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Using literature to discuss difficult topics in Norwegian schools

An analysis of the graphic novel *Fun Home: A family trigucomic* by Alison Becdel and how it can be used in the foreign language classroom in Norwegian secondary schools

Bachelor's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education
Supervisor: Hanna Musiol
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Abstract

This thesis analyses how the graphic novel *Fun Home: A family tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel discuss sexuality and gender identity, and how it challenges gendered spaces and gender roles that are present in schools. It argues that *Fun Home* add an educational value in foreign language classroom as it gives its reader an insight into to lives of individuals who identify within the LGBTQ+ community. The thesis explores how the use of this type of literature can motivate students to participate in discussions about heteronormativity and gender binary.

Keywords

Education, sexuality, gender identity, graphic novel, pedagogy

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Introduction

As the Norwegian school system is divided in its view of the celebration of pride, the inclusive and diverse classroom is now in question (Jørgensen, 2024). Pride is viewed by some as a celebration of love between all individuals, and especially those who identify within the LGBTQ+ community. Schools are influenced by the heteronormative and gender binary norm which affect all students and can be challenging for individuals who identify within the LGBTQ+ community (Blackburn & Smith, 2010) (Blackburn, Clark & Nemeth, 2015). To ensure that students receive an inclusive education, the Ministry of education and Research added the interdisciplinary topics sustainable development, democracy and citizenship, and health and life skills. The two last ones are especially relevant for the foreign language education in Norwegian schools. In addition to these, the curriculum clearly states that pupils shall receive historical and cultural insight, to build a good foundation to help each pupil to preserve and develop their identity in an inclusive and diverse environment (Ministry of education and research, 2019). I turn to the inclusion of queer literature in Norwegian school to foster conversations about sexuality and gender identity. The importance of this project is to find ways to aid schools and their role in the discussion of LGBTQ+ today, and to explore how literature such as *Fun Home: A family tragicomic*, is a tool which teachers can use to start these conversations in the classroom (Blackburn et al. 2015) (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017).

There are multiple terms that I need to specify before we continue, such as sex, sexuality, gender, and gender identity. The difference between sex and gender is important to establish because they are distinct. Sex is seen as the biological concept while gender is a socially constructed “role” which I will touch on later in the text (Spain, 1992). Gender identity will in this text refer to the personal process of one’s own gender. In this text I will also use the term sexuality which concerns the preferred sexual orientation of the individual. These are all important themes in the graphic novel by Bechdel.

This thesis aims to investigate the educational value of Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home* in exploring themes of sexuality and gender identity. Through a critical analysis of the novel's content and its potential application in educational settings, this paper seeks to understand how *Fun Home* can serve as a valuable tool for fostering discussions and enhancing understanding of complex issues related to sexuality and gender identity. In the first chapter I aim to analyze how the graphic novel *Fun Home* discuss the topics sexuality and gender identity, by looking at specific examples from Bechdel's book. In addition to my own analysis, I will include a review and analysis to add depth and better understand the content of the graphic novel. In the next chapter I look at how this type of literature can be included in upper secondary education in Norway to foster conversations about sexuality and gender identity for individuals within the LGBTQ+ community.

Thesis statement: I want to find out how the graphic novel *Fun home* by Alison Bechdel discuss sexuality and gender identity, and how it can be used in foreign language education in upper secondary schools in Norway to foster conversations about the LGBTQ+ community.

Chapter 1: How does the graphic novel discuss sexuality and gender identity?

Introduction

Fun home: A family tragicomic by Alison Bechdel was first published in 2007. The book is a comic, a graphic novel and autobiography all in one. It tells the story of young Alison and her deceased dad Bruce. When looking back at her relationship with her dad she notices that they are a lot more similar than she first thought. It is a story about the authors life and her realization of being a lesbian as well as struggles of fitting into the societal norms that belong to girls. The author reveals part of her dad's "hidden" life, which she was unfamiliar with as a child. The themes that are explored in the book include sexuality and gender identity, which are difficult topics for some people to talk about, and especially in schools (Blackburn & Smith,

2010). The story of Bechdel's childhood is personal and vulnerable, which the author manages to express through drawings, text, and diary entries. The reader receives much input into Alison's thoughts and experiences growing up as a lesbian with a closeted dad.

