

Dennis Dokland

The Mental Health of YA Literature

Master's thesis in Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education
for Years 5-10

Supervisor: Libe García Zarranz

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NTNU

Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Abstract

This research aims to study representations of mental health in three young adult (YA) novels to find out if YA literature is meaningful as teaching material in the Norwegian EFL classroom. The theoretical frameworks in this study include YA studies to look at the potential of the YA genre (Corbett & Phillips, 2020; Roberts, 2013; Wickham, 2018), and bibliotherapy (de Leon, 2017; Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Hébert & Kent, 2000) as a strategy to implement literature in the EFL classroom to engage students with sensitive topics like mental health. Furthermore, this research connects mental health-related issues with critical disability theory (Leduc, 2020; Hall, 2019; Minich, 2016; Watson, 2012) and argues how the study might be transferrable to the mental health topic to shed light on similar alienation of certain individuals due to stigmatization through society's need to "cure" or "fix" people. The research has been conducted as qualitative research with a case study on *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018), *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016), and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). This study has found examples of mental health delineations that are relatable to lower secondary school students which can be facilitated in the EFL classroom to engage them in discussions of mental health issues while practicing critically reading texts. This has been done through a textual intersectional analysis to examine whether the chosen YA novels managed to accurately depict mental health issues and how intersectionality affected the characters' mental health. The findings revealed that the novels contain representations of mental health-related issues like grief, loneliness, otherness, childhood traumas, shame, suicidal ideation, and depression that are realistically portrayed and can be facilitated to promote awareness and create a safe environment for student reflection.

Keywords: Mental health, young adult literature, stigmatization, bibliotherapy

Sammendrag

Formålet med denne masteroppgaven er å studere representasjoner av mental helse i tre ungdomsromaner for å finne ut om «YA-litteratur» er meningsfullt å bruke som læringsmateriale i det norske engelskfaget. De teoretiske rammeverkene i denne oppgaven inkluderer «YA» studier som ser på potensiale til sjangeren (Corbett & Phillips, 2020; Roberts, 2013; Wickham, 2018), og biblioterapi (de Leon, 2017; Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Hébert & Kent, 2000) som strategi for å implementere litteratur i engelskklasserommet for å engasjere elevene i sensitive temaer som psykisk helse. Videre, vil denne studien koble psykisk helselaterte spørsmål til *critical disability theory* (Leduc, 2020; Hall, 2019; Minich, 2016; Watson, 2012) og argumentere for hvordan studiet har overføringsverdi til psykisk helse feltet for å sette søkelys på liknende problemer rundt stigmatisjon gjennom samfunnets behov for å «helbrede» og «fikse» person, dermed skaper man en fremmedgjøring av individer ved å definere de som «ufør» og «syk». Denne forskningen har blitt gjennomført som en kvalitativ studie med casestudie på *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018), *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016), og *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). Denne studien har funnet eksempler på skildringer av psykisk helse som er relaterbart for elever i ungdomsskolen og kan bli brukt i engelsk klasserommet for å engasjere elevene i diskusjoner om psykisk helse mens de utøver kritisk lesning av tekst. Dette har blitt gjort gjennom en interseksjonal tekstanalyse der jeg undersøkte om de valgte bøkene klarte å beskrive psykisk helse på en nøyaktig måte og hvordan interseksjonalitet påvirket karakterenes mentale helse. Funnene viste at bøkene har representasjoner av psykisk helselaterte problemer som sorg, ensomhet, annerledeshet, barndomstraumer, skam, selvmordstanker, og depresjon som er realistisk portrettert og kan bli brukt for å fremme bevissthet og skape et trygt miljø for studentrefleksjoner.

Nøkkelord: Psykisk helse, YA-litteratur, stigmatisering, biblioterapi

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List of Abbreviations (or Symbols)

WHO	World Health Organization
NTNU	The Norwegian University of Science and Technology
YA	Young Adult
EFL	English as a Foreign Language

1 Introduction

Educational settings can be decisive in how students' mental health develops, since most of their social interaction and learning happens in school. According to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (2019), most children and adolescents are happy with their life. However, they also state that 6% of the boys have a high level of psychological distress, while among girls the prevalence is 19.7%. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) claims that around 20% of the world's children and adolescents have a mental health condition. Therefore, mental health awareness is vital to teach students because they are very likely to either encounter a family member or friend that experiences mental health issues or experience them themselves. In Norway and the Nordic countries in general, suicide is the leading cause of death among young people (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2016), and in Norway suicide as the cause of death among men in the age group 20-29 was as high as 36% in 2021 (Strøm et al., 2021). Additionally, the Norwegian Education Act (1998) explicitly states that all students are "entitled to a good physical and psychosocial environment" (§ 9 A-1), and that everyone working at a school has an obligation to ensure a safe psychosocial environment for everyone (§ 9 A-4). Thus, teachers have a responsibility to promote mental health awareness and acceptance of diversity to establish a secure learning space for all students. Teachers in the EFL classroom must strive to facilitate teaching strategies that engage students with material concerning sensitive topics such as gender identity, racism, and childhood abuse. This goal can be accomplished by including authentic material that discusses mental health like young adult (YA) novels to teach students to be more aware of and empathic towards people with mental health issues.

This research will not focus primarily on any sole mental health issue such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, but rather the scope of negative thoughts that often follows adolescence when identity formation and expectations clash to build up anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, loneliness, and feelings of worthlessness. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the lockdown in Norway and in the aftermath, studies have seen that young people are struggling with loneliness and feelings of not belonging. Additionally, a recent report conducted by Anders Bakken (2021), the leader of *Ungdatasenteret* (the Youth Data Center) that coordinates and organizes collection of data and is designed to conduct youth surveys in Norway, showed that "53%" of the students feel stress concerning school often or very often, "17%" of those had problems dealing with the pressure, and "25%" were worried about going to school (pp. 5-6). These findings have sparked a debate in Norway regarding a relatively large number of students who want to participate in school but are afraid to go due to various causes often relating to different levels of mental health issues. Therefore, it is vital that education begins teaching mental health awareness to help students realize that they are not alone in their thoughts so that it becomes less frightening to communicate their own feelings when they are negatively loaded instead of covering them up out of shame. As educators of the young, we have a responsibility to consider the impact of mental health issues among the students and how they might affect their learning, and more importantly, their life in general. Thus, there is a need to focus more directly on topics such as mental health issues in school and in the EFL classroom particularly, for example, by implementing YA texts that resist and help abolish stigmatization of people with

mental health issues as “crazy” or “unreliable”. Additionally, students will learn how common mental health issues are to varying degrees, and that circumstances or actions can have consequences with severe repercussions that are not necessarily seen on the surface.

This MA thesis seeks to answer three interrelated questions. How can representations of mental health-related issues in YA novels be meaningful for lower secondary school teachers in the Norwegian EFL classroom to teach critical thinking, empathy, and mental health awareness? How can teachers use the YA genre to aid students’ mental self-preservation and identity formation? How can YA novels be implemented in the EFL classroom to engage students in open and reflective discussions about sensitive topics? All these questions relate to YA literature and its potential as material for teaching mental health awareness to lower secondary school students while engaging them with relatable narratives. Therefore, this research has studied how mental health is portrayed and described in YA novels to examine the potential of teaching sensitive topics like anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies in the EFL classroom with YA literature. In particular, I have analyzed the representation of mental health issues in three YA novels: *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, by Adib Khorram (2018), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie ¹(2007), and *When the Moon Was Ours*, by Sarah McLemore (2016). The YA genre is prolific in its ability to resonate with students because it often involves relatable characters in their teenage years who must overcome a conflict while struggling with concerns such as identity, fitting in, and societal problems (Corbett & Phillips, 2020; Monaghan, 2016; Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016). Therefore, YA novels can help teachers engage lower secondary school students in critical reading, and resist stereotypes through more realistic portrayals of diversity. Additionally, the research has also analyzed the benefits of bibliotherapy, counter-narratives, and critical reading as strategies for teachers in the Norwegian lower secondary school to discuss mental health issues. Furthermore, I argue that these strategies can help develop critical thinking and empathy by exposing students to various stories that they must reflect on through classroom discussions. Moreover, this study has looked critically at research terminology on the mental health topic, considering whether the representation of mental health issues has repercussions by unwittingly negatively reinforcing stereotypes causing stigmatization.

My motivation for writing this MA thesis and focusing on mental health-related issues in YA literature is multi-faceted. First and foremost, I wrote an article on mental health in a YA novel called *PET* (Emezi, 2019) as part of my degree, which I found purposeful and learned a lot from, while also recognizing a need for further research in the field of mental health and YA literature. Therefore, I wanted to progress my research and learning experience by addressing the same topics but in a greater scale. Mental health is also an issue that is central in the new Norwegian curriculum and, thus, needs further research on how to discuss it with students. Additionally, I believe that mental health awareness in education is lacking, speaking from my own experiences in education as both a student and a teacher. Secondly, I have experienced and known people who

1. I am aware of the sexual misconduct allegations against Sherman Alexie in 2018, so I was hesitant to use his YA novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) in this study. However, I reasoned that his work of fiction is still worthwhile to look at, since it is critically acclaimed and has been utilized in many classrooms to teach diversity since its release. Therefore, it is meaningful to look at the novel to see if it remains relevant after 15 years or if it should be dismissed due to its author’s actions in recent years.

have been afraid of talking about their potential mental health issue in fear of being stigmatized by classmates and family members. I also find it important to add my positionality on person-first language vs identity-first language is that I find a person-first language the most respectful, as you put the emphasis on the person and prevent people from being defined by their diagnosis, so I have applied this throughout this MA thesis. However, I am aware and fully respect that some people prefer identity-first language instead because they feel that their diagnosis is an integral part of their identity. Lastly, I am a strong advocate for inspiring students to read literature, because I believe reading can be an immense asset for students and adults alike.

