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Social Justice and Critical Pedagogy in the Literature Classroom: Reading *Matilda* with Student Teachers

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Abstract

Roald Dahl's classic children's novel *Matilda* (1988/2018) has long been considered controversial by literary scholars on account of its stereotypes, sexism, and violence. At the same time, the novel has long been a favourite among educators for its ability to encourage children to read. This article suggests ways in which the controversial contents of *Matilda* can be harnessed to teach critical pedagogy and inclusion to pre-service student teachers for primary school. The article also reports on a small study carried out with a class of student teachers at a Swedish university. Students were asked to critically assess *Matilda*'s use in their future classroom as well as in their own education. The results of the study indicate that the novel has great potential for discussing social justice, inclusion and children's literature in ELT, both on the teacher education programme and in the ELT classroom in primary school.

Keywords: *Matilda*, critical literacy, teacher education, inclusion, children's literature, ELT

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Introduction

Matilda by Roald Dahl (1988/2018) has been celebrated by educators and librarians for its ability to turn reluctant pupils into enthusiastic readers, and because the small girl genius who loves to read has been considered a good role model for young learners (Beauvais, 2015; Pinsent, 2012; Tveit, 2020). The story about Matilda has been a commercial success, selling more than 17 million copies world-wide and spawning both a successful film version and a stage musical (McLoughlin, 2022; Pope & Round, 2015). However, despite these triumphs, *Matilda* has also been regarded by some literary critics as problematic in terms of its attitudes towards violence, misogyny, and social class (Beauvais, 2015; Butler, 2012; Hunt, 2001; Petzold, 1992; Worthington, 2012). The tension between these two tendencies – one aiming to get children reading, one concerned with what they actually read – has been prevalent in Dahl scholarship for years.

This article describes how a potentially controversial text like *Matilda* can be employed in primary teacher education to help pre-service student teachers develop their ability to critique a literary text through a lens of critical literacy. Such a reading of *Matilda* can further their understanding of their own future position in an educational system of essentially middle-class values (Beauvais, 2015): for instance, to consider the inclusion (and exclusion) of 'the non-reading child' in the language learning classroom. Critical literacy skills can enable teachers to consider how to work with inclusion in terms of text selection as well as with teaching practices in the classroom. Ultimately, then, teaching *Matilda* to pre-service teachers offers an opportunity to think about critical pedagogy, demonstrating how children's literature can be harnessed to raise awareness of and promote educational equity in primary school education.

The article concludes by reporting on a class in English children's literature for pre-service student teachers for the grade levels 4 to 6 (children in the age range 10–12) at a Swedish university, where *Matilda* was discussed in the context of critical reading, inclusion, and classroom practice. The students were then all given an assignment aimed at demonstrating their ability to assess *Matilda*'s place in their own future classroom: that is, not only the hidden power structures in the text, but also, by extension, how to deal with these structures as a teacher of English literature to middle-school pupils. Finally, the students were asked to assess the value of *Matilda* in their own education.

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Theoretical Framework

A few different terms, which are intimately connected to each other, are important for understanding *Matilda*'s potential in the teacher education classroom. Inclusion – to achieve educational equity in the face of differences in ethnicity, class and gender (Douglas & Nganga, 2017; Luke, 2021) – is a key feature of primary education. Children come to school with different knowledge sets from their lives outside of the school setting, a 'virtual school bag,' and these need to be acknowledged and appreciated (Bland, 2018; Thomson, 2002). The European Union emphasizes the importance of 'reaching out to the more educationally and socially disadvantaged to enable all young people to succeed in education and develop their full potential regardless of their background' in order to, amongst other things, 'reduce disparities and promote inclusion, citizenship and social cohesion' (Council of the European Union, 2016). Ideas of inclusion also feature prominently in the goals for Swedish teacher education for school grade levels 4 to 6, where the phrases 'for every pupil' and 'all pupils' appear several times in the section outlining required 'Competence and Skills' (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2022:1219, annex 2).