When analyzing a graphic novel there are many elements that can be in the focus. In the case of *Fun Home*, it is necessary to examine the interrelations between text, images, and spatial layout to gain an overall understanding of the graphic novel (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p. 168). The entire book tells the story of Alison's life from a young age until around year 20. However, in a graphic novel it is possible to analyze small portions of the content, for example a page, which could only cover a day in Alison's life. In this analysis I will focus on a few examples where the author touches upon the topics of sexuality and gender identity. This will then be used further in the next chapter where I aim to look more specifically into how the graphic novel can be used in an educational setting. This chapter will use different sources to analyze how the book discusses the topics of sexuality and gender identity. The review by Stebbins (2011) and the analysis by Matos (2014) will be used as a supplement to the analysis. The analysis will be done in the light of Spain's (1992) text about gendered spaces, as well as Blackstone (2003) which discusses gender roles, and includes examples where the graphic novel challenges these gender norms. Cordeiro & Ellison (2017) will continue to be used further in both chapters as I explore how *Fun Home* can be read by younger readers.

Analysis

Graphic novels and comics include both text and visualization. Comics can map a life in a literal way, which Bechdel's novel is an example of, as she maps her own life through the book (Chute, p. 109). "She (Bechdel) shows her father's life in this way - across the book and even in individual panels" (Chute, 2011, p. 109). The instance Chute (2011) refers to is when Alison draws a map of her dad's life, where he was born, lived, died, and buried (Bechdel, 2007, p. 140). The map can represent Bruce's closeted life which we will discuss further in this chapter.

Chute continues to emphasize how "... comics can express life stories, especially traumatic ones, powerfully because it makes literal the presence of the past by disrupting spatial and temporal conventions to overlay or palimpsest past and present" (Chute, 2011, p. 109). Bechdel's has used her life story to compare her experiences as a lesbian to her dad, a closeted man trying to make sense of his "hidden" life. A life which Bechdel claims multiple times through the book, ended with Bruce' suicide. The reader become familiar with Alison and her complex life story and struggles with sexuality and gender identity.

Firstly, I will look at examples where the book discusses the social norms of gender roles with Spain (1992) and Blackstone (2003) in mind. Social norms have put women and men in different positions and spaces based on their sex and gender. Gendered spaces are the spaces that society has created for the individuals based on their gender (Spain, 1992). While gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender (Blackstone, 2003). Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behavior is believed to be appropriate for what sex (Blackstone, 2003, p. 335).

Alisons description of her dad challenge both gender roles as well as gendered spaces. Over the course of two pages Bechdel describes her father to be the representation of an ideal husband and father (Bechdel, 2007, pp. 16-17). In this example Bechdel sheds light on the gender roles created by the society. However, the book continues to challenge these by describing other features that are important for Bruce. At one point Alison claims that her dad was attempting to express something feminine through her (Bechdel, 2007, pp. 96-99), which might support the argument that Bruce wants to be more feminine himself. Spain (1992) emphasize that the term gender is used as a socially constructed, mutually dependent nature of femininity and masculinity rather than the biological differences associated with women and

men (p. xv). Bruce's occupation as a teacher has, according to Spain (1992) been seen as "women's work" (Spain, 1992, p. 27). However, social changes have broken down traditionally gendered spaces which might have been more visible between 1960 and 1980 when the novel is set (Spain, 1992, p. 40). Since then, there has been a change in how society deal with gender and gender roles. In the examples Alison talks about her dad trying to fit the role as a husband and father, still there are other situations where he does not fit into the masculine societal role as a male. Bechdel also creates a symbol of her dad being trapped in the societal norms, by emphasizing how he only stayed in the same town his entire life, which I mentioned earlier in this text. The novel invites for question regarding how gendered spaces and gender roles can be challenging when discussing themes such as sexuality and gender identity.