2 Theoretical frameworks

The following section presents the theoretical background for this research which includes YA studies, bibliotherapy, and critical disability studies. These various theoretical approaches have guided my research to answer how interacting with YA novels can teach empathy and promote mental health awareness while engaging students in open and reflective discussions about sensitive topics. My theoretical framework consists of past research on YA literature and its possible role in teaching critical reading, empathy and promoting discussion through relatable characters and narratives (Corbett & Phillips, 2020; Monaghan, 2016). However, the YA genre's rise to mainstream has led to a market overflowing with books, which means that teachers need to be critical when deciding what/which book(s) to implement or introduce to their students. Therefore, I also present theory on how to decide if books fulfill a certain requirement for them to be purposeful to introduce to students. Meanwhile, I am interested in theoretical approaches on how to facilitate learning through YA literature whilst contributing to students' own mental health/identity formation. Thus, I have drawn on bibliotherapy and counter narratives (de Leon, 2017; Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011) in the process of presenting classroom strategies to promote authentic discussions using YA novels. Furthermore, I have considered how critical disability theory might be transferrable to shed light on problematic terms in the mental health research field such as "mental health illness" and often referring to individuals with mental health issues as people who are "suffering" (Leduc, 2020; Scrofano, 2019). Therefore, I have chosen YA studies because the uniqueness of the genre paired with bibliotherapy can lead to safer classroom environments. Additionally, students are taught awareness of differences and empathy to eradicate stigmatization where physical or mental disabilities are negatively perceived.

2.1 Young Adult Studies

2.1.1 Potential of YA Literature in the EFL Classroom

YA literature has the potential to teach adolescents about growing up and the multitude of feelings and thoughts that follow when maturing, while also delving into sensitive topics concerning societal problems, such as discrimination, stigmatization, environmental issues, and war. Therefore, YA literature is not necessarily only entertaining fiction but also a source for critical questions of societal norms and a platform that tackles meaningful topics with refined sensitivity (Corbett & Phillips, 2020). This means that YA novels can be facilitated in the classroom to teach students about issues concerning themselves and society, while allowing the students to actively engage with authentic materials that are relatable. According to Corbett and Phillips (2020), YA literature can be formational for adolescents and teach them about different people, ideas, cultures, and practices which they would normally not encounter where they live (p. 2). Thus, the interaction with YA books could help create a more inclusive classroom environment where diversity is applauded because students realize that uniqueness and differences are ordinary. In addition to this, YA books tell stories that belong in the classroom because the characters are relatable in age and can help students learn how fallible humans are so that they develop empathy and become acquainted with parts of themselves they never knew existed (Roberts, 2013). YA literature is therefore a

complex genre that teachers can implement to teach students about themselves and different people.

YA novels offer a possibility to delve into topics and feelings that question normative values set by society while expressing ideas concerning race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, identity, ability, and so forth, that in more established literary fields remain “unspeakable or unpublishable” (Corbett & Phillips, 2020, p. 2). Thus, YA literature has the potential for teachers to help students heal through a “pedagogy of exposure” (Dernikos, 2018, p. 1) where the focus is on affects and emotions, while the counter-narratives, simultaneously, might introduce students to different viewpoints and perspectives that they might not regularly engage with. Furthermore, the YA genre has had an emergence of stories that realistically portray characters with mental health issues (Wickham, 2018), which can help promote mental health awareness and abolish stigmatization. Additionally, YA novels are shifting and evolving with time, which is positive, since they can then authentically relate to current events, topics, feelings, and experiences in a way students understand rather than having to look at these questions exclusively through a historical lens. However, this also creates a possible issue for teachers in that they will have to continuously expand their bibliographical knowledge to ensure that their YA novel selections remain relevant for the students. Nonetheless, this should not deter teachers from exploring the potential of YA literature, because the benefits of teaching students to read are numerous (Roberts, 2013; Sumara, 2002) and YA novels can engage students with various topics simultaneously.

2.1.2 YA Popularity

The recent rise of YA literature to mainstream popularity has led to a vast number of YA novels being published and released every year, thus creating a challenge for teachers when deciding which books to introduce to the students. It is positive that YA literature is receiving attention so that more young readers are inspired to start or continue reading. I contend that the chosen novels for this MA thesis are not prudent to the commercialization, since their respective authors are writing from own experiences and are more likely to portray a realistic narrative. Adib Khorram is a queer Iranian-American writer living with depression, Anna-Marie McLemore identifies as queer, Latine, and nonbinary author, and Sherman Alexie is Native American writer born with congenital hydrocephalus. Therefore, all three authors write from an authentic perspective, since their positionality is within the group they are writing about (hooks, 1989). However, the affluent YA market might also produce problematic misrepresentations of certain groups or topics in its commercialized strive. Therefore, it is important that teachers are knowledgeable about the books they want to introduce to students to prevent a reinforcement of negative stereotypes. In light of this issue, a case study by Alison Monaghan (2016) that focused on mental health representations in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999) concluded with a set of criteria to establish if a book is fruitful to use in education. Monaghan (2016) argues for four markers that can help indicate if a narrative is productive to teach students about mental health which can then help teachers determine what literature to implement. For the students’ benefit, the book should firstly portray a realistic protagonist who has competence equal to the character’s age and situation. Then, the narrative needs to be comparable to the reader’s own life and experiences, and it should make sense according to the narrator’s logic. Lastly, the text should, at some point, clearly express the character’s health condition (Monaghan, 2016, p. 39). Thus, teachers can use these markers to discern if a book is worthwhile for the students to engage with to teach them about mental health through

realistic and nuanced depictions. Furthermore, these markers have helped my research to determine how valuable the YA novels analyzed in this study are to teach students mental health awareness to promote a healthy psychosocial classroom environment.

2.2 Bibliotherapy

To implement YA novels in lower secondary education, teachers can use bibliotherapy which is a method that utilizes literature to help students' personality grow through affective learning where students can "understand and cope with problems" (Hébert & Kent, 2000, p. 168) by engaging with narratives that depicts relevant life situations and experiences. Therefore, bibliotherapy facilitates the use of books as a strategy to nurture readers' mental health while teaching empathy and appreciation of diversity (de Leon, 2017; Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011). Bringing bibliotherapy into the classroom by using YA literature can promote awareness of mental health issues, such as depression, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, anxiety, and PTSD, in addition to each other's differences, thus creating a safer environment for students where their diversity is accepted. The combination of YA literature and bibliotherapy to teach understanding of oneself, others, and society is a valuable resource which can be aimed to specifically improve a positive mental health environment. Studies have shown that there is a correlation between students' perspectives on school life, both social and academic standing, and their mental health (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2015; Cole et al., 2010; Frojd et al., 2008), thus indicating that school-based mediation is crucial to teach positive attitudes towards mental health. Moreover, teachers have a responsibility to bring the mental health topic into the EFL classroom to ensure that students participate in texts and discussions surrounding mental health-related issues. Therefore, bibliotherapy offers a possibility for teachers in the EFL classroom to begin integrating YA literature into their teaching to create an inclusively diverse classroom that promotes mental well-being.

In de Leon's (2017) literature review, she investigated studies concerning the implementation of bibliotherapy and a key finding was how the participants managed to identify with characters who were relatable in age and life situations to understand and handle circumstances that invoke strong emotions (pp. 7-8). Furthermore, bibliotherapy as a method to teach sensitive topics can promote "understanding and acceptance of individual differences" (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011, p. 11), and has more potential to do so when students relate to the literature. Consequently, bibliotherapy can be used to teach students to celebrate dissimilarities by implementing YA literature, such as *PET* (Emezi, 2019), *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green, 2012), and *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline, 2017), which realistically portrays sensitive topics like child abuse, terminal disease, and racism that students might identify with. These titles are a few among many other recently published YA novels that include sensitive topics in relation to Indigeneity, queerness, and death. Finally, bibliotherapy might help students who are experiencing some form of exclusion feel recognized through the portrayal of characters with similar issues concerning identity, family, death, and disability.

2.3 Critical Disability Studies – Models and Narratives

The renowned disability scholar and author Amanda Leduc (2020) defines a disability as something that disrupts a person's physical, developmental, cognitive, or mental health because even though disability was once reserved for mostly physical disabilities, the term has evolved to recognize "all manner of impairments" (p. 35). To

view established structures within society with a critical lens is imperative to further social justice and end dogmatic stereotypes that discriminate groups of people. In this thesis, I put mental health-related issues in conversation with disability frameworks because of similarities in how people living with depression, anxiety, or PTSD and people with a disability have been distorted in literature (Barker & Murray, 2017). Following Leduc's (2020), this distortion of disabilities become "a symbol for everyone else" (p. 37), thus harming the agency of people with a disability. Furthermore, Hall (2019) argues that critical disability theorists should not only commit to working for people that are labeled or self-identify as disabled, but rather all groups of people that historically and currently have had their value discredited and been medicalized. Moreover, critical disability studies is concerned with social justice work by scrutinizing limitations and norms set by society that create stigma around differences (Minich, 2016). Hence, critical disability studies does not necessarily limit itself to the concept of "disability" because the theory can be applied to view most socio-political constructions and how these impact any oppressed people (Hall, 2019). Thus, the use of critical disability studies as a researcher entails looking at how society has maltreated certain groups like people with disability by limiting their freedom of action with various social constraints while disparaging their opinions through the use and abuse of medical models.

The voices of people with disabilities started being heard in the 1960s when they rightly demanded that disability should be redefined from a medical problem to a political and social issue instead (Watson, 2012). There are various models on disability that call attention to how society view disabilities, where the two prevailing ones are the social model, which was created by people with disabilities in contrast to the medical model that had been maintained as the status quo. The medical model creates a direct link between a person and a diagnosis to emphasize the need for intervention through medicine to either solve or eradicate a particular disability or condition (Leduc, 2020). In turn, the social model challenges the medical one by looking at how systemic barriers maintained by society limit people with disabilities. Thus, the medical model has historically, since the late sixteenth century (Hobgood & Wood, 2017) and throughout the 18th and 19th century (Holmes, 2017; Joshua, 2017), had severe repercussions by stigmatizing people with disabilities as individuals who need to be cured or fixed, which might create shame and ostracization from society. Additionally, an article by the Norwegian professor Elisabeth Eide interviewed eleven individuals with various disabilities to see what their experiences with Norwegian media had been since they all had considerable media exposure between 2002-2012. The study found that the participants experienced that media attempted to "victimize" people with disabilities by focusing on differences rather than similarities and perceptions of "suffering", "personal tragedies", and "sickness" (Eide, 2012). Therefore, this study seeks to find out if the chosen YA novels manage to resist representations of the medical model and incorporate instead facets of the social model to help abolish stigmatization against people with disabilities.

Critical disability studies emerged in the 1970s (Reaume, 2014), and have in recent years, managed to highlight how certain narratives depicting people with disabilities can be harmful for the progress of abolishing stigmatization and old stereotypes. This has created a need to view established norms in new perspectives, to "re-see" (Dunn, 2010) literature and portrayals of not just characters with disabilities but all minoritized groups, to understand how previous and current depictions can reinforce harmful stereotypes. Therefore, it is important that teachers are aware of how minoritized groups are portrayed in the literature they teach their students so that they can either help students resist negative stereotypes or re-see problematic texts critically.