Allan Luke argues that one area of education where inclusion plays a central part is literacy, as 'the selective traditions of school literacy can contribute to the marginalization of students on the basis of their gender, cultural, linguistic and social class background' (Luke, 2021). I would suggest that the reading of books poses one example of such 'selective traditions of school literacy' that Luke mentions. This is not to say that children should not be encouraged to read books in school, but rather that teachers need to pay attention to the 'virtual schoolbag' and the literacy traditions of their pupils, traditions which might not include a love of or interest in conventional books. By problematizing such a definition of literacy through critical reading of a literary work itself, the teacher educator can help the teacher student to pay attention to issues of inclusion. As we will see, *Matilda*, with its unabashed privileging of such literary literacy, connecting it to moral goodness and intelligence, provides ample food for discussion of and reflection on the topic.

Critical literacy is one of several kinds of literacy needed to navigate today's society alongside, for instance, visual and information literacy (Bland, 2018). Originating with the work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Freire (1970/2017), critical literacy can be defined as 'learning to read all texts critically and understanding their manipulative power' (Bland, 2018, p. 5). Such a practice can involve interrogating multiple viewpoints, asking questions such as 'How

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is this text trying to position me?' and 'Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?' (Janks, 2019; Lewison et al., 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997). Ultimately, critical literacy seeks to address social, economic and cultural inequality. With its focus on multiple viewpoints and unheard voices, then, critical literacy is concerned with questions of inclusion. The Swedish National Agency for Education (Lozic, 2014) emphasizes the importance of critical literacy in compulsory education, and of teachers making 'visible exclusionary processes, perspectives of marginalized groups, and other power structures such as class, gender and ethnicity' (my translation).

Critical literacy can function as a road to critical pedagogy (Bland, 2018). Critical pedagogy can be described as a 'pedagogical process of teaching and learning, by which students and teachers interrogate the world, unmask ideological and hegemonic discourses, and frame their actions, in the interest of the larger struggle for social justice' (Darder et al., 2008, p. 279).

Critical Literacy and Critical Pedagogy in Teacher Education

Teachers need training in critical literacy and critical pedagogy. In fact, 'critical reflection among pre-service educators is crucial in helping them uncover their biases, beliefs and assumptions about teaching students who are culturally, ethnically and linguistically different' (Douglas & Nganga, 2017, p. 528). Douglas and Nganga further suggest that teacher education classrooms must be spaces where students can question what Henry Giroux, in his seminal *Border Crossings* (2005), refers to as 'the omissions and tensions that exist between the master narratives and the hegemonic discourses that make up the official curriculum and the self-representations of subordinated groups as they might appear in "forgotten" or erased histories, histories, texts, memories, experiences and community narratives' (Douglas & Nganga, 2017, p. 527; Giroux, 2005, p. 25). Belonging to such subordinated groups as Giroux refers to, we could think those of a socio-economic standing which is different from that of the school's very often middle-class biased world. The importance of recognizing such groups and voices, then, resonates in the concerns of critical literacy and is central to inclusion in schools.

Matilda

Matilda tells the story of the child genius Matilda Wormwood, whose parents fail to recognize her talents and treat her with contempt and neglect. Her crooked car-salesman father often bullies and mocks her, and her shallow stay-at-home mother frequently leaves her to fend for herself. Matilda

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teaches herself how to read and, with the aid of the local librarian Mrs Phelps, works her way through most of the English canon. As she begins school at the age of five, her abilities are recognized by her teacher Ms Honey, who strives to allow Matilda the education her abilities deserve. Those efforts are thwarted by the evil headmistress Ms Trunchbull, who is also Ms Honey's aunt, having stolen all her inheritance and left her poor. Ultimately, Matilda develops telekinetic powers and uses these to frighten Ms Trunchbull into returning Ms Honey's inheritance to her and to leave the school. Meanwhile, Mr Wormwood is now wanted by the police on account of his illegal business endeavours, and as the family flees to Spain, Matilda chooses to remain with Ms Honey, who formally adopts her.

