

Young Adult Novels depicting Mental Illness in the English Subject Classroom

How to Employ YA Novels in the English Subject Classroom
as a tool to help Students handle Mental Health Challenges
and Develop Mental Health Literacy

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ABSTRACT

To employ complete novels in teaching is often seen as an extensive task and is therefore avoided by some teachers. This thesis looks at ways to implement novels on the mental health disorders, in particular depression, eating disorders, and anxiety disorders. I will show how teachers can use the novels *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, *Starvation* by Molly Fennig, and *Highly Illogical Behavior* by John Corey Whaley in their teaching. To ensure working with topics on mental illnesses in a helpful way, teachers will have to know the generation they have in their classroom. I will therefore analyse the Ungdata 2022 report (Bakken, 2022) and the Public Health report (Bang et al., 2023) to see how the state of mental health is among students today.

I will investigate how using these novels in teaching can provide students with mental health literacy to make them understand and master such issues should they occur to themselves or someone they know. It is important to figure out how to proceed with teaching these matters without doing more harm than good. The analysis of the novels will examine how students are likely to respond to the novels and how they can learn about mental illnesses in a rewarding way. With help from the English subject curriculum this thesis will discuss in what ways matters of mental health and fiction may be used in the English subject classroom.

Furthermore, since not all students like to read, I believe it to be relevant to investigate how to implement longer texts in the English subject classroom. The novels I have chosen will be included in this discussion.

Based on my book analysis, document analysis, and discussion of implementation in the classroom, some of my conclusion involves a proposition on the use of brave space, a concept where students should not be afraid to speak their mind. In addition, I conclude that the proposed novels can help students develop mental health literacy and I provide examples on how these novels provide knowledge needed to lessen mental health stigma and how to act should they find themselves in difficult situations.

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During the two last years of my education, I have been working as a teacher. I knew I had to include mental health in my thesis when I saw the frustration and uneasiness teachers felt towards their students when the topic of mental health came up. My hope is that this thesis can convince teachers that it is a teachers' job to include mental health in the classroom and that shying away from using novels will not benefit students later in life. I have learned a lot writing this thesis, and it has been challenging but also educational and worthwhile. It has not been easy but with the help and support of my supervisor, friends, and family I managed to write this thesis in the end.

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1.0 Introduction

Mental health has become increasingly important when discussing the well-being of youth today. A report published by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (Bang et al., 2023) states that mental health problems are stable among young adults. The Covid-19 pandemic became a period where many youths' mental health gained great attention. It became noticeable during the pandemic with the media mentioning the growing use of mental healthcare in Norway (Evensen et al., 2022) and how a number of youths did not receive the help they needed, and many who needed help became invisible when society and education became digitalised. The scientists in *Aftenposten* wrote that those who were in risk of developing mental health problems experienced a worsening (Evensen et al., 2022). In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, many were anxious to see how adolescents would be affected.

While there has been an increase in the usage of mental healthcare, the Ungdata report (Bakken, 2022) shows that the youths' mental health problems seem to be the same as before the pandemic. Even though the effects of the pandemic may not have been as grave as first imagined, the study done by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (Bang et al., 2023) reports that the number of children and youth diagnosed with a mental health disorder have increased in the last decade. Due to this increase, teenagers are likely to encounter mental illnesses through themselves or someone they know. Dealing with mental health disorders can be challenging depending on their complexities and seriousness. It can be even more difficult for young people still figuring out their identities. To navigate the landscape of mental health in the best possible way, young adults need knowledge and some tutoring on the subject.

As mentioned, mental health is a topic to be dealt with carefully. As a teacher, one is responsible for creating a good learning environment, but this task can be challenging for different reasons. When learning of students' private lives or mental health, a teacher could easily teach in a damaging rather than a beneficial way. However, that does not provide grounds for avoiding the topic.

The curriculum established by the Ministry of Education and Research (2017) shows the teacher's responsibilities. There are different sections, and one section placed above all the different subjects in the Norwegian school system is called the core curriculum. This curriculum is not specific to any subject, and is to be applied as a guideline in all teaching. The core curriculum is separated into different "values and principles for primary and secondary education and training" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). In the core

curriculum, underlying “principles for education and all-round development” the interdisciplinary topic “life and health skills” exemplifies some of these important values for teachers to include. As a teacher, one “shall give the pupils competence which promotes sound physical and mental health, and which provides opportunities for making responsible life choices” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The idea is that the students need to gain knowledge that can help them develop good physical and mental health.