Stories containing representations of disabilities have been categorized by several disability narrative theorists (Couser, 2009; Frank, 2013; Karp 1996) to discern what the implications of character development reveal of society's view towards difference. Scrofano (2019) examined these categories and found that the disability narrative theorists had created similar sets and identified how these categories are captured within Frank's (2013) narratives of "restitution", "chaos", and "quest" (p. 5). Scrofano (2019) further argues that YA novels should refrain from the category of restitution and attempt to find instead narratives within the category of quest to instill hope of not overcoming a disability or illness, but of finding meaningful purpose where people with disabilities are presented as complete participants of society. These categories are used alongside the models of disability in this study to help identify if a narrative promotes understanding of diversity or if, instead, it reinforces the dangerous belief that disabilities need to be fixed.

3 Research Methodology and Methods

This section will outline the research methodology and methods that I have applied for this research, a description of the data collection plan, how the data has been analyzed, ethical considerations to be aware of as a researcher, limitations to the study, and the reasoning behind these research decisions. Selecting which method(s) to apply is a crucial part of a research project as it guides the researcher in choosing what data to collect, how to collect it, why the data is relevant to study, and how to analyze it. Furthermore, my choice of methodology can help show the purpose of my research, as it tells the reader that I am interested in qualitative data concerning literature that can be used to look more closely at a specific issue such as mental health. Therefore, a case study approach was chosen to be able to scrutinize the set of novels to answer the research questions: How can representations of mental health-related issues in YA novels be meaningful for lower secondary school teachers in the Norwegian EFL classroom to teach critical thinking, empathy, and mental health awareness? How can teachers use the YA genre to aid students' mental self-preservation and identity formation? How can YA novels be implemented in the EFL classroom to engage students in open and reflective discussions about sensitive topics?

3.1 Qualitative Research

This MA thesis has been conducted as a qualitative research study which is an evolving methodology that represents several research approaches that are commonly used in nearly all social science inquiries (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Qualitative research is an excellent methodology to explore constructs within society, since it allows the researcher to observe or make use of real-life contexts to scrutinize social aspects or norms. This is key in a project such as mine which seeks to shed light on how YA literature can challenge discriminatory portrayals of people with mental health issues through realistic narratives. In contrast to quantitative research that mainly looks at numerical data, qualitative research focuses primarily on textual data which is interpreted by the researcher while drawing on relevant theoretical approaches previously developed in other studies (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Therefore, qualitative research is limited by its lack of participant quantity but benefits from the detailed data collected, thus culminating in a greater quality of material. Thus, this research utilizes qualitative research to increase the value of the data found in the novels. In other words, I have examined the chosen YA novels closely to scrutinize the details in the text rather than, for example, conducting a quantitative research concerning the number of YA novels published with mental health as a topic in the 21st century. Moreover, qualitative research is a strategy that permits the researcher to acquire information beneath the surface (Mariampolski, 2001) that would otherwise go unnoticed, and for that reason, it is imperative that qualitative research is conducted to shed light on obscured real-life contexts. This strategy is productive in detailing how close reading can reveal explicit and implicit topics such as mental health, to see if characters with mental health issues are portrayed realistically or diminished to stereotypes. Consequently, this study aims to facilitate qualitative research to gain in-depth knowledge of mental health portrayals in YA literature. In doing so, I seek to highlight the importance of teaching authentic and

relevant texts in the lower secondary EFL classroom, thus inviting students to become critical and empathetic readers.

3.2 Case Study

The research methodology chosen for this thesis is a case study that will focus on the YA novels *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018), *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016), and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) as its primary texts. Despite their differences, I chose these novels because they are all representative of how the YA genre has kept evolving in the last 15 years with authentic narratives of adolescence, where mental health is portrayed both directly and indirectly as the characters' inner thoughts are described. Furthermore, the primary text encapsulate a large variety of identities and issues such as anxiety, otherness, ability, and disappointment in the self. Carrying out a case study has allowed me to explore a particular setting in detail by scrutinizing a specific set of data in my research. A case study approach is primarily used to describe specific learning, teaching or research settings extensively (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 14), thus generating a thorough understanding of complex issues by exploring "an event or a phenomenon in depth and in its natural context" (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 1). Additionally, Stake (2006) claims that "qualitative case study was developed to study the experience of real cases in real situations" (p. 2). Therefore, the case study approach is applicable to this research project, since the cases will be used to describe how mental health is depicted in these YA novels and how these novels can be used in educational settings to teach about mental health-related issues. Furthermore, the case study allows a researcher to study a case or cases for a determined and specified reason where the interest originates from the individual case(s) (Hyett et al., 2014). Therefore, the selected YA novels are of interest because of their ability to appropriately reflect meaningful topics such as mental health (Corbett & Phillips, 2020; Wickham, 2018), together with their potential as resources that can be implemented in the EFL classroom to raise awareness.

This research is what Stake (1995) refers to as a "collective case study" (p. 4) since I have opted for three novels to increase the potential for learning and to create "balance and variety" (p. 6) which is also important. Additionally, my thesis will be an instrumental study given how it will analyze several cases where their individual characteristics give valuable insight to the research. Conducting a collective case study is advantageous, as it enables the researcher to make comparisons between the cases (Crowe et al., 2011). The multitude of YA novels to decide from created an issue during the case selection, which is a decisive part of an instrumental case study research, because the case(s) must be chosen by the researcher, thus creating the issue of deciding which primary texts will maximize the learning potential. For this research, the selection was made after extensive deliberation, YA novel readings, and examination of previously conducted studies to choose three primary texts that included portrayals of characters experiencing mental health issues. According to Stake (1995), the cases in a collective case study should not be chosen on solely similar attributes but need to create a balanced and varied case set where the primary goal is the opportunity to learn (p. 6). Therefore, I have chosen three cases from the YA genre that I believe can shed light on mental wellbeing uniquely by telling three completely different narratives where the characters who live with/experience mental health-related issues surrounding the same topics of identity and belonging, even though their circumstances are not alike. Furthermore, even though the primary texts chosen might not be generalizable for the YA genre, they are unique in their own right and can offer greater understanding if they

are examined to produce “exemplary knowledge” (Thomas, 2010, p. 33). Thus, the set of cases were chosen to see how *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016) portrays traumatic experiences of childhood abuse, while *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) depicts thoughts and feelings in the face of tremendous grief, and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018) invites readers to follow the mind of a fifteen-year-old boy diagnosed with clinical depression. Furthermore, the analysis will identify how mental health comes into play in these different scenarios and attempt to distinguish if the chosen novels manage to resist stereotypes with realistic representations of mental health issues.

3.3 Data Collection

My data consists of findings from three YA novels that tell stories involving characters who experience thoughts and issues surrounding mental health such as suicidal thoughts and otherness. Three cases have been chosen for this study after extensive deliberation: *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (2018) by the queer Iranian American author Adib Khorram, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) by the Native American author Sherman Alexie, and *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) by the queer, Latine, and non-binary author Anna-Marie McLemore. These cases have been probed through an extensive data collection which has included several close readings while taking notes, marking relevant pages, and writing down citations that illustrate mental health concerns and thoughts surrounding characters’ mental health. Afterwards, I divided the findings into categories that I selected during the collection and proceed with the coding of the data to make it more tractable and comparable to each other. The coding strategy has been used to make the data collected more manageable by organizing it into groupings, which helps me with the storing and retrieving process as well as becoming more familiar with the materials (Heigham & Croker, 2009). The coding has highlighted key topics such as descriptions of mental health issues, the intersection of mental health and identity, and characters’ responses to mental health issues that appear in the novels, which I have cross-examined across the case set.

I have analyzed the findings from the data collection through a textual- intersectional analysis because these tools permit a researcher to investigate topics in the text closely and how different themes intersect. Textual analysis has allowed me to look at how the authors use dialogues and inner monologues surrounding mental health-related topics and how the characters are portrayed when experiencing situations that cause disarray in their mind. According to Fürsich (2009), textual analysis is a method that enables researchers to “discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text” (p. 241). The content of the cases has therefore been analyzed to see if there are any patterns, similarities, or differences between the descriptions of mental health in the three novels. Additionally, the findings have been analyzed through an intersectional lens, which entails looking at the intersection of two or more personality traits to see if and what occurrence(s) causes a mental health issue to arise in characters and how this affects them. However, according to Collins (2019), there are some “definitional dilemmas” (p. 4) surrounding intersectionality. Due to competing perspectives on its nature, she does argue for its benefit in recognizing social problems as “interconnected” (p. 1). Moreover, intersectionality can create an “intersectional space of placing different ideas in dialogue” (p. 7) by looking at how various topics are connected in one way or another. Examples of this can be situations involving family, friends, love, race, sexual orientation, identity, or otherness that might lead to ostracization, misjudgment, or self-judgement which eventually result in mental

health issues. Finally, I have discussed the findings and analysis in light of the theoretical frameworks deployed and additional sources to answer the three interrelated research questions posed in this thesis.

3.4 Limitations

There are some limitations in this research project that have been recognized and need to be addressed. The first limitation is the time span to conduct the research which impedes the opportunity to gain a completely thorough understanding of the research field. Furthermore, the limited time has also shaped the process of data collection, as it creates the issue of possibly limiting the data due to a fear of being overwhelmed by too much material to analyze. Therefore, the research could need further development through a more extensive project where there is further time to gather a wider array of data from additional sources to triangulate results rather than gathering material solely from YA novels and previous studies conducted. Thus, the study might be limited by not including the voices of teachers or students through other methods such as interviews, observations, or questionnaires. However, the scope of this research project does not permit such an extensive data collection and for that reason, I have chosen to focus the study on the benefits of teaching mental health through YA novels and the YA genre's potential in the EFL classroom, and in education more broadly.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

During this research, I have been ethically aware of how my positionality as a researcher and human being might affect the study, and my intentions and motivations for writing about mental health and YA literature. In addition to this, the research also draws on critical disability studies, and it is therefore worth mentioning that I am able-bodied and an advocate to end stigmatization against people with disabilities. This work will hopefully be used to resist stereotypes, but it is important to reflect on ethics when writing about experiences of a group which you do not belong to (hooks, 1989). I have personally never been diagnosed with any mental health condition but have experienced and observed situations in educational contexts where mental health issues and a lack of mental health information has had negative implications such as the reclusiveness and ostracization of students. These experiences have led to countless reflections around the fluctuating nature of mental health and the inadequate attention in education to how common, yet complex mental health issues are. Furthermore, mental health is an important topic that needs to be discussed and researched so that teachers and students alike can help abolish the continuous misinformation concerning mental health issues. My intention with this research is therefore to find out if YA novels are productive to teach mental health awareness and how teachers can implement the books in their teaching to promote inclusiveness.