The analysis by Matos (2014) highlights some key examples that show Bruce in a more feminine societal role and Alison in a masculine societal role. These examples of gender identity will be used later in the 2nd chapter to discuss activities for the classroom. An example which supports the claim made in the first paragraph, show the dichotomous view of Bruce as a feminine presence and Alison as a masculine presence. Bruce engages in an activity that is stereotypically approached as feminine. Matos (2014) mentions how the wall unit splits the panel into two sections, thus highlighting Alison's placement in front of the television showing a Western movie. Keep in mind that this memoir is not necessarily upholding gender binaries—a man with feminine characteristics and a girl with masculine characteristics, in due course, challenges the binary in the first place (Matos, 2014). The analysis done by Matos (2014) shed light on Bechdel's focus on gender roles through the novel. Bechdel shares a memory from her first time seeing a woman performing masculinity when she was at a café with her dad at a young age (Bechdel, 2007, pp. 118-119). Bruce acknowledges it also and ask Alison if she wanted to look like that, in which she responds with a "no". This is Alison's first time denying her own gender identity in the novel, maybe because she is pressured to portray a feminine

gender identity instead of a masculine, which is what she seems to prefer. The situation might be familiar to a reader who is struggling to understand their own gender identity.

Throughout the book Bechdel use words and visualizations to tell the story of her relationship to her dad Bruce, and how it has shaped her. The review by Stebbins (2011) looks at the graphic novel and the themes sexuality and identity. Central to Alison's pursuit is a struggle about sexuality and family. She is haunted by unanswerable questions regarding sexuality and her father's sexuality (Stebbins, 2011, p. 286). Stebbins (2011) emphasize that the book is "especially relevant for queer youth because it provides a rare depiction of the young life of a lesbian woman" (p. 287). Her view supports the argument that the graphic novel can be read by young adult readers which is explored further in chapter two. The book gives a rare look at the life of a lesbian woman whose experiences might be relatable to queer youth (Stebbins, 2011, p. 287). Sexuality is an important theme in the novel, and Bechdel does not hide her sexual orientation from the readers. She uses both visualization and text to express her preferred sexual attraction, and her experiences with sexuality in a way that can be familiar for the graphic novel's audience.

A final example I want to include in my analysis is found close to the end of the novel, where Alison attempts to talk to her dad about her sexuality. The conversation led to Bruce admitting that he wanted to be a girl when he was younger, as well as his experiences with other males, which supports the claim that he did not fit into the heteronormative and gendered binary norms (Blackburn et al. 2015). This is something Alison herself struggled with growing up, with her dad as the main person forcing her to be something she was not (Bechdel, 2007, pp. 220-221). For Alison this was an important memory which answered some of her questions about her dad's sexuality and identity.

The behavior Alison is required to perform does not support how she identifies in the world. As she become more aware of the gender norms she was required to adapt to as a child,

and eventually refuses to act in accord with her dad's gendered expectations (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p 181). Alison's journey illuminates how our own behaviors incorporate the external and internal pressures placed upon us to act in a particular manner and can help students recognize the ways in which we might intentionally or unintentionally reify social norms by rehearsing the behaviors commonly associated with them (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p 181). There is no question if *Fun Home* disrupts gender norms. Bechdel's representation of family is one example of this. Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth (2015) mention how social norms related to families and homes are understood to be grounded in the fictional notion that all families comprise a father, mother, and their biological children, that all live together in their home (Blackburn et al. 2015, p. 34). For Bruce it seems important to portray this to the people outside his family, as he is a closeted man. Alison on the other hand explore another family structure as she brings her girlfriend home on a vacation.

Summary

The story of Bechdel's life include personal and vulnerable experiences of her life growing up. From living at home with her parents in a small town in Pennsylvania, to moving to college where she can explore more freely her sexuality and gender identity. The graphic novel discusses the topics sexuality and gender identity in an interesting and capturing way, with real experiences from Bechdel's life. Alison's experiences might be familiar to some of the readers, as well as Bruce's struggles as a closeted man. Gender roles and gendered spaces are challenged by Alison and her dad, which can foster discussions between readers.

Chapter 2: How can *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel be used in educational settings?