Even though the term mental health is not mentioned in the English subject curriculum, it is mentioned in the core curriculum, which is the overall guideline a teacher should always be aware of in teaching any subject. In the English subject curriculum, health and life skills are “the ability of the pupils to express themselves in writing and orally in English” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). If the students can express themselves in what they produce, they will also easier “express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The ability to express feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions is necessary when working with the topic of mental health as this topic tend to trigger emotional responses. In addition to helping students with expressing their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions, teaching students to express themselves in writing and orally “can provide new perspectives on [...] the pupils’ own way of life and that of others.” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Students should be enlightened to understand the lives of those around them and their own lives.

In summary, the English teacher has some responsibilities within the areas of mental health, like all teachers regardless of subject. The English teacher needs to be aware that one’s teaching in the English subject is supposed to touch upon the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills” as well. This adds to the many areas of expertise teachers are supposed to be helping their students with, having the risk of making it quite challenging. However, mental health is not a topic to include in a teaching lesson without any consideration and themes with a higher sensitivity degree, such as mental health disorders, should be dealt with, with complete care. The challenge is how to stay in the teacher role without moving into the area of psychology and psychiatry, fields of expertise requiring years of special training. Should a teacher stray too far from their job specifications, it could have repercussions for the students, and it would most likely demand too much of the teacher eventually.

The many tasks put upon a teacher require structure and awareness of how to deal with the different tasks. Since teachers should teach students numerous things, it could be an idea to combine different elements to make the teaching more efficient. For example, the English subject curriculum lists reading as a basic skill that teachers should help their students

develop. The students should acquire the ability of “understanding and reflecting on the content of various types of texts on paper and on screen and contributing to reading pleasure and language acquisition” (Ministry of Teaching and Research, 2019). Therefore, while most students in upper secondary school have been taught to read in English, they also need to be able to analyse the content of different texts and understand the texts on a deeper level, not simply reading them. The curriculum also states that reading should contribute to reading pleasure, requiring more than just giving the students any text to read. It has to be enjoyable for them at a time when many students do not find reading to be a fun activity.

In an article by *Aftenposten*, results from the survey “Ipsos Barn og ungdom 2022” shows that the number of those who do not read is increasing from childhood to adolescents (Semb Aasmundsen, 2022), which means that while some youth did experience reading pleasure, there is a chance they do not have these experiences in upper secondary school. The statistics show that 21 per cent of girls and 32 per cent of boys between 16-19 years did not read a single book last year (Semb Aasmundsen, 2022). These numbers provide a glimpse into the everyday lives of the Norwegian youth. One reason for this seems to be that the younger population thinks reading books is boring and the survey shows that sixty per cent of boys and fifty per cent of girls give this answer (Semb Aasmundsen, 2022). Therefore, it is likely that contributing to reading pleasure in the English subject may be a more complicated task than teachers might have pictured.

1.1 Thesis Statement

Using the novels *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, *Highly Illogical Behavior* by John Corey Whaley (Originally published in 2016), and *Starvation* by Molly Fennig, this master thesis will explore how English subject teachers can implement reading and mental health literacy into their teaching. Mainly, the Vg1 programme for general studies is of interest. In a time where students will hear about experiences of mental health disorders and may have some experiences themselves, it will be crucial to find a way to manoeuvre these themes while keeping to the responsibilities of a teacher and not trying to be a psychologist. This thesis is created in the belief that the inclusion of topics on the youths’ minds, such as mental health, can increase motivation and interest in the English subject. It can also help with complex tasks, such as helping the students experience reading pleasure.