There are also the ethical considerations concerning which theoretical frameworks to include in the research and the selected cases. The reasoning behind these theoretical choices have been to highlight key aspects of why YA literature has value as teaching material and how narratives can help abolish stigmatization by teaching understanding of differences. Therefore, I have chosen three different cases within the YA genre, written by authors with Indigenous (Sherman Alexie), Latine (Anna-Marie McLemore), and Iranian-American (Adib Khorram) backgrounds, that can show various facets of mental health and otherness. Since the cases were chosen by myself, it can be a challenge to not become too personal with the units of data, something I have attempted to be aware

of throughout my research. It is important that I manage to communicate authentic results and do not miscommunicate the authors' meaning to confirm my own research while also managing to offer my own interpretations that are valuable to the research.

4 Analysis of Research Findings

In the following chapter, I will present and analyze the findings regarding mental health representations and descriptions from the three selected YA novels: *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018). I applied a textual-intersectional method when analyzing the findings to study how the mental health issues are described and how they relate and interact with other topics like identity, gender, sexual orientation, family, and ability. My reasoning for calling it a textual-intersectional method is because the tools intersect and intertwine in the analysis because of the importance of the intersectional identity factors when discussing mental health-related issues. The presentation and analysis of the findings from each book are presented separately to honor the novels and their respective author(s) and to highlight their individuality despite their similarities. Additionally, this approach allows readers to gain a greater understanding of the uniqueness of the different novels, rather than grouping the presentation of the findings together, which might limit the appreciation each novel deserves. Furthermore, by doing this I seek to avoid homogenizing practices and focus instead on the unique differences integrated in each novel. In turn, the discussion of the findings is done with the complete case set simultaneously to cross-examine the analyzed findings and to discuss similarities, differences, and the representation of mental health issues within the novels. Furthermore, the discussion manages to detail how similar issues such as suicidal thoughts, depression, and traumatic experiences arise from completely different scenarios, which shows that young adults are likely to encounter relatable feelings concerning friendship, loneliness, grief, self-worth, and disappointment in self just like the characters in the novels, even though their backgrounds vary.

4.1 Presentation and Analysis of findings

4.1.1 *When the Moon Was Ours*

In the novel *When the Moon Was Ours* (McLemore, 2016), readers are introduced to two protagonists, Sam who is Italian-Pakistani and Miel who is latinx, and they are best friends. They are also falling in love with each other while Sam is questioning his gender identity as a trans teen, and Miel is having difficulty dealing with the loss of her family. Meanwhile, *When the Moon Was Ours* is heavily infused with magic realism that is used to discuss identity (Stamper & Miller, 2019). Note, for example, that Miel has a continuous blossoming rose growing from her wrist. Furthermore, there are six more prominent characters that drive the narrative represented by Sam's mother, the witch Aracely, the adult taking care of Miel, and the Bonner sisters who are white and privileged: Chloe, Ivy, Peyton, and Lian. All of these characters are struggling with their own personal issues, but the main focus is on Miel and Sam as they both serve as focalizers in the story through a third person view. Even though *When the Moon Was Ours* does not include an explicit mental health diagnosis, the novel does realistically portray surrounding thoughts and actions that follow teenage years such as anxiety, low self-worth, shame, identity crisis, and fear of exposure by detailing the feelings and

thoughts that arise during traumatic events. Additionally, there are several indications that Miel has PTSD from childhood trauma that sometimes overwhelms her.

Suicidal Ideation

An important finding concerning mental health issues from the novel is the suicide attempt that happens when Sam is devastated after a meeting with Miel where she told him that they have made a mistake and that they should not pursue the possibility of being more than friends. This leaves Sam feeling alone and unwanted which causes him to seek out the nearby river during the night. While standing at the water's edge, readers are told of the thoughts running through Sam's mind as he spirals into negativity where all "stories were lies" (McLemore, 2016, p. 130). Furthermore, he feels that his family's and Miel's tales brought false hope that led nowhere and could never survive reality. As these thoughts are running through Sam's mind, he is staring down at the dark surface of the river. Even in his state of despair he clings to the belief that the river might help him, like it helped Aracely, to become who he truly is, or make him want to be the woman he was born as called Samira. Moreover, if none of these options come to pass, Sam hopes the river will be merciful by taking him under and "turn him into water" (McLemore, 2016, p. 131). Sam wades into the river and lets the current take him as he gives up control of his drifting body, feeling the pain of the cold water drowning his lungs while reflecting on Miel, his emotions, and his identity. Sam realizes that raw hope drove him into the river as the decision concerning his gender identity feels too massive to deal with alone, so he wants more than anything else that the water can make the decision for him. When Miel eventually pulls Sam out of the river he attempts to fight her at first to stay in the water, but his body is so cold that his arms and legs felt "no more alive than the water" (McLemore, 2016, p. 133). Additionally, Sam reflects on how his fingers are so numb that he wonders if "he was disappearing" (McLemore, 2016, p. 133), which tells readers how close Sam was to dying. The questions within Sam concerning his gender identity intersect with mental health-related issues given how he finds little recognition from society and feels like a burden for his loved ones and when the only person he believes understands him distances herself from him, he feels isolated, alone, and disconnected from the world.

Traumatic Experiences

Traumatic experiences in early childhood can have severe repercussions on people throughout the rest of their lives and can impact their mental health. Miel has suffered through several traumatic events in her youth due to her parents fearing the roses growing from her wrist. The roses are depicted as supernatural since people believe they have extraordinary abilities, except for Sam and Miel, who are adamant that the flowers are "nothing more than town lore" (p. 111). Because of this fear, Miel's parents tried to "heal" her in the numerous ways during her childhood that the *señoras* propose. However, in despair, her father tries to cauterize the opening in Miel's wrist, but the attempt fails as the rose grows through the sealed skin forever forming a "knot" of scar tissue on her wound which causes her pain every time a new petal grows, and this wrist pain has "kept her awake so many nights" (p. 219). Additionally, the fear from her parents' attempts to change her has instilled a constant shame regarding her disability so she tries to hide it by cutting off the flowers, which causes her a lot of pain. Thus, there is a correlation between Miel's instilled shame and self-harming as she describes snapping off a rose as "Pain shivered along her veins. It found her hearth and her stomach and everything in her that was alive." (p. 26). Therefore, Miel's self-harming

injures more than just her wrist as she feels hurt in her whole body and mind. Furthermore, Miel sees this act as an "offering to the mother who had feared them" (p. 41), which shows how the traumatic experiences from the past can affect the actions of the present. Both Miel and Aracely seem haunted by their past which is seen when they admit to hearing their mother's voice in the winds. Their lack of communication, however, has caused Miel to wander unknowingly of her deeper connection with Aracely and has blamed herself for the death of her brother Leandro and her mom. Meanwhile, Aracely could have explained earlier that she was named Leandro before transitioning, and then share the events of the past so that Miel would not feel unnecessary shame. However, Aracely believes that Miel has forgotten about her past and fears that "she might remember the rest" (p. 103) if Miel learns that Aracely is her sibling. This example shows the intersection of age and ability, since Aracely believes that if Miel's past is left alone it will be forgotten

Additionally, readers are early introduced to the fact that Miel has a "fear of pumpkins" (p. 4) without any broader explanation of exactly why. This is detailed later in the novel when Miel is forced into a glass coffin and locked inside with barely any room to move, and some of her memories come back to her more vividly. Glass coffins have been used to "[encase] the limb" (Leduc, 2020, p. 37) in storytelling and prompt a magical change similar to the medical model, but in *When the Moon Was Ours* the encapsulation does not change or cure Miel but, it makes her confront her childhood traumas. Miel remembers her mother forcing Miel inside a hollow pumpkin still rooted to the ground when she was a child and although she "cried and called for her mother" (p. 72) until she was exhausted, her mother did not let her out before the next morning. This incident explains why Miel is so afraid of pumpkins and expresses how traumatic being locked up in a glass coffin while having experienced similar childhood traumas must be. Furthermore, Miel has troubles sleeping during the pumpkin harvest season because it reminds her of being confined in a dark pumpkin as a child, so she needs lights to be able to sleep (p. 181). Additionally, after the pumpkin confinement, Miel's mother had, in desperation, attempted to clear Miel of her petals by holding her underwater in the river while repeating "The difference between baptism and drowning is a few faithless breaths" (p. 158). Therefore, when Miel is enclosed within the glass coffin for the second time by Ivy Bonner, she becomes terrified and feels that "She fell deeper under the water" (p. 169), and that "she gasped and coughed like water had filled the panels" (p. 170). This indicates that Miel has difficulties with close quarters as it generates post traumatic stress from her childhood experiences of being enclosed and forced under water. Thus, there is an intersection between Miel's family relations and her mental health

Furthermore, a consequence of this traumatic event is that Miel has forgotten and construed a lot of her childhood memories concerning her parents. She remembers her father as gentle and kind because of how he cut her petals and bandaged her wound but has difficulties "settling into the memory" (p. 27). Moreover, readers learn later that Miel is holding onto this memory as she does not remember if her father had died or left them, but she is adamant that "her father did not leave them" (p. 53) which makes Miel wonder if she is at fault for losing her father as well. Eventually, Miel starts remembering her past more vividly as she recalls "her father shouting" (p. 217), "his whispers" (p. 217), and that "he had left them" (p. 221). This realization hurts Miel since she has believed that her father was always gentle and caring because of her repressed memories. Meanwhile, Miel also sees herself as a girl with "the blood on her hands of two people whose names she could not speak" (p. 26), indicating that Miel blames herself for losing her family. This is explicitly stated when Miel tells Aracely: "I killed you ... And then

I killed her" (p. 222). Although Miel was only five years old at the time, she still blames herself for what happened and feels ashamed for having caused the accident. Therefore, her mental health is affected by her traumatic past, since she has trouble reconciling with her memories because of the difficulties of accurately remembering her parents.