As Beauvais (2015) suggests, reaching critical consensus about the political undertones of Dahl's work has proven difficult. Its conservative agenda and its depictions of excessive violence and sexism have been seen as 'balanced' by his subversive use of humour (Alston, 2012; Worthington, 2012). Hence, to be able to answer the question 'how is this text trying to position me?' requires careful close reading and consideration from any reader. A reading of *Matilda* in an educational context requires future teachers to make ethical choices in their interpretation of the work.

One such difficult interpretative issue concerns the tension between justice and violence in the novel. Described as 'both heroine and wrong-doer' (Pope & Round, 2015, p. 258), Matilda herself emerges as a strong child, full of integrity, and has been compared to Jane Eyre in her just reaction when bullied by the grown-ups around her (Guest, 2008; Maynard, 2019). At the same time, the depictions of violence on Matilda's part have been considered unsuitable for her position as a role model. Pope and Round (2014) note that 'when it comes to self-preservation, Matilda indeed has few morals' (p. 259). For instance, after an argument about her father's dishonest business methods, Matilda is punished by having her book removed and being made to eat a TV dinner. Her revenge is one which results in physical injury, as she superglues her father's hat to his head, causing him to lose some of his hair (Dahl, 1988/2018, p. 30).

Perhaps even more concerning, there is violence and sadism from the adult world in the novel, too. Matilda's father is a bully, ripping up a library book that his daughter has borrowed, suggesting she 'save up [her] pocket money' to pay for a new one (Dahl, 1988/2018, p. 35), and Ms Trunchbull frequently subjects the pupils at Crunchem Hall to violent and sometimes sadistic

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treatment. Dahl's well-noted sense of humour and the fairy-tale character of the novel have often been invoked by critics and educators to suggest that the child reader will not take these issues too seriously. However, as Heather Worthington (2012) has noted, while Ms Trunchbull's picking up a pupil by her pigtails and throwing her across the fence might be seen as unrealistic and thereby potentially comical rather than frightening, the sadistic manner in which the headmistress forces Bruce Bogtrotter to eat cake until he vomits is 'all too believable' (p. 129.) How to understand these issues, and by extension, how to teach them in the primary or middle-school classroom, cannot be dealt with by the student teachers until they have decided on how they believe that the text is trying to position them, and how they want to respond to such positioning.

Readers and Non-Readers in *Matilda*

Another strand of criticism against *Matilda*, highly relevant for the novel's usefulness in the context of critical literacy and pedagogy, concerns the class prejudice and elitism that permeates the story. This prejudice is largely expressed in the novel's attitudes towards literature and education (Beauvais, 2015; Pinsent, 2012). *Matilda* is not class-biased against the economically poor – for instance, Ms Honey lives on £1 a week in a crumbling cottage behind the school. Rather, the prejudice in the novel is directed against those poor of cultural capital, lacking appreciation and understanding of what Bourdieu (1979/1984) defines as middle-class values and tastes, in particular a love of literature. Matilda's parents are utterly contemptuous of reading: Mr Wormwood tells Ms Honey that '[w]e don't hold with book-reading… You can't make a living sitting on your fanny and reading story-books. We don't keep them in the house' (Dahl, 1988/2018, p. 90). Mr and Mrs Wormwood are also dismissive of the value of education if it does not instantly lead to making money or marrying well. When asked by Ms Honey to mind Matilda's extraordinary gifts and think about her further education, in particular university, Mr Wormwood responds: 'Who wants to go to university, for heaven's sake! All they learn there is bad habits!' (Dahl, 1988/2018, p. 93).

The lack of appreciation of literature and education relates to pettiness, greed and downright criminal behaviour in *Matilda*. The Wormwoods are shallow people who watch bad television, eat bad food and display gaudy, vulgar taste in clothing. Beauvais (2015) locates the portrayal of Matilda's father in the petty bourgeoisie, 'equal or superior to the middle class in economic power

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but dissimilar in lifestyle and values,' suggesting he resembles the 'Essex Man' caricature (p. 280). Mrs Wormwood, a plump woman with badly dyed hair and a liking for bingo and TV soaps, triumphantly tells Ms Honey that she herself chose 'looks before books' (Dahl, 1988/2018, pp. 92-93) in order to catch a well-to-do husband; Mr Wormwood brags to his children about his unethical tricks to sell substandard cars. Guest (2008) points out that, by contrast, the salvation of both Matilda and Ms Honey (rightfully restored to her inheritance) 'is reworked along class lines—the suburban villa and tacky lifestyle are replaced by a tasteful Georgian home with books and a garden' (p. 247).