This master thesis will analyse the novels by looking at various sections that can be helpful when developing mental health literacy. Parts of the books will be analysed using reader-response theory to find sections teachers should handle with care or use for educational

purposes. Literature review of articles, books, and didactic theory will provide the theory on the subject in addition to the LK20 curriculum, and document analysis of the papers and research done on mental health topics. By examining these aspects, this thesis will provide insight into the following research questions:

- 1) How to employ selected Young Adult novels depicting depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders in the Norwegian upper secondary English subject classroom.
- 2) How can such novels aid students in handling the issues of mental illnesses and developing mental health literacy?

1.2 Background

According to a study by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (Bang et al., 2023), the difference between mental health problems and mental health disorders is that mental health problems are limited to having symptoms like feeling anxious or sad. In comparison, a person with a mental health disorder will have an illness that limits the person's functionality in his or her everyday life. The person also has to be diagnosed by a healthcare professional (Bang et al., 2023).

Among the different mental health disorders, some are more prominent than others amidst adolescents in Norway. Such disorders are depression, anxiety disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, adjustment disorders, eating disorders, and autism (Bang et al., 2023). This thesis focuses on depression, anxiety, and eating disorders as these are three of the most common reasons for referrals in the ages 16 to 22 alongside ADHD (Bremnes & Indergård, 2022, p. 25). While the reasons for choosing these mental health disorders are due to their occurrence rate, it is also because they are often mentioned in the media and public debates, making them familiar to youth.

Even though most teenagers have heard of the different mental health disorders, the information they receive may not be trustworthy. While factual texts about mental illnesses can be found, this is not necessarily the information youths are exposed to. One of the platforms many teenagers get their information from is social media, a media platform open for anyone to publish as they wish. Even though some of the information published on social media can be educational, a lot is created with the purpose of gaining views and likes, leading to the creation of an unreal picture of mental health.

Therefore, although young people seem to be quite knowledgeable of mental illnesses, they might have been wrongly informed. In general, it is important to teach people correctly about mental illnesses, and especially young people. Thirteen per cent of youth under the age

of 18 will be diagnosed with a mental illness (Bang et al., 2023), and if teenagers have the correct information, it may help them handle their life situations and also understand experiences of others. The term used for gaining this knowledge is mental health literacy, which includes the five components:

- (a) Knowledge of how to prevent mental disorders, (b) recognition of when a disorder is developing, (c) knowledge of help-seeking options and treatments available, (d) knowledge of effective self-help strategies for milder problems, and (e) first aid skills to support others who are developing a mental disorder or are in a mental health crisis. (Jorm, 2012, p. 231).

In summary, the components discuss mental health disorders and educate about what one should do to obtain good mental health.

By gaining knowledge about these five components, the idea is that mental health literacy “provides the necessary foundation for mental health promotion, prevention, and care” (Kutcher et al., 2016, p. 567) and can help prevent serious mental health issues before they develop into mental illnesses. However, mental health literacy is not easy to learn on your own. Therefore, Kutcher et al. (2016) write that “since most young people are enrolled in schools, schools have been recognized as an important venue to address student mental health” (p. 567). School is an institution where teenagers spend a considerable amount of time each day, which makes it a suitable place to introduce topics like mental health. There are guidelines published by the Ministry of Education and Research (2017), and other resources available for teachers to use in their instruction. Teachers often know their students quite well, allowing them to personalise their teaching of mental health literacy to fit their students’ needs.

2.0 Theory and Method

2.1 Relevance

The report “mental health in Norway” (Reneflot et al., 2018, my translation) writes that about 16-22 per cent of the Norwegian adult population will have a mental illness in twelve months (2018). This information was retrieved through many studies looking at occurrence numbers through a twelve-month period. This means that if you have a class of about twenty-five students, there is a chance that about five will be a part of these statistics. Even though students in your class may not be diagnosed with a mental health disorder as adults, the chances are high that they will know someone with a mental illness, perhaps someone they are close to. Therefore, teaching mental health literacy will be helpful to students.