Introduction

In this chapter I will use pedagogical literature and LK20 to explore how the book can be used in the Norwegian school. "Comics and graphic novels are often mistaken as "easy" literature;

however, it is rather complex and demands readers to engage with several modalities and reading strategies simultaneously” (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p. 183). With this said, students find graphic novels approachable, and this might help teachers to safely introduce students to queer and intersectional identities (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p. 183). With the analysis in chapter one in mind, how can *Fun Home* be used in an educational setting in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Norway? The curriculum that will be focused on is for upper secondary education (after vg1) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The book is first and foremost written in the United States of America, and the story takes place in a small town in Pennsylvania, which adds an extra element of cultural differences. The aim of this chapter is to specifically look at how the book can be used as a tool in foreign language education in upper secondary schools in Norway. The literature that will be included in this chapter is mainly pedagogical, such as Rimmereide (2021) which discuss how teachers can use graphic novels in the classroom, and Cordeiro and Ellison (2017) to explore the importance of discussion about sexuality and gender identity. In addition, Blackburn et al. (2015) offer knowledge about what queer literature, such as *Fun Home* can offer readers. The Norwegian curriculum (LK20) is included to aid the research statement, in how the graphic novel can be used in foreign language education in upper secondary schools in Norway to foster conversations about the LGTBQ+ community.

Including graphic novels in the classroom

In the competence aims after year 1vg general studies from LK20, it is stated that learners should be able to read different types of texts as well as write a variety of texts, such as multimodal text (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The technology is advancing, and the curriculum is adapting to this growth of multimodal media that students are experiencing in their everyday lives. The curriculum is created as a guidebook for teachers and students in Norwegian schools to ensure that the education is adapted to the individuals. An important

element in foreign language education is students' motivation to the second language, which graphic novels can be a good source for. "Graphic novels may motivate a variety of learners and provide a wide range of literature for learners, which subsequently improves their general reading skills" (Rimmereide, 2021, p. 198). If students are motivated, it may increase participation in reading and discussions, which will lead to a development in multiple basic language skills.

"Reading texts where the verbal and the visual texts complement each other, such as comics, graphic novels and picture books, requires the reader to be involved in the reading process in a different way than reading prose without images, or text which is merely illustrated." (Rimmereide, 2021, p. 199)

As mentioned earlier, graphic novels are complex and there are numerous elements in which the reader can focus on when reading to better understand the story. Different approaches, such as mainly focusing on the text, or the images are effective for comprehension of the story (Rimmereide, 2021, p. 199). Different from non-graphic novels, they might help to fill the gaps that are not easily accessible through the verbal text, which is a useful and relevant in today's multimodal society (Rimmereide, 2021, p. 199). Graphic novels also add an educational value for students with learning disabilities. The use of visual together with text supports the learners, especially in foreign language education. The language in longer texts can be difficult, however with the combination of visual and text the reading will support the reader (Rimmereide, 2021, p. 212). For *Fun Home*, Bechdel sometimes use a language that could be challenging for young learners, however, the visual can aid the reader if that is the case.

The importance of talking about LGBTQ+

Bechdel's graphic novel challenge the normative societal view on gender roles and gendered spaces, in a way that can be used in an educational setting. By ignoring the socially constructed gender norms that teachers, students, and school administration take part in, the school does not adapt for every student. If the educational system fails to include literature that challenge the

gender norms, students might not be aware of their unintentional participation. When discussing difficult topics in the classroom it is important to be aware of the way that is done. Cordeiro and Ellison (2017) explain how a performative text as *Fun Home* can be used in educational setting.

“Bechdel’s novel encourages close, intertextual, feminist, and queer readings. The texts and images contained within the pages of *Fun Home* mirror the identity discoveries made by the characters and hint at the potential identity discoveries (whether familial, gendered, sexual, or intellectual) our students may experience.” (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p. 168)

The graphic novel allows for readers to familiarize themselves with Alison and her experiences as a lesbian, even if they do not identify with the same sexual orientation. Alison’s childhood is characterized by the people around her, which is the case for students in school as well.