Considered a wish-fulfilment fantasy by several critics (Cumming, 2007; Guest, 2008; Petzold, 1992), it is clear that Matilda is born in a family where she does not belong. She 'fetches for herself, using her intelligence, the education she deserves' (Beauvais, 2015, p. 277), and ultimately also a family more suited to her personality. It seems clear, then, that in *Matilda*, a love of books and a propensity for (formal) education are in fact innate qualities connected to moral goodness and socially recognized good taste.

The attraction of the portrayal of Matilda's love of literature can potentially obscure the class prejudice and snobbism to several groups of readers involved in children's education. For instance, Tveit (2020) notes that the novel has long been a favourite among librarians, but '[f]ew have spoken of the more questionable attitudes that this text also includes, when it comes to the cultural divide between the readers and the nonreaders' (p. 148). Similarly, Beauvais (2015) suggests that the class prejudice has been overlooked because the book contains 'a portrayal of child precocity that is likely to be particularly seductive to a secondary audience of middle-class parents, caregivers, mediators and professional readers of children's literature' (p. 278). She further suggests that such a view on *Matilda* aligns with 'a middle-class, liberal humanist ethos, profoundly concerned with children and with reading, but unwilling to accept alternative lifestyles and parenting practices' (p. 279). Here I would add that a similar interest in and fondness for children and reading can be found in the teaching profession – and the danger of succumbing to the second part of Beauvais' suggestion is something the profession needs to be aware of in its own values.

Taking the above into consideration, what would it mean to introduce a text like *Matilda* into a primary school setting for pupils aged 10–12? How would it be understood by those children who do not read at home, who perhaps cannot read literature or who simply do not like it? The

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lines of division between readers and non-readers in *Matilda* are clear and are connected to other qualities, such as, in the non-readers, moral turpitude, bad taste and limited intelligence (and conversely, in readers, innate intelligence and a deserved place in the middle classes). These issues then, need to be weighed against *Matilda*'s often pointed out benefits – it is a fun, popular book which tends to engage pupils into reading, and it takes, at least ostensibly, the child's side against a cruel and unfair adult world.

Matilda, Critical Literacy and the Teaching Profession

The social class prejudice of *Matilda* is one thing a critical reading can reveal. A related, central point of interest for critical literacy and critical pedagogy concerns those voices (and knowledge, and experiences) which are not necessarily heard in the classroom, or in this case, in the storyworld of the literary text. In reading *Matilda*, it can be a challenge to identify such voices and presences, because the narrator focuses so intensely on the trials of Matilda herself. Other children are not really remarkable in the story; there are no very horrible children, nor any that are terribly poor or bullied (beyond the antics of Ms Trunchbull). However, there are non-exceptional children who are paid very little attention by the narrator, and who gain little sympathy. The most prominent example of such an ordinary child is Matilda's brother Michael ('a perfectly normal boy,' p. 5), a quiet, non-rebellious child trying to please his father, whose main function in the story seems to be as a foil to extraordinary Matilda ('the sister, as I said, was something to make your eyes pop', p. 5). That literary critics succumb to the persuasive tactics of the narrator can be seen in Petzold's (1992) assessment of the protagonist's sibling: 'Michael appears rather dim-witted and far too obedient, but he is too much of a minor character to be of much consequence' (p. 190). By directing my students' attention to Michael and the narrator's careful note of the differences between him and his sister, I ask them to remember the children in class who are quiet, obedient and who might be overshadowed by their peers.