The importance of understanding what young adults with mental health disorders are going through cannot be stated enough. The complexity and severity of mental illnesses need to be understood to give the correct support one can as a next of kin. Those lacking knowledge of mental illnesses may believe that those who are sick choose to have a mental illness. Such an approach could prove to be damaging for those with a diagnosis. Awareness of mental health disorders can also help everybody experiencing symptoms typical of a mental illness to understand if they should seek help or if what they are experiencing is the typical consequence of life. Starting the conversation on mental health disorders can help eliminate the taboo of speaking about mental illnesses and furthermore stop the stigma that those with mental illnesses often experience. An example can be found in an article from Denmark where “the stigma of mental illness remains a challenge to us as a society, as it is in countries we usually compare ourselves to” (Bratbo & Vedelsby, 2017, p. 317). Since some people think others chooses to be ill, a conversation and enlightenment on the topic can also help people suffering from it feel less ashamed.

The stigma towards those with a mental illness are made up with the components “stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination” (Sheehan et al., 2017, p. 42). This means that not only are there negative attitudes towards those with mental health disorders due to stereotyping and prejudice, there are also specific negative behaviours such as discrimination. One example showing these components together is that “mental illness is the most frequent cause of exclusion from the labour market.” (Bratbo & Vedelsby, 2017, p. 317). While there are different explanations to this, “Part of the explanation is stigma, taboo and a lack of knowledge about mental illness – with major implications on everyday life for individuals affected by this” (Bratbo & Vedelsby, 2017, pp. 317-318). By finding ways to increase mental

health literacy in education, students may be able to contribute to an inclusive work environment once they graduate. It can also prevent stigmatisation towards those with mental illnesses in other arenas than the workplace.

On the matter of using novels in the teaching of mental health, which will be suggested in this thesis, the lack of reading pleasure among many youths makes this more challenging, and many teachers choose to avoid longer texts. This thesis aims not only to start a healthy conversation on mental challenges but also to provide possible suggestions on how to use novels without this genre becoming overwhelming to those who do not enjoy reading. Since students who choose general studies in upper secondary school often wish to move on to higher education after three years, they will most certainly meet more extensive texts they must overcome. Allowing students to avoid longer texts in upper secondary school will make this transition more difficult. If teachers work on their students' reading pleasure and help them develop reading strategies when encountering longer texts, it can help students feel that longer non-fiction texts may be readable.

2.2 YA Literature

2.2.1 Young adult literature

Young adult literature is a ““transition” literature between children’s and adult fiction” (Mertz, 1992, p. 23), which means that it is literature for those who are too old for children’s literature but are not yet mature enough for adult literature.

Young adult (YA) literature has met different views on its quality and whether it should be used in a classroom. In a society where fewer teenagers find reading pleasurable, novels aimed at a young adult audience can provide topics young readers can enjoy. In addition to YA literature’s positive impact on reading pleasure, there have also been arguments that there are literary elements in young adult fiction that can “help young adults become more sophisticated readers” (Mertz, 1992, p. 25). However, this can be disputed as “There are adults who believe that young people should read the classics and nothing else” (Crowe, 2001, p. 147). Consequently, there are some disagreements on the literary quality of young adult fiction, making the justification of the chosen novels in this thesis necessary.

2.2.2 Sick-lit

Among the multiple genres in young adult literature, one of importance for this thesis is the sick-lit genre, which is “rooted in illness, self-harm, suicide, sufferance, violence and death”

(Testoni et al., 2016, p. 154). The content of this genre involves a lot of serious topics, and it is tremendously popular, especially among youth. Often this type of literature portrays a character experiencing some psychical or psychological illness, and the undisguised description of the deterioration these teenage characters go through is either critiqued or applauded. Most of the literature within this genre shows a realistic depiction of what these types of illnesses can do to a young person, making it informational. However, the critique the sick-lit genre faces is how this literature aimed at a younger audience “trivializes serious issues” (Testoni et al., 2016, p. 154), making it important to be critical of which novels are chosen for teaching.

Adolescents are at a period where the uncertainty of their identity and experiences may easily be affected by their surroundings. In some sick-lit novels, like those involving mental health, characters may be so ill that they can take their own lives. Due to the youth’s challenges and pressure to excel academically and in their private lives, they are more vulnerable to being inspired by characters’ choices in these books. Since youth are likely to retrieve such stories on their own, from novels but also through different types of media, it is proposed by Testoni et al. (2016) that the best way to manoeuvre this type of content is by teaching about it “in the context of formal education” (p. 155). Using this type of literature in an educational process can prevent the idealisation of mental illness and suicide from occurring if one has a critical conversation about the characters’ actions.