4.1.2 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) readers meet Arnold Spirit Junior who is a fourteen-year-old boy who is Native American and living on a reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Arnold has always had difficulties with being different than other kids which has led him to only having one real friend called Rowdy. When Arnold decides to leave the reservation school, Wellpinit High School, to go to the all-white Reardan High School, he loses Rowdy as a best friend and starts his journey of self-discovery by finding his own identity while realizing that the world is more complex than he originally believed. Throughout the novel there are indications that Arnold encounters mental health-related issues as he faces adversity in both Reardan and the reservation, causing stress, doubt, fear, and grief. These moments of hardships are realistically depicted based on how a teenager could react to the experiences of otherness, anxiety, and loss, making Arnold go through several mental states in the text where he seldom feels adequately equipped to handle his emotions. Therefore, my findings show how Arnold's mental health is affected by bullying, ostracization from society, and losing family members while also including depictions of mental health-related issues in side characters primarily shown through friendship.

Friendship

In a passage in the book where Arnold is at Reardan High School in a sheltered bathroom, he learns that Penelope has bulimia since he hears someone throwing up and waits for her to come outside. The focus of the novel is not on Penelope's life, but rather Arnold's so the novel does not resurface the issue of bulimia throughout the story as it is not Arnold's main concern. However, we do see that Penelope and Arnold develop a relationship of sorts after the discovery because rather than judging her, Arnold listened to her and understood that she needed a friend she could trust. Therefore, readers are not shown that Penelope "beats" bulimia, thus resisting the medical model of solving a particular disability or condition (Leduc, 2020). Instead, this episode helps Arnold realize that the rich White people can also have hidden issues, and that some of them are just as much in need of a friend as he is. The friendship between Penelope and Arnold shows that unlikely relationships can grow between people that none expected, and more importantly, that the people you least expect need a friend might be the ones that need it the most. These representations are important for students to engage with so that they can learn to be empathetic and create an inclusive classroom environment where everyone feels included.

Effects of Loneliness

A common factor concerning mental health are the feelings of loneliness, otherness, and not fitting in, which is clearly seen in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and how these feelings intersect with the main character's mental health as it often swings based on recent social interactions. After Arnold leaves Wellpinit High School to go to Reardan High School, which is outside the Native American reservation, he is ostracized from his community, since they see him as a traitor (p. 132). Feeling that everyone except his own family has turned their back on Arnold entails a massive

amount of judgement to deal with for a fourteen-year-old while at Reardan he is an outsider that most shy away from since he is the only Native American teenager, besides the school mascot (p. 56). The fact that the only other Native American figure represented at the school is a mascot also shows the bigotry he faces at the new school and reinforces the feeling of being different. Additionally, his sister gains courage from Arnold's decision to leave the reservation and does so herself after spontaneously marrying a man and moving with him to Montana, which makes Arnold even lonelier. In terms of communication, Arnold is left with a dad who is either drunk or replies with grunts, his mother, and the few comments (usually insults) and replies at school from classmates and teachers. This causes Arnold to resign to his room where he mostly draws cartoons alone while wishing he was still friends with Rowdy. This can be seen during an episode where Arnold really misses his friend and sends him an e-mail from Reardan and receives a reply of Rowdy's bare ass which makes Arnold laugh but also depressed as it makes him realize the space that has grown between them (p. 130). Therefore, Arnold's loneliness is negatively impacting his mental health, since he cannot confide his feelings to anyone.

Portrayal of Disability

Arnold has a disability due to too much cerebral spinal fluid in his skull when he was born, which led to a surgery that he barely survived during infancy and is still a concern as his head is extra vulnerable to impacts of force. Additionally, he details, at the very start of the book, the consequences of being born with too much cerebral spinal fluid or "brain grease" as Arnold calls it, and how it has permanently affected various physical elements in his life like eyesight, headaches, extra teeth, malnourishment, speech impediments, and seizures (pp. 1-4). Therefore, his mom has often been afraid for his safety, because Arnold states that people with disabilities "get beat up" (p. 4) each month and sometimes more often. He is never cured of his disability, and we rarely see it hinder or plague him as he matures, besides when he is elbowed in the head by Rowdy and has a minor concussion. During this event Arnold's mother thinks he has been murdered by the hit, and comments on his hydrocephalus and says, "your brain is already damaged enough" (p. 147) which is also a worry for Arnold. Arnold's disability affects his mental health because of the stigmatization revolving around disabilities which makes people bully Arnold and it reinforces his negative self-image. This is clearly seen as Arnold often uses derogatory terms when describing himself such as "retard" because "everybody on the rez calls me a retard about twice a day" (p. 5). This example shows how Arnold has internalized the word because he constantly hears it from society, which is why language can have such an important impact on how people with disabilities perceive themselves (Zigler, 2020). Moreover, this episode clearly depicts the lingering effects of terminology from the medical model that persist as slurs that project stereotypical and socially constructed images onto people with disabilities.

Grief and Loss

Another emerging theme in the research findings is the occurrences of death and how this impacts the mental health of the characters. Throughout the novel, Arnold and his family experience tremendous amounts of loss which is seen as Arnold recalls that he is only fourteen years old and has been to forty-two funerals so far in his life (p. 199). Readers are introduced to the topic of grief early as Arnold's dog (and best friend) Oscar is sick and needs to be put down. Arnold loved Oscar and the loss causes him to become depressed as he considers "crawling into a hole and disappearing forever" (p. 15). The

second event surrounding loss occurs when Arnold's grandmother dies after being driven over by a drunk driver on the reservation while walking home from a powwow. The third episode of grief takes place after Eugene, his dad's best friend, dies after being shot in the face by a friend over "[fighting] over the last drink in bottle of wine" (p. 169). After this event Arnold felt helpless and contemplates that he found unknown strength to just get out of bed in the morning as he feels "depressed" (p. 173). The last death is the hardest one to accept for Arnold as his sister and her husband die after throwing a party where someone turned on a stove, forgot about it, and left so it ended up burning down their trailer home while they slept in a stupor inside. Losing his sister in an already traumatic year filled with death and change is the last straw that breaks Arnold as he goes into a state of shock, followed by hysteria, before he finally resigns to feeling depressed once again. Afterwards, Arnold finds little joy in anything as he states, "I could see shadows but I couldn't see details" (p. 209) and that he was freezing like "a snowstorm blowing inside of my chest" (p. 209). Additionally, Arnold reflects on the difficulty of conversing with people when it feels like every planet has exploded and that you have lost everything (p. 213). The novel accurately depicts the pain of losing loved ones and how it can gravely affect the mental health of young people which can show students the importance of being empathic towards those who have experienced or are experiencing grief, and that the tremendous weight of feelings transpiring after loss will alleviate eventually.

4.1.3 *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*

In the YA novel *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018), readers follow the fifteen year old Iranian-American main character, Darius Kellner, the days before, during, and the days after a trip where he visits his mom's family side for the first time in Yazd, Iran. Darius is diagnosed with clinical depression, as is his father Stephen Kellner, while also undergoing not fitting in due to otherness, bullying, having no close friends, doubt, and low self-esteem. While in Yazd, Darius meets his first friend called Sohrab and readers are brought on a journey of self-exploration and the building of a lasting friendship with both ups and downs. Meanwhile, readers follow the thoughts of Darius through a first-person narrative relating to how he views the world and himself as he struggles to identify his own worth during events with his family and Sohrab. Therefore, the findings from *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* concern the portrayal of Darius' depression and medication, and how his mental health intersects with friendship, family, and otherness.

Representation of Depression

The first and most prominent finding is that the main protagonist has clinical depression which is depicted through his reflections around the diagnosis and the reactions of others. Early in the novel, readers are introduced to the fact that both Darius and his father are diagnosed with depression, take medication for it, and see the same doctor (p. 28). Then, later in the novel readers are told that Darius was "diagnosed with depression" (p. 107) when he was twelve years old. During the customs interrogation Darius is asked about what he is depressed about, which is a question he hates "Because the answer was *nothing*" (p. 68) and it makes him feel inadequate to have "nothing to be depressed about" (p. 68), since nothing bad has happened to him. This passage challenges the stereotypical notion that something terrible must have happened for someone to be diagnosed with depression, where in Darius' case it is his brain that "makes the wrong chemicals" (p. 69). Throughout the novel Darius never describes himself as being depressed which is positive, since the stereotype that all people with

depression are naturally in a depressed mood is stigmatizing (Barney et al., 2009). Darius, on the other hand, is portrayed as living with depression and his mental health issue does not define him or his emotions as he describes it like he has a blocked "well inside" (p. 24) him and that he finds it hard to show his feelings. Therefore, he finds it difficult to express his inner thoughts and the best way he manages to explain his depression is that he sometimes "gets stuck thinking things" (p. 237) where his mind mulls over sad thoughts. Furthermore, Darius is asked if his depression is hard for him and Darius answers "Yeah. Sometimes" (p. 237). This shows that depression can be difficult to cope with, but it is not something that necessarily limits people constantly.

At the end of the novel readers are told why Darius' father is so nervous about his depression because he fears what actions Darius might take. Darius' dad finally talks about his depression and explains that he is so worried about Darius being overwhelmed by his depression and that if he takes his eyes off his son, he might suddenly be "drowning in depression" (p. 285) and do something irreversible. An example of this occurs when Darius remembers that the one-time he said out loud that he wanted to die, his father had "freaked out and threatened to send [him] to a hospital" (p. 116). This fear stems from Stephen, himself having a period when Darius was seven where he constantly began thinking about how much better Darius and his mom would be without him there. Darius, however, is not contemplating suicide but his dad states that "suicide isn't the only way you can lose someone to depression" (p. 286). Stephen fears that Darius' feelings might overburden him so that he becomes reclusive, which is important to discuss in the EFL classroom as the Norwegian core curriculum includes an interdisciplinary topic called "health and life skills" (Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2017, p. 14) that stresses the importance of preparing students for thoughts, feelings, and relationships that can impact their mental health.