Matilda also has further relevance for teacher education, as it is largely set in school: it deals with good and bad teachers, and it discusses how the educational system should deal with pupils with different abilities. Several of these topics seem clear-cut at first sight but become, on inspection, ambiguous from both a textual and a moral point of view. For instance, while the initial division between the evil Ms Trunchbull and the angelic Ms Honey seems straightforward, it has been suggested that Ms Honey is problematic as a role model. As Guest (2008) points out,

> her mild nature compromises her relationship to other adults, who use her passivity and vulnerability against her. The teacher's failure to assert either the interests of herself or the children with whom she sympathizes introduces a more unsettling and unresolved limitation in adult femininity than the text's caricatures of "bad" women. (pp. 247-248)

Such a point of entry into the text provides excellent discussion material in a class of student teachers, allowing them to grapple with the limits of what a teacher can and should do for their pupils, and where the boundary of their responsibility lies.

Another point of entry into discussion is the concept of differentiation, that is, the organization of pupils and/or teaching material according to ability and aptitude rather than age. The novel approves of such a structure – for bright pupils. As Ms Honey suggests that Matilda should be moved up to the top form to work with the eleven-year-olds, where her intellectual abilities will be better matched, Ms Trunchbull refuses to allow such a move, arguing that 'all children remain with their year groups regardless of ability' (Dahl, 1988/2008, p. 82). This sequence too provides student teachers with food for thought and discussion: what would really be better for a small child in such a situation?

Matilda and ELT

It might seem that the suggested use of *Matilda* outlined above may just as well be applied in an L1 classroom, both for the pre-service student teachers themselves and for their future pupils. But there are several reasons for why *Matilda* is particularly beneficial within an ELT context. As Bland (2018) has argued, the ELT classroom offers the most opportunities for training critical literacy development, due to the vast diversity in texts in the English language. Bland (2018) further suggests that 'particularly literary texts prompt the reader to consider language formulations deeply, as well as connotations in verbal and pictorial text and cultural meanings' (p. 5).

Much of the tension within *Matilda*'s ideological makeup stems from Dahl's notorious interest in language, and in particular the 'slippery' narrator: becoming aware of the positions the narrator asks the reader to take up is central to both understanding and critiquing the novel. For instance, when the narrator claims that '[i]t is bad enough when parents treat ordinary children as though they were scabs and bunions, but it becomes somehow a lot worse when the child in question is *extra*-ordinary, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant' (Dahl, 1988/2018, p. 4) – how should this be understood? Is it humorous to a point where it can be ignored? In order to decide that the narrator is slippery or manipulative, the reader needs to engage actively with discourses and value-laden words in English. What value do certain words have in English, how can they be understood by a Swedish person (let alone a Swedish fifth or sixth grade pupil)? How should future teachers work with such slipperiness in their own language learning classroom? With ELT pupils aged 10–12 a similar but easier discussion could concern the characters' personalities as defined partly by their names – how do we know that Ms Honey is nice and Ms Trunchbull is not? What kind of ideas do we get of Matilda's school just by looking at its name, Crunchem Hall?

Another issue that makes *Matilda* suitable for the ELT classroom specifically is the question of power hierarchies in language learning. Critical questions can be asked of language education by teachers and students, such as 'Why teach this language? Whose particular language use is being taught as "standard?" Who benefits from the teaching of this language?' (Chang-Bacon et al., 2021, p. 41). Here, *Matilda*'s preoccupation with the English literary canon may offer a way into discussing the dominance of a particular kind of English in schools and in literature. Several critics have noted that the list of literary works that Mrs Phelps provides Matilda with is very traditional and canonical: mostly white, mostly male, and mostly old (Beauvais, 2015; Butler, 2012; Guest, 2008; Pinsent, 2012). Drawing students' attention to this list can engender a discussion about canonicity, literary authority and text selection in the language learning classroom. Through its conservative and sometimes dogmatic insistence on the English canon as a preeminent set of texts, denoting class, intelligence, and moral superiority, *Matilda* can form a productive basis for questions which are important to future language teachers, such as textual choices and translanguaging. Ultimately, a critical approach to *Matilda*'s claims about 'good' English literature can help facilitate a widened understanding and acceptance of alternative forms of cultural representation in the language learning classroom.

