. Why not? I don't have the answers for it, I'm just trying to reflect on it.

S4. Well like, of the way that the Savage is, like the animal plant watcher.

S2. Hehe yeah.

S4. Eh, it would be really rude if he went around like killing a lot of stuff in the big city, but like, in the forest it's ok like, it's just nature.

## DISCUSSION

The students were given free and open opportunities of the literature circles for discussing what they wanted to within the framework of the texts and the roles, which allows flexibility and individual interpretation drawing on insights and prior experiences (Littledyke & Manolas, 2010).

On the one hand, one could say that the ecodialogues about picturebooks were free and open, only guided by the ecocritical roles provided. Since the roles were open for them to interpret, the students decided how to understand the text through the roles and conversations. On the other hand, since the conversations were guided by the roles, one may also argue that the conversations were restricted. The roles gave the students a lens through which to focus on certain aspects, which may or may not be obvious at first. The fact that other aspects also came up, such as references to historic events while discussing *The Rabbits* and the emotional expressions of *The Savage*, shows that without the pre-defined roles and the specific lens, other issues may have taken focus and potentially have eclipsed notions of nature and culture, which permeated and came through in these conversations.

Although the students were not always sure what to extract and emphasise, many of the dialogue extracts demonstrated that through dialogues and trying out ideas with their peers in the groups they developed a somewhat deeper understanding of some of the concepts, especially in those groups that were able to include metalanguage, making use of terminology from ecocritical theory. Through the lens of roles, the students were given space to discuss and converse about issues of nature and explore concepts of wilderness and animals and plants in literary texts. Even though very few stated they ever had had conversations about such issues, the students were able and willing to discuss and explore the literary texts through the pre-designed roles and the angles with which they were asked to discuss. However, some of the conversations are clearly exploratory, sometimes trying out ideas, throwing them “out there” as a way to instigate a conversation.

Since the method did not invite the participants to share opinions about their own views on their own experiences of whether they employed what Rosenblatt (1995) calls an aesthetic or efferent reading approach, or where on the continuum in the Nat-Cul matrix they themselves would position a statement, it is not possible to firmly say anything about their experiences. However, from the didactic point of view, the conversations are open and allow what they choose to bring to the conversation. There were no right or wrong answers, in line with *Bildung* and aesthetic reading.



With regard to the dialogues themselves and the interaction between participants and the type of talk employed (Mercer & Littleton, 2007) there were instances of disputational, cumulative, and exploratory talk in the dialogues. One aspect of Mercer and Littleton's exploratory talk, which requires that the participants "engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (2007, p. 51), is that the "members of the groups try to reach agreement at each stage before progressing" (p. 51). This point is rather interesting, particularly while engaging in discussions about literature. Though the students through the prompts were asked to identify literary devices, plot, and characterisation, the students were also relating their comments to the frame of the study, which were ecocritical theory, the NatCul matrix, and the focus of the roles. Although most students did not include metalanguage to introduce their views, they were clearly underpinning their line of arguments in the sense that the students kept to the topic and framework of literature circles.

Lars Laird Iversen (2014) questions the need for agreement and advocates that disagreement is a sign of democratic skills and critical literacy. Especially issues such as democracy and environmental matters are essential to question and deliberate and to practice in the classroom. Thus, literature circles may be excellent ways of practicing such skills.

Another potential hindrance to truly free and open conversation may be the question of "safe space" (Iversen, 2019). In the dialogues, despite belonging to the same group of students in a class, the matter of whether or not the students felt "safe" is somewhat questionable. How well did they really know each other, even though they had been students in the same group for more than one term, or how safe did they feel to speak freely? Some of the dialogues display uncertainty in the students; they are hesitant and not sure how to respond to the others. All participants had agreed to participate in the study, and none withdrew from the study. Furthermore, even though the dialogues allowed the students to bring to the table what they wanted, the questions in the prompts still required knowledge and skills about literary analysis and knowledge and perhaps even interest in nature and wilderness. The learner-centred methodology of working with literary texts, including challenging themes, in the classroom is a way to develop critical, independent thinking and may over time increase the level of feeling safe.

## CONCLUSION

Through negotiations in the literature circles, the participants engaged in dialogues and discussions, which potentially enhanced and developed awareness of

their own positions and engaged in each other's points of view, which aided the students in developing a sense of critical environmental awareness as proposed by Gaard (2008), while at the same time being respectful of other people's points of view. The dialogues did not summarise or ask the participants to state an opinion about the learning outcome, which is in line with Bildung and processes of discussing and reflecting on the topic, which is a powerful way of considering one's own thinking (Self) and what the other thinks and believes (Other) (Nussbaum, 1997; Hoff, 2016). In their meeting with the literary texts, there is potential for genuine communication with peers. Despite the uncertainty whether the setting provided a truly safe space, the potential for participants being able to express their opinion in a safe environment, while engaging in in-depth, genuine dialogues, exists. Through dialogue, each individual increases and creates *awareness* and understanding for their own attitude and values and those of others (Bildung). Depending on the literary text, roles may be adapted to encourage a certain focus in the discussions. Ecodialogues is one way of addressing and being open for conversations about contentious topics, which environmental issues may be said to be, in the classroom. If employing this way of working, the students will become more familiar over time and will know what is to be expected, and they may then engage more freely and feel the ecodialogues to be a safe space for sharing, exploring, and engaging in conversations – and may perhaps become more environmentally aware.

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