Another finding I would like to present and analyze involves the realistic representation of medication by detailing challenges, benefits, and the stigmas concerning taking medicines for mental health issues. Readers are told of some challenges that medication might cause as people respond differently to medicines. Trying out medicines in search of the right one was the "worst three months" of Darius' life, which tells how immense repercussions the wrong medication can cause for a person. Consequently, teachers and students need to be aware of this, as fellow students who require medication might need an adjustment time like Darius, who tried three medications before finding the right treatment. When Darius started taking medication, it also negatively impacted his soccer abilities because it made him unable to focus on anything. Due to a lack of mental health awareness, Darius' coach bullies him by continuously "humiliating [him] in front of the whole team" (p. 107) for suddenly becoming much worse at soccer, which made Darius leave "every single practice in tears" (pp. 107-108). This example is a clear description of how uninformed people in the role of mentors/teachers/adults are unable to instill critical care and can cause lasting traumas. Furthermore, Darius' medications have made him forget major parts of his childhood before he was diagnosed with depression given how antidepressants can sometimes "dull the memory" (p. 75). Additionally, the medications have a side effect on Darius' weight as he rarely loses any, but his doctor says it is a small price to pay for "emotional stability" (p. 127). Finally, readers are told that Stephen needed to be heavily medicated during a period which made him lose himself and become someone else due to pills, but he says "they saved my life" because they kept him alive until he managed to recover and be tapered off it. Thus, the novel presents several representations of side effects and benefits from medication while resisting to medically cure Darius or Stephen

as that would be unrealistic when they have clinical depression. Therefore, this is a realistic representation of depression that counters the medical model of disability where any deviation from the norm needs to be fixed (Leduc, 2020).

Concerning the medication, there are several examples of stigmatization relating to the act of needing pills to stabilize your brain and how this affects Darius negatively as he feels ashamed for taking them. The first incident occurs when Darius and his dad are taking medication in the kitchen and he feels that his dad is looking at him, ashamed of him, "ashamed of us" (p. 28). When Darius is at school, he must receive his medication from the nurse's office due to regulation and their pills are distributed in small paper cups that he thinks look just like the ones used in "every mental institution in every movie and television show ever" (p. 32). This passage indicates that Darius believes he is perceived as someone who belongs in a mental institution because he needs to take medication. A study on adolescents' experiences with taking psychiatric medication showed that the participants were ashamed of their diagnosis and need for medication and tried to keep their medication secret in fear of being stigmatized (Kranke et al., 2009). Darius' shame surrounding his medication is also seen later in the novel when he does not want Sohrab to see him take pills. Even though he had told Sohrab about his depression, he feels ashamed that he needs medication and finds it "more intimate than just being naked in front of each other" (p. 240). Furthermore, while in Iran his grandfather questions why Darius is taking medication, stating that "medicine is for old people" (p. 102). This comment shows the intersection of age and ability as Darius' grandfather believes that medication is only for old people, indicating that young people should not need medicines and withstand health issues without help. He believes that Darius must try harder at thinking positive things and then his depression will improve as he says that the medication "will not fix anything" (p. 102). Therefore, Darius' grandfather is under the notion that depression can be "fixed" which is in line with the medical model of disability that reinforces feelings of shame within people experiencing health issues. This is seen as Darius thinks he will "never be good enough" (p. 102) for his grandfather, since he has expectations of Darius being cured.

Friendship's Role on Self-Worth

Another finding I have analyzed involves how friendship impacts Darius' mental health in both positive and negative ways. Friendship can play a momentous role on a person's mental health as meeting friends that understand you might make life more joyous while lacking friends altogether will likely result in loneliness. In America, Darius only has one person who is close to being a friend and he is afraid of "alienating" (p. 31) her because then he would be alone. However, when Darius wakes the first day in Iran, he is quickly introduced by his grandfather to a boy called Sohrab who is the same age as him. His grandfather is adamant that Darius and Sohrab should become friends and they agree to play soccer the next day. Even though Darius does not like playing soccer, he is still looking forward to it, which surprises him as he realizes that he "made a friend" (p. 100). This is the first time Darius is motivated for the next day without feeling uncertainty, indicating that the friendship with Sohrab is already making Darius more self-confident. Moreover, in the locker room, Darius is filled with doubt about playing but Sohrab's smile towards him makes the nervous knot in his stomach slightly dissipate as "some friends just have that effect on you" (p. 106). However, new friendships are difficult to navigate and can cause hurtfulness which is seen when Sohrab joins in with two other teenage boys at laughing at Darius in the shower which makes him humiliated as he was certain that Sohrab understood him and that they were "going to be friends"

(p. 115). This humiliation haunts Darius throughout the day and night as "Sohrab's laughter kept dancing around in my skull" (pp. 120-121), preventing him from sleeping and deconstructing the newly built self-esteem. Nevertheless, Sohrab sincerely apologizes the next day after reflecting on his actions and the abrupt departure from Darius and admits to him that he was being disrespectful. This honest apology combined with Sohrab's plea for another chance makes Darius believe that maybe they were "destined to be friends" (p. 131). After this, Sohrab becomes a person Darius trusts, since he feels that they both understand each other without having to explain or justify themselves and Darius finds this feeling as "pretty much the most amazing thing ever" (p. 187). This example clearly depicts how important friendship can be for people like Darius who have never experienced anything as astounding as the feeling of understanding between two friends.

Sohrab realizes that Darius might be thinking sad thoughts as he is left out of a card game, and he sometimes becomes "stuck" in his thoughts which prompts Sohrab as he says, "I won't let you be stuck anymore" (p. 262). This shows how friendship can help people be more engaged in the world by teaching each other new things and creating safety in uncertain situations. The friendship with Sohrab is bringing Darius joy as he feels more confident in himself now, as he loves being Sohrab's friend and "[he] loved how being Sohrab's friend made me" (p. 266). In the Norwegian curriculum there is a core value concerning the "joy of creating, engagement and the urge to explore" (Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2017) that includes the benefits of collaboration to enrich society with create innovation. Furthermore, YA literature often focuses on how the teenage characters experience social aspects in their community, and how these interactions affect the narrative, the characters, and the reader (Corbett & Phillips, 2020). Experiencing a strong friendship can feel elevating by increasing your self-worth and sharing a real connection, but it can also feel devastating when a confrontation happens. After Sohrab learns that his father has been killed in prison, he naturally has a lot of built-up emotions that need venting which he takes out on Darius by pushing him and calling him "selfish" (p. 278), before he tells Darius to "stop crying" (p. 279) and that Darius is always complaining and feeling sad about himself even though nothing bad has ever happened in his life, which paralyzes Darius. The grief produced tantrum eventually ends with Sohrab saying that "no one wants you here" (p. 279) which is the ultimate remark that starts resonating inside Darius' head as he leaves because that is what he has believed all along as he thinks the following: "I knew it was true" (p. 279). The fact that it is Sohrab who states this remark makes it even worse for Darius since they have become such close friends and confided many secrets to each other, including Darius sharing how dejected he feels due to feelings of disappointment and being unwanted.

Disappointment from Family

Darius feels that his father, Stephen, is constantly disappointed in how he acts in situations and often berates him for not acting differently as that might fix his social problems. This is seen as his father tells Darius that he only needs to "stand up for himself" (p. 13), and hints at Darius to change himself to get less "picked on" (p. 42), thus making Darius feel that he is at fault for being targeted by bullies rather than supporting him. Darius overhears his dad saying that he does not want Darius to be ashamed, but he fears that being bullied and dealing with depression simultaneously can be too overwhelming and that Darius should try to fit in more and "act a little more normal" (p. 60). We see how the lack of communication hurts Darius as he feels unable to talk about his feelings with his father since Darius feels that no matter what, Stephen

is unhappy and disappointed by his actions. Thus, Darius thinks that his father is "always trying to change [him]" when all Darius wants is some fatherly support where Stephen acknowledges that the bullies are in the wrong and that Darius does not need to become more "normal" (p. 191) because it is not his fault. In Iran Darius suddenly feels that he is both a disappointment to his dad and his grandfather and his heritage since it is his first time there and he does not speak Persian nor knows the culture like the rest of the family. This example shows the intersection of identity, language, and family, since Darius feels humiliated by his grandfather for not being "Persian enough" (p. 158) as a result of not speaking Farsi as fluently as his little sister.

Additionally, Darius feels ashamed about his weight due to his dad scrutinizing his diet, not allowing him second servings of pasta but rather pressing the "salad bowl into my hands instead" (p. 17). Furthermore, not managing to live up to the expectations Darius feels his dad has for him keeps reinforcing negative thoughts he has about himself concerning his depression, weight, hobbies, and friends as he keeps feeling as a disappointment no matter what he does and the focus on his weight makes him feel "worse than I already was" (p. 37). Another example of weight focus negatively impacting Darius occurs when they order his favorite take-out pizza, but he does not enjoy it since he feels his dad's judgement at eating pizza which shows how shame can make previously enjoyable acts feel wrong. This continues to happen on their trip to Iran while waiting for the next flight they go to a Subway and readers are told that Stephen is paying close attention to any "dietary indiscretions" (p. 59) which causes Darius to refrain from eating altogether even though he is very hungry after his dad makes him ashamed of not picking something with vegetables. Although Stephen is coming from a good place, he ultimately makes Darius feel worse by trying to help rather than being compassionate. The next episode surrounding Darius' weight arises when he gets targeted by the customs officers for a check, and they question why Darius is depressed and when he answers they tell him it is "probably your diet" (p. 69) indicating that Darius' weight has given him depression, when de facto is that his medicines are causing his weight gain. However, Darius believes that his dad is disappointed in him not being able to counteract the effects of the medicines by being more disciplined with his diet and exercising (p. 127). During a family celebration in Iran, Darius' uncle pats Darius on the stomach when meeting him and questioning where it has come from, before patting his belly yet again making Darius feel "so ashamed" (p. 171). This constant fixation on Darius' weight clearly makes him self-conscious of how he looks and is perceived by others which produces more solitude as he distances himself from others out of fear of being targeted. Passages like these can be used in the EFL classroom to critically engage students with consequences of body shaming and the importance of body positivity.

Consequences of Otherness

Darius seems very concerned about how his thoughts and actions are uncommon in moments of uncertainty, often making him doubt whether he is "normal". This can be seen by Darius rhetorically stating "That's normal. Right?" several times throughout the novel after contemplating his thoughts or emotions. Darius' uncertainty, fueled by feeling differentiated because of his depression and Persian heritage, causes him to feel like he is outside the world, belonging nowhere. His family in Iran is experienced as being "half a universe away" (p. 24) and from "an alternate reality" (p. 24) which indicates how distanced Darius is from his mom's cultural background while at school he is identified as "a kid with Middle Eastern heritage" (p. 39). Additionally, Darius has become ostracized from his class as he feels "invisible" (p. 6), since no one notices or gives him any

attention, which can be devastating for any student in a classroom. The feeling of not belonging is clearly expressed during a shower passage in Iran where Darius is laughed at for not being circumcised as he thinks "I would never fit in. Not anywhere" (p. 115) which makes him want to "disappear into a black hole" (p. 116). Furthermore, in a conversation with Sohrab, Darius admits that he has very few friends in America which he believes stems from his Iranian background (p. 136). These examples show how otherness impacts people's mental health and can make them feel so out of place that they just want to vanish from existence for a time. Thus, teachers can use texts like this to teach the interdisciplinary topic of "health and life skills" (Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2017), which stresses that students should be exposed to different perspectives on thought and communication patterns that make them reflect over their own and other's life.