Reading *Matilda* with Pre-service Student Teachers

Matilda, as we have seen, contains a number of ideas which lend themselves to critical discussion in the student teacher classroom, such as cultural elitism and its attached use of caricatures, and the balance between humour and horror with which violence and bullying are depicted in the novel. I would like to conclude this article by reporting on a class of pre-service student teachers' reading of *Matilda* and their subsequent thoughts on critical reading, inclusion, and educational practices in terms of social justice in the classroom. These ideas were articulated in written reflections on *Matilda*'s suitability both in their future classrooms and in their own pre-service education. The following presents a number of student voices, structured loosely in line with Janks' (2019) argument about reader positionality and ethical decisions in relation to textual arguments. The presentation of these voices seeks to contribute to the understanding of what features of *Matilda* student teachers themselves consider important for their future teaching profession.

The practice of reading both with and against a text in order to determine its positionality is central to critical literacy. Janks (2019) argues that

> [o]nly when readers (in this case, students and teachers) have read with and against a text are they ready to make ethical (not literacy) decisions about whether to take up the positions on offer or to oppose them—to decide which, if any, positions can be defended because they contribute to weaving a social fabric that is just and equitable. (pp. 563-564)

In this report, concepts originating with critical literacy are employed to present student views on critical reading of children's literature. Student responses are organized into two categories, following the progression outlined by Janks. The first section focuses on how the student teachers reflected on the literary text itself, that is, how they understood the text's positionality and how they read with and against the text. The second section centres on the student teachers' thoughts on the function of a text like *Matilda* in their own education as well as in their future classroom. Ultimately, both sections are concerned with aspects of how critical reading of a literary text can be employed to guide student teachers towards an understanding of critical pedagogy and social justice in the classroom.

The class

The class consisted of 31 pre-service student teachers for the years 4 to 6 (pupils aged 10–12) who participated in a course in English children's literature at a Swedish university, where one segment

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was spent on *Matilda*. The seminar began with a brief general introduction where the students were invited to share their initial impressions of *Matilda* and their previous experience, if any, of reading the novel or other works by Dahl. They were then divided into smaller groups of four and given a number of study questions to discuss. The practice of smaller groups is conducive for student participation as it provides students with more talking time and increases student agency, and is a common feature in the 'powerful polyvocal classroom' (Morell & Morell, 2021, p. 13). It may also help students who are less confident in large settings to find their voice (Douglas & Nganga, 2017). After the discussion, the students reconvened into a full class and shared with each other what had been discussed in the smaller groups, bringing those topics and ideas to a wider discussion, exposing all students to further reflections than had been made in the small group.

The students had previously had one seminar on *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007) by Jeff Kinney. During that seminar, the group had been introduced to the concept of narrators and their impact on the story, and this idea was picked up again in the seminar on *Matilda*. From the discussion above we have seen how influential the narrator in *Matilda* is for the position that the text is asking its readers to take on several issues, such as education, intelligence and social class. Hence, one of the study questions drew the students' attention to the function of the narrator, and asked them the following:

> The narrator (the voice who tells the story) says: "It is bad enough when parents treat ordinary children as though they were scabs and bunions, but it becomes somehow a lot worse when the child in question is extra-ordinary, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant." (p. 4). Do you agree or disagree? Motivate your answer.

The question sought to draw the students' attention to the manipulative quality of the narrator's voice but also to the difficulty readers might experience in accepting or agreeing with their claims: in other words, it served to make the students aware of a potential dissonance between their own views on issues raised in *Matilda* and those of the narrator. What the question did not do, however, was draw explicit attention to other dubious values which the narrator advocates in the text, such as class prejudice or connections between academic aptitude and moral goodness. Hence, the intention was to provide students with a way into a critical reading of the text without leading them explicitly to issues they should potentially be wary of. Only when the students had articulated a stance against the narrator's claims about different 'types' of children parents treat badly were they asked to take their understanding of the narrator to other sections of the book and find other examples of instances where they might disagree with the voice. The ability to 'read against' a text was then picked up in the assignment which concluded the segment on *Matilda* in the course.