The book also encourages discussion about gender roles and gendered spaces. Cordeiro and Ellison (2017) emphasize the use of pedagogical theatre to explore difficult topics such as sexuality and gender identity. By including pedagogical theatres, the focus is on doing, as it is argued that “we don’t learn by listening, but by doing” (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p. 173). Graphic novels add a visual image in addition to the text and are good sources for pedagogical theatre. This activity is a good tool to help students learn in an active and fun way, as it prompt self-reflection and critical thought about systemic social norms and the performative processes that constitute these normative institutions (p. 176). They present an activity where students should either engage in activities that encourage them to feel as if their routine gender compartment, identity, or expression is changed in some manner or were the students imagine an empathetic response to an alternate person’s identity performance and act “as if” they experience that identity (Cordeiro & Ellison, 2017, p. 176). This activity can lead students to be more aware of how their actions are influenced by surrounding institutional contexts and cultural ideas as well as it shows them how through their choices, they unintentionally

participate in the continuing of gender norms. The activity can act as a starting point for conversations about sexuality and gender identity. The students would then be more familiar with of how Bechdel challenge gender norms when reading *Fun Home*.

The educational value of Fun Home

By including Bechdel's novel in the foreign language classroom it allows student to explore queer literature which confront heteronormativity and gender binary. Blackburn et al. (2015) mentions in their findings that queer literature, such as *Fun Home*, offers multiple and conflicting ideologies related to sexuality and gender through poststructural conceptions of identities and disruptions of norms (Blackburn et al. 2015, p. 41). They then go on to mention how "... engaging with queer literature may provide critical resources to young adult readers by countering the invisible ideologies of heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia that circulate in their daily life" (Blackburn et al. 2015, p. 43). Working with this type of literature may help students and teachers notice heteronormativity and the ways that it supports and maintain homophobic practices and processes. Blackburn and Smith (2010) argue that nearly every school in America is heteronormative, meaning that heterosexuality is the default, and homosexuality is not. This seem to be the case for Alison as well, however as she leaves her home, to go on to college, she disrupts the gender norms she experienced growing up. Meanwhile, her father Bruce never leave town, and never escape the heteronormative practice, which ultimately ends with his suicide. Alison questions the reason for her father's suicide, which create questions for the readers, allowing them to think about the consequences of living in a heteronormative place as a homosexual.

The different lives of Alison and Bruce give the reader multiple views of sexuality and gender identity, which can foster discussions in the classroom. These are experiences that most students are not familiar with because of the heteronormative structure in schools. In the Norwegian curriculum, LK20, there are three interdisciplinary topics to assist the competence

aims. Two of them, democracy and citizenship, and health and life skills, are especially important in the EFL classroom. The interdisciplinary topic of democracy and citizenship refers to aiding pupil's understanding that their view of the world is culture dependent (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The importance of including this topic is to open for new ways for students to interpret the world and promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudices (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The other interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills "... allow for students to express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions and can provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupils' own way of life and that of others" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). *Fun Home* is a great tool for working with these interdisciplinary topics, as it introduces a different culture to the students as well as it challenges heteronormativity and gender roles which can foster discussion about the LGBTQ+ community.

Summary

The graphic novel *Fun Home* can be used to foster conversations about sexuality and gender identity in foreign language classroom. The extra element of visual images in addition to text motivate younger readers and is helpful for students with learning disabilities. Graphic novels are a good source for including different activities, such as pedagogical theatre, which allow students to actively take part in their own learning. By including the graphic novel *Fun Home*, it allows students to explore queer literature which confronts heteronormativity and gender binaries that are present in schools.

Conclusion

First, I will restate my thesis statement: I want to find out how the graphic novel *Fun home* by Alison Bechdel discuss sexuality and gender identity, and how it can be used in foreign

language education in upper secondary schools in Norway to foster conversations about the LGBTQ+ community.

The curriculum in Norwegian school specifies the importance of a diverse and safe environment for students where they can explore their identity. This is especially important for students who identify within the LGBTQ+ community, as they are a minority in an environment where heteronormativity and gender binaries are nourished. Bechdel's graphic novel challenge the gendered spaces and gender roles by sharing her experiences as a lesbian who prefer to portray a masculine role instead of feminine, which her dad and the community pressure her to do. The author's involvement with sexuality and gender identity gives the reader an insight into the life of an individual who identify within the LGBTQ+ community. By including this type of literature in the foreign language education in Norway, students become more aware of the experiences of these minorities, creating an inclusive and diverse environment where students can explore their own identity.

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