5 Discussion of Research Findings

In the following chapter, I will discuss the findings from the analysis in the context of my theoretical frameworks and research questions. The research questions for this MA thesis are: How can representations of mental health-related issues in YA novels be meaningful for lower secondary school teachers in the Norwegian EFL classroom to teach critical thinking, empathy, and mental health awareness? How can teachers use the YA genre to aid students' mental self-preservation and identity formation? How can YA novels be implemented in the EFL classroom to engage students in open and reflective discussions about sensitive topics? The purpose of this research is to examine the representation of mental health in contemporary YA literature to evaluate whether the selected YA novels in this study are productive and valuable as teaching materials when discussing mental health-related issues in the Norwegian EFL classroom. Therefore, I have discussed if the chosen novels for this research include characters living with or experiencing mental health-related issues and how they manage to portray mental wellbeing while resisting or reinforcing negative stereotypes. Furthermore, I discuss how the topics that I found in my analysis are relevant and meaningful for students in the Norwegian lower secondary school to engage with to increase their mental health awareness. Moreover, I also present strategies for implementing YA literature in the EFL classroom through the use of bibliotherapy, counter-narratives, and reader response activities that can teach students to be critical and empathetic readers. Lastly, I discuss the question of accessibility in terms of the challenge that schools face of receiving enough funding for new YA literature and books in general.

5.1 Fruitful Narratives to Teach Mental Health

I have decided to discuss the chosen YA novels for this MA thesis as examples of productive narratives to teach students about teenage experiences of mental health-related issues in a relatable way to increase their mental health awareness. To discern if a text concerning young adult's experiences with mental health is fruitful to utilize as teaching material, Monaghan (2016) proclaimed four markers to evaluate a narrative. Firstly, the narrator must have equal competence to the given circumstances to make the story more accurate and relatable for students. In all the three novels analyzed the protagonists are in high school, as Arnold is fourteen years old while Miel, Sam and Darius are fifteen. According to the analyzed findings, all four characters are portrayed realistically based on their expected competence levels which can be seen as Arnold navigates through his feelings, Darius often misinterprets events around him concerning the adults, and Miel and Sam who do not manage to see the complexity of the events surrounding them. Thus, students receive a greater opportunity to build empathy and learn about themselves while engaging with YA books like these where the protagonists are relatable in age and knowledge (Roberts, 2013). Meanwhile, Monaghan's (2016) second marker refers to relatability in readers' own lives and the narrated experiences so that students manage to either identify with the story or empathize with the character(s). In the three novels, readers meet relatable events that students in the Norwegian lower secondary school could experience, such as Arnold's grief when losing his dog (and best friend) Oscar, Darius' humiliation in the shower where "Sohrab's laughter kept dancing around in [his] head" (pp. 120-121), or Sam's questions

concerning his gender identity which he desperately wants resolved as he wishes, while in the river, “for the water to take this decision from him” (p. 132). Grief, humiliation, and uncertainty are emotions that can heavily impact a person’s mental health and they are likely to be experienced among lower secondary school students in varying degrees.

Furthermore, Monaghan’s (2016) third criterion is the logic of the narrative. For example, Miel’s fear of pumpkins and enclosed spaces is clearly originating from her experiences of childhood abuse, which shows how point A in the narrative relates to point B. Meanwhile, Darius feels that he is a constant disappointment and that his dad is “ashamed of [him]” (p. 28), when his dad is actually disappointed in himself for passing depression on to Darius as he apologizes and says, “I’m so sorry son” (p. 286). In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Arnold experiences grief induced feelings of depression, apathy, and suicidal thoughts that build up fueled by his continuous loss throughout the book, as he reflects on the impossibility of answering “how it feels to lose everything” (p. 213). Thus, in all three cases, the narratives are logical as the reasoning for the characters’ experiences concerning mental health-related issues is solidified in the texts. I would argue that even the extraordinary magical realism in *When the Moon Was Ours* stays true to the narrative as the magic never exceeds any expectations. The final criterion, according to Monaghan (2016), relates to the narrative’s ability to explicitly articulate the health condition depicted in the text to promote awareness and remove stigmatization around various diagnoses. Darius clearly states that he is diagnosed with clinical depression as he shares thoughts on challenges with articulating feelings and a difficulty in describing how it makes him feel besides becoming “stuck thinking things” (p. 237). In *When the Moon Was Ours*, albeit not explicitly stated, readers are eventually told that Miel has experienced childhood abuse which has obvious repercussions on her mental wellbeing as certain situations signal signs of post-traumatic stress and self-harm, while also including Sam’s suicide attempt. Meanwhile, Arnold is never diagnosed with depression, but he explicitly states on several occasions that he feels depressed and how “any nightmare would be better than [his] reality” (p. 208) due to the massive amount of loss he experiences in a short time span. Thus, I believe that all three novels manage to encapsulate the markers argued for by Monaghan (2016) and can serve as authentic material to depict young adult’s experiences with mental health-related issues.

5.2 Research Findings

5.2.1 Challenging the Medical Model

The medical model of disability creates an impression that there is something wrong with people who have certain limitations concerning physical, cognitive, developmental, or mental health, and an expectation that medicine can and should strive to cure people with disabilities. As a result of this expectation society puts pressure on people with disabilities to “fix” their difference, which can make them ashamed for not being able to. To challenge the notion of the medical model teachers can use literature that promotes the social model by looking at how people with disabilities are limited by society rather than their diagnosis. Therefore, texts like the chosen YA novels in this study offer narratives within Frank’s (2013) chaos resolution where the characters become more genuine members of the community, not due to nor despite their disability or mental health-related issues, but because they realize their own self-worth. Thus, literature like *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* (Khorram, 2018) challenges the medical model when readers are told that Darius and Stephen still take medication due to depression because even though Darius has reconciled with a lot of his doubts and

uncertainty, he still has clinical depression. Since there is no cure for clinical depression, I would argue that this is a realistic portrayal of mental health issues. Additionally, the narrative shows that Darius is more affected from societal problems like otherness and a lack of mental health awareness, rather than his depression which aligns with how the social model of disability considers and challenges the limitations constructed by society that, in this case, make Darius feel like an outsider due to his cultural background.

5.2.2 Representation of Suicidal Ideation

In all the three cases selected for this research there have been findings that touch upon the topic of suicide in different manners and with unique perspectives. Being able to consider meaningful topics with a refined sensitivity is one of the strengths of YA literature (Corbett & Phillips, 2020), and suicide is important to discuss in education, as suicide is the leading cause of death among young people in Norway and Nordic countries (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2016; Strøm et al., 2021) as stated in the introduction to this thesis. In reality, there is no recipe for who is susceptible to suicidal tendencies and the notion or attempt to end your own life can come unexpectedly after episodes that feel overwhelming, as it happens with Sam in *When the Moon Was Ours*. The rejection from Miel combined with his continuous questions about his own gender identity making him desperate to find a resolution, to the point of considering suicide and wanting to take his own life. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Arnold, the main character experiences suicidal thoughts when he finds the world "joyless" after Eugene died and Arnold writes that "I could have easily killed myself" (p. 173). Furthermore, later in the novel Arnold reflects on how he felt after losing his grandma stating that he "felt like crawling into the coffin with her" (p. 199). Even though Arnold does at no point exhibit a wish to actuate an actual attempt, he does show signs of suicidal tendencies due to the grieving process. For students in the lower secondary school, it can be valuable to see such depictions of suicidal thoughts to remove stigmatization of people experiencing something similar being "crazy" or "unreliable" when the truth is that anyone can, at times, experience such thought patterns. The representations in these texts are a valuable asset for EFL teachers to discuss terminology in English that should be avoided like "commit suicide", since it can further induce stigmatizations around people who contemplate suicide or those who have taken their lives (Silverman, 2006). Moreover, *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* details how Darius has not contemplated suicide even though he has thought about it, so the notion that his depression leads to suicidal tendencies angers him. This is a positive representation concerning the implications of depression, since it is common to connect depression and suicidal tendencies directly with each other like a symbiosis. Connecting these two is harmful for both mental health issues, as it creates a stereotypical representation of people with depression automatically being suicidal and that everyone who has suicidal thoughts must be depressed. Therefore, it is important to show realistic portrayals of characters like Darius so that students can become more aware of how living with depression does not necessarily mean that you want to end your life and that attempting to end your own life does not necessitate a depression diagnosis.

5.2.3 Realistic Portrayal of Depression

Darius' depression in *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* displays a life that is not all-consuming by the diagnosis as Darius manages to involve himself in school, family situations, and with varying success with peers. Therefore, we see that depression does not necessarily debilitate someone completely, but it impacts Darius' thought patterns so that he is filled with uncertainty. Thus, the novel manages to resist stereotypes through

realistically depicting how the diagnosis affects Darius and not resort to focusing on tropes that might cause stigmatization like suicide idealization, self-harm, psychiatric hospitalization, or total reclusiveness, and rather fixate the narrative on Darius' experience of life with clinical depression. This was also one of the goals of the author Adib Khorram, as he states in the afterword of the novel that as someone who both lives with depression and has loved ones with it, he found it important to show how "depression can affect a life without ruling it" (p. 313). Therefore, teachers can implement texts like *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* to resist stereotypical representations and teach students that depression takes form in unique ways for different individuals. Narratives like these are relatable to students because YA novels view the world from a young adults' competence level, and novels like *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* can be taught to help build mental health awareness since students engage within the mind of a person living with depression. Furthermore, students might see similarities in their thoughts and Darius', which can help students realize that they could have a mental health issue like depression and if so, they also see that they are not alone in the world with such thoughts and might gain the courage to "confide in a friend or parent" (Monaghan, 2016, p. 34). Additionally, *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* includes characters that are easy to empathize with and can be used to teach students about differences and inclusiveness while building empathy.