The assignment

At the end of the course, the students were encouraged to reflect on *Matilda*'s suitability and potential in an educational context. They were now asked to provide input on three points: to give reasons both for and against the novel's use in the primary or middle-school classroom, and then to evaluate *Matilda*'s usefulness for their own education as future teachers. The written assignment ultimately aimed at exploring how student teachers' critical reading of the novel could generate an understanding of its potential for social justice in the primary school classroom. Phipps and Guilherme (2004) stress 'the importance of critical reflection for student teachers as a means by which they may become more aware of the implications of their personal and professional experiences and of their role as critical pedagogues' (p. 3). In order to reach these experiences, the assignment encouraged the students to argue from a wide range of perspectives, both professional and personal, including steering documents and past personal experience.

The assignment was graded as pass or fail only, since the purpose was for the students to articulate their reflections on critical issues rather than to be given approval of whether their understanding was 'correct' from a normative, educational standpoint. After the assignment was completed and graded, the students were asked, via email, for permission to use their answers, and the answers of those who did not want to participate were removed from the sample. The email was formulated after discussions with the university's Office for Research Ethics, taking into account national guidelines for participation (Swedish Research Council, 2002). Out of the 31 students who took the class, 25 students gave their written consent to their answers being used in the article. From these, where direct quotes were considered useful to include, explicit permission was asked for and given by students in separate emails.

Student voices: Student teachers reading with and against the text

One of the most prominent topics to emerge in the student teachers' reflections was Matilda's home environment and the fact that she is an abused child. As discussed in the first part of this article, the conflict between Matilda and her father, along with Ms Trunchbull's behaviour, have been considered as both humorous and horrible by critics and educators. In one way, the students' interest in this topic can of course be considered to originate from a reading with, rather than against, the text, since the topic forms a large part of the plot and is of significant interest to the narrator, who condemns Matilda's parents' behaviour. Some of the students also approved of the retaliations against her father and Ms Trunchbull on Matilda's part, suggesting it could function as an inspiration for empowerment to child readers. In this sense, they took on board what the text wants them to focus on, one of the obvious themes of the novel 'engaged with properly,' and understood what the text argues, as Janks (2019, p. 563) puts it.

But despite the notorious ambiguity between humour and horror, which critics have often noted in *Matilda*, and despite the fact that one of the study questions the students worked with drew attention to the comical episode in which Matilda superglues her father's hat to his head, a majority of students gravitated towards the question of how this aspect of the novel could potentially affect its (child) readers negatively. In this sense, the students did not read with the text, but rejected the idea that Matilda's plight should be considered amusing. For instance, one student suggested that while 10–12-year-olds might be mature enough to discuss violence in school and at home and that such a conversation might 'create some involvement', they still felt it was 'a bad idea to give the book attention at all since it involves so much violence.'

A second issue which was frequently addressed by the students concerned the connections between education, social class, intelligence and morality which permeate the novel. Here, students read against the text and found different ways to express their resistance to the claims made in *Matilda*. One student argued that '[t]he reasons for using *Matilda* in the 4-6 classroom are quite similar to the reasons why you shouldn´t. One example would be the fact that social heritage and intelligence isn't linked, even if school results and social heritage might be.'

Another student resisted the novel's image of non-readers as bad people, and in particular the image of them as bad parents, by referring to their own life experience. Their argument demonstrated clearly that they had read both with and against the text and then made an ethical decision on not taking up the position it offered:

> When I came into the campus week, I had not one bad thing to say about this book, however, after our discussions my opinion has been altered. The main reason the book would be unsuitable in the language learning classroom is because it tends to picture everything in 'black or white'… the author practically points out 'non-readers' as bad and ugly people, and terrible parents which can cause confusion and despair among the pupils which I can relate to. I had the greatest childhood anyone could imagine, even though neither of my parents read any books.

At the same time, the student found a way to retain a reading with the book, and envisioned many pupils loving the book **'**maybe because it allows them to escape the dull reality and into the fantastic world of fiction, just like Matilda does.'

Both these students, then, resisted the novel's assertion that people who read are morally superior, but through different arguments: one through deeply personal reasons and the other by gesturing to 'external,' sociological ideas about links between intelligence, academic achievement and social heritage.