5.2.4 Lack of Communication

During the analysis a key finding was the lack of communication in all three novels as characters are afraid of being alienated if they reveal their secrets. Teaching students about the possible repercussions from a lack of communication with the use of YA literature can help preserve students' mental health, since these novels showcase the difficulties of communicating openly but also the benefits by doing so. Secrecy is a common factor among people with mental health issues out of fear of being stigmatized as a "crazy" person that needs help or out of shame of being labelled as there are many negative stereotypes surrounding mental health issues. This is also represented in the novels as secrets play a role in all the narratives to varying degrees, where the secrets are kept out of fear and shame which can contribute to "alienation and avoidance of treatment" (Theurer et al., 2015, p. 50). The representation of secrets in *When the Moon Was Ours* especially showcases how the lack of open communication from Aracely causes Miel to be uncertain surrounding the traumatic events of her childhood as she is having difficulty accurately remembering her mother and father. These lost memories create a distorted view on the past as Miel blames herself for the death and loss of her whole family, consequently making her struggle with feelings of shame and self-hatred. Meanwhile, there are similar consequences in *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* where Darius is blaming himself for the fraught connection with his father when the truth is that his dad went into a dark period of depression and has kept it secret from Darius out of shame. Portrayals like these are valuable as they help students become more aware of the importance of talking about your feelings even if they feel shameful, as communication will be more helpful than keeping them locked inside. Similarly, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* there are passages where Arnold is ashamed of his family's poverty, so he tries to hide it since he is afraid of being abandoned if the other students at Reardan perceive that he is poor. However, in all cases there are indications that their secrecy is harmful as it creates confusion, and when the characters eventually communicate, they ultimately feel more secure in themselves and each other as they are better equipped to understand their differences and realize their similarities.

5.3 Discussing Mental Health via YA Literature in the EFL Classroom

5.3.1 Teaching Empathy

An important aspect of teaching literature is how it allows students to imagine themselves in other's shoes by experiencing narratives depicting different perspectives that aid in understanding injustice and build empathy. Philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2012) refers to the human ability to perceive how the background of others shapes their feelings and desires as "narrative imagination" (p. 62), and claims this ability is crucial to cultivate in education. This is feasible by employing YA literature in the lower secondary schools since these narratives encompass a variety of topics, feelings, thoughts, and circumstances. Richmond (2014) states that teachers at all levels should teach texts that portray characters with mental health issues to build awareness and implement strategies to foster empathy in the students (p. 20). Therefore, novels like *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, *When the Moon Was Ours*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* can be used in the EFL classroom because the novels engage students with realistic portrayals of mental health-related issues with characters they can identify with and relate to. Furthermore, teaching empathy by exposing students to texts that require them to empathize with characters is most effective to engage them as readers and reflect beyond the literature (Edgar, 2020). Therefore, teachers can use YA novels because the characters and students will often be relatable in age (Roberts, 2013), thus increasing the possibility of empathic reflection and conversation. Meanwhile, social topics like mental health are simultaneously included in the texts and should be discussed in the classroom to build mental health awareness.

5.3.2 Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

Teaching critical thinking skills by focusing on the reader's response to the YA literature allows students to engage with meaningful literature that includes topics like mental health that are relatable to their own experiences and critically reflect on society's norms, history, and current state. Students who are taught critical thinking skills will receive tools necessary to interpret and understand texts both within and outside the EFL classroom while receiving opportunities to develop "reflective learning styles" (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016, p. 692). Furthermore, critical thinking and ethical awareness stands as one of the core values in the Norwegian curriculum, specifically highlighting the need to teach students to be inquisitive and derive meaning from various forms of knowledge as a requirement to learn in different contexts and developing good judgement (Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, pp. 6-7). To ensure that the implementation of literature is worthwhile for students, it is imperative that the teacher acts as a mediator between the text and its readers. It is not sufficient to expose students to literature without any guidance and expect them to analytically circumvent the written text and eventually arrive at the author's meaning without any instruction.

Bobkina and Stefanova (2016), for example, propose a strategic plan containing four stages to optimize the learning output when teaching critical thinking skills where the teacher must first activate the students' schemata to build on familiar knowledge. The next stage is reading the chosen text for general comprehension while the teacher checks their understanding through questions and a discussion of key ideas. Then, they move on to exploring the relation between the author's conveyed attitudes and meanings compared to a social-cultural context to analyze the intention of the text through a

discussion directed by the teacher. Lastly, the students should experiment with creative writing for example by reshaping, continuing, rewriting, adapting, or translating the story (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016). Thus, the teacher must design activities that assist students in comprehending the text while challenging them both linguistically and cognitively as well to ensure the development of their critical thinking skills.

5.4 Accessibility and Funding of Books

A challenge with teaching YA novels is that the availability of material to teach is often limited because schools do not have enough funding for books or class sets. Additionally, schools do not prioritize buying English YA novels either, so it is difficult for teachers to implement teaching these texts, since they do not have the materials needed. In Norway teachers are prohibited from asking students/parents to buy specific books as well because the Norwegian Education Act (1998) states that no students or parents can be demanded to buy any school material (§ 2-15). This issue was also experienced by the former 9th and 10th grade teacher, now assistant professor Stephanie Toliver, as she recalls that she lacked access to the diverse books she wanted to teach because the school did not have them, nor could they afford new books (Corbett & Phillips, 2020). This is a key concern that schools should be aware of since many students depend on the school and the library to introduce them to books and if these institutions do not include diverse books due to funding or other reasons, then students will suffer from lack of exposure. An example of this can be seen in the United States where a study on librarians' attitudes towards LGBTQ+ literature was conducted, and all the participants were positive on the importance of including diverse books, but several respondents showed reluctance at collecting certain books that are more graphic because of potential backlash from the community (Oltmann, 2016). This fear is not without basis which has recently been seen in the US where a total of 184 books have been banned from libraries and schools across 38 districts in the period between July 2021 and March 2022 (Friedman, 2022). The banning includes acclaimed titles such as *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1980), *All Boys Aren't Blue* (Johnson, 2020), and *This Book Is Gay* (Dawson, 2014) because they tackle sensitive topics like gender identity, sexual identity, racism, and sexual activity. Although the banning of books is not a problem in Norway, the significance of availability of books remains the same and if Norwegian schools and libraries do not find funding for YA novels, young people will suffer because the inevitable effect is a limitation on whom will be able to read diverse books. However, it is possible for teachers to use excerpts or passages from books to engage students with the YA genre without having to buy a whole class set though it might limit the overall experience of the novel(s). Additionally, the digital world is opening further opportunities for teachers and students to access literature more readily through eBooks and projects like *eBlink* (2022) that aspire to create a Norwegian digital library system to combat the unavailability of books in classrooms.

6 Conclusion

The increased focus on health and life skills in the new Norwegian curriculum as an interdisciplinary skill, and the obligation that teachers have to ensure a safe psychosocial environment for all students due to the Norwegian Educational Act (1998), has created a demand for strategies to teach mental health awareness. Thus, there is a need to examine how to engage students in meaningful discussions around mental health-related issues. The purpose of this study was to study portrayals of mental health-related issues in three chosen novels to answer three interrelated questions: how can representations of mental health-related issues in YA novels be meaningful for lower secondary school teachers in the Norwegian EFL classroom to teach critical thinking, empathy, and mental health awareness? How can teachers use the YA genre to aid students' mental self-preservation and identity formation? How can YA novels be implemented in the EFL classroom to engage students in open and reflective discussions about sensitive topics? Meanwhile, the theoretical frameworks that I have discussed in this thesis show that YA literature has vast potential in teaching students about themselves and others through relatable narratives that make them interact with different cultures, people, and ideas. Additionally, integrating YA texts that include representations of mental health-related issues in the EFL classroom can help students with similar thoughts feel recognized and less alone. As I have argued, teachers can use YA novels in connection with bibliotherapy to promote mental health awareness and create a safe school environment for every child. However, teachers also need to be aware of negative stereotypes regarding people with disabilities and mental health issues, so that they resist reinforcing dangerous stigmas. Thus, we need to implement texts with realistic portrayals like *When the Moon Was Ours*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* to engage lower secondary EFL students in discussions revolving depression, childhood trauma, and grief. Because the characters are the same ages as the students, they can connect and empathize with them while relating to their experiences, which can aid their personality growth.

Furthermore, the findings from the analysis indicate that all three chosen YA novels have valuable representations of mental health-related issues that students can relate to due to similar competence, age, and experience. The findings also revealed that the novels include portrayals of traumatic experiences, depression, suicidal thoughts, importance of friendship, and low self-worth. The depictions of mental wellbeing in the chosen novels manage to challenge the medical model of disability by detailing realistic feelings, thoughts, and situations while refraining from curing any of the characters. Thus, *When the Moon Was Ours*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* all contain narratives where the characters find resolution by realizing their own worth and becoming full members of the community. However, I believe that the most effective novel to teach mental health awareness in the Norwegian lower secondary school is *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, since it depicts Darius' life with depression in such an engaging and realistic way that truly makes the reader empathize with him because you learn to understand his behavior. Meanwhile, this novel manages to shed light on stigmatizing beliefs about depression such as shame concerning medication, the notion that people with depression can just "think more positive", that depression and suicidal ideation are not exclusively linked, and that living with

depression is not necessarily that impactful all the time. Although I find *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* the most fruitful of the three novels, the other two definitely have valuable representations as well. The grief and feelings of ostracization that Arnold experiences in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and how *When the Moon Was Ours* portrays childhood trauma and suicidal ideation are all important themes that students should engage with to increase their mental health awareness. Therefore, I contend that YA literature has promising potential if teachers manage to engage the students in the texts through reader response strategies that make them involved in the narrative.

Further Research

There is a need for further research on mental health in education and the potential of YA literature as valuable material to teach mental health awareness. A suggestion for other researchers interested on this topic would be to, observe or conduct classes in the Norwegian lower secondary school with YA literature that involve mental health-related issues while facilitating strategies like bibliotherapy and reader response methods. This line of research would help examine how effective teaching mental health awareness through YA literature is, and additionally, if students become more critical and empathetic readers by engaging with novels and characters that require affective response and some level of identification. It could also be valuable for the field of mental health and YA studies to conduct further inquiries into how YA novels manage to portray realistic characters and representations of explicit mental health diagnoses and more implicit mental health-related issues. Lastly, it would be relevant to conduct an extensive quantitative study that would categorize how many YA novels in the last 20-30 years include representations of mental health-related issues, and how they fall within the medical model or social model of disability. This could generalize the findings to reveal how the YA genre manages to portray mental health in a broader picture.

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