Student voices: Children's literature for social justice in the classroom

Janks (2019) suggests that reading with and against a text is a first step towards making ethical decisions regarding the positions a text offers, with a view to 'contribute to weaving a social fabric that is just and equitable' (p. 563-564). Through their insights into the injustices proposed in *Matilda*, some of the students began to envision how the novel could be employed in promoting social justice in their future classrooms. For instance, as we have seen, Matilda's horrible home conditions were considered as a potential problem to teaching the novel in primary school. While for some of the students the discussion ended there, others described how the plot could inspire hope, suggesting that it could give badly treated children the courage to speak up. One student argued that if it was difficult for a teacher to ask their pupils directly about their home environment, a book like *Matilda* could form a bridge into such a conversation:

> In general, I believe it is difficult for teacher to talk about family circumstances with the pupils, it could turn out wrong if the parents get to know it. But if they [the pupils] read *Matilda* and reflect on it by them self how kids not should have it at home they

> maybe can relate to their own situation. My hope is that the pupils maybe can talk with the teacher or a good friend how they have it at home. Then they maybe can get help!

The previously mentioned student, who challenged the text's position on a link between 'intelligence and social heritage,' also suggested that this very insight was relevant for their own education, as it could strengthen student teachers'

> understanding of different sociocultural backgrounds and what that means for the individual pupil. This is one of the main factors that speaks for using *Matilda* in the teacher education program … as a conversation object about class affiliation, democracy and equality *Matilda* is clear as a bell-ringing.

Douglas and Nganga (2017) argue that sociocultural and political dimensions of identity must be included in the education of pre-service teachers, in order for them to understand 'who they are and how the self impacts their practice' (p. 524). By suggesting that reading against the text could contribute to teachers' understanding of educational equity, then, the student in question clearly envisioned the possibility and importance of social justice in their classroom.

A third student argued that for the novel to work in the classroom, the teacher would need to actively frame the reading experience for the pupils, but that the novel was still very important from a social justice perspective. Despite the potential risks, the student urged courage on the part of the teacher:

> The book needs to be discussed and talked about together. Since you don't know every student's situation at home or what they have in their 'backpack', some events in this book can be seen as scary or unpleasant. Despite the fact the book contains cruelty and ugly words it is important to talk about since this is the reality for many children in the world. By not using it, trying to protect the students from ugly things, you ignore the children who can identify themselves with Matilda.

Through their reading against *Matilda*'s propositions about education, intelligence, and moral goodness, these students demonstrated that they had begun thinking about children's literature as a possible means for the promotion of social justice in the language learning classroom.

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Conclusion

This article has suggested ways in which Roald Dahl's classic children's novel *Matilda* can be harnessed to raise questions of critical pedagogy with student teachers for primary school. *Matilda*, with its ambiguous ideological makeup and its mix of prejudice and humour, condemnation, and hope, offers the teacher educator a wealth of opportunities to teach critical literacy, inclusion and ELT through children's literature. In particular, the novel lends itself to discussions about social class prejudice, childhood reading, and how to include the non-reading child in the ELT classroom.

The small case study carried out with a group of pre-service student teachers at a Swedish university tentatively suggests that *Matilda* directs student teachers to pay attention to the potential bias of their future profession with regards to children and reading and how to employ children's literature in their own future classrooms as a means to raise critical questions of inclusion and social justice with young learners. Douglas and Nganga (2017) stress the importance of exposing pre-service educators to course materials that 'offer them the opportunity to understand aspects of systemic inequalities in schools and societies as well as what they can do as teachers and leaders in their classrooms, schools, and communities' (p. 528). The study suggests that student teachers reading *Matilda* had reached this insight.

Ideas to which a critical reading of *Matilda* draws attention – claimed connections between social class and morality, between a love for literature and innate goodness, between traditional education and good taste – all encourage pre-service teachers to reflect on their own educational background and beliefs. Ultimately, such a reading can help them consider how that background might impact them as teachers of pupils of all backgrounds, be it those who resemble them or those whose experiences and identities differ vastly from their own. Further studies could explore this dimension of student teacher self-reflection in relation to childhood reading further, with particular reference to popular canonical children's literature.

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