Testoni et al. (2016) also believe that it would help rather than harm if teachers include activities which “encourage the sharing of narratives by individuals who have refrained from adopting suicidal plans and instead adopted positive coping mechanisms” (p. 162-163). Therefore, while two out of three novels in this thesis include topics of death or suicide, they both include characters who choose life over death to give students that nuance. As long as young adults continue to be fascinated and intrigued by the sick-lit genre, it is wise to start the conversation about this topic in the classroom, where the discussion can be handled carefully. As an example, *Highly Illogical Behavior*, portrays a character with severe anxiety disorder. While the character may experience the feeling of dying due to his anxiety, he is not suicidal. By providing the students with characters that end up giving life a chance, one can secure a less damaging environment in the classroom.

2.3 *The Curriculum*

The didactic discussion later in this thesis includes the curriculum from 2020, called the Subject Renewal, LK20. What is unique about the LK20 is that it is “a curriculum that leaves

important decisions and interpretations to the institutional, instructional and personal domains” (Speitz, 2020 p. 44), which means that the new curriculum gives teachers more autonomy over how they choose to organise their teaching. The competence aims, which the students shall gain knowledge of at the end of the year, focus on developing specific learning skills. How teachers plan their tutoring to reach these goals is not necessarily decided.

The subject curriculum in English has several points in addition to competence aims. LK20 “first describes the relevance and central values of a given subject, then specify its core elements and competence aims, and finally determine forms of assessment” (Speitz, 2020, p. 44). The relevance and central values in the English subject curriculum opens with “English is an important subject when it comes to cultural understanding, communication, all-round education and identity development” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Here English is acknowledged as a subject with possibilities within general education and identity development. While the main focus must be on students’ language skills, teachers have to acknowledge that students should also be helped with matters that does not involve English grammar or pronunciation.

It has already been mentioned in the introduction how health and life skills is a part of the interdisciplinary topics in the English subject curriculum. This section of the curriculum shows the importance of learning to express own opinions and feelings, as those with mental health problems or mental health disorders problems may struggle with explaining how they feel. Working with novels that depict mental illnesses and seeing how characters speak and think, can increase students’ abilities in expressing themselves. In addition, the subject curriculum provides some competence aims that show why novels shall be implemented in the classroom. These competence aims are “read, analyse and interpret fictional texts in English” and “read, discuss and reflect on content and language features and literary devices in various types of texts, including self-chosen texts” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). By including various writing and oral activities, more competence aims may also be included. Therefore, working with novels on mental illnesses can be a part of English teaching lessons.

2.4 Mental Health Disorders

The three novels chosen for this master thesis have been selected according to a few different criteria. While one of the criteria was for the novels to consider the effect of topics like death and suicide, others were for the novels to depict mental health disorders realistically and to henceforth be educational. In each novel the different types of mental illnesses will be

discussed. What will further be examined is whether the characters have been diagnosed by a professional or not which can be used later when discussing mental illnesses with students. A challenge among many youths is being able to separate between having symptoms similar to different mental health disorders and having the actual disease. By including some of these novels in the curriculum, the teacher can look at the characters and their mental health problems with the students, and together discuss whether the characters have a mental health disorder or if other possibilities exist for the characters' experienced emotions.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, also called ICD, lists the different mental illnesses. WHO writes that the ICD can be used to "track the situation in general or before and after treatment" (WHO) and Malt & Braut (2022) writes that it has been used as the official classification of mental illnesses in Norway since 1997. The most recent version of the ICD is the ICD-11. However, while this came into effect in January 2022, Norway still uses the ICD-10. In the ICD-10, chapter F describes mental and behavioural disorders. This chapter will be used to look at the symptoms of the mental illnesses to understand what the teacher can bring to the classroom. As ICD-10 is used by health care specialists in Norway, the research on Norwegian teenagers' mental health is based on ICD-10 formulations. To ensure consistency of what is meant by the different mental illnesses both in the book analysis and the analysis of reports on teenagers mental health, the following part will use ICD-10 to describe the symptoms of the chosen mental health disorders.

2.4.1 Depression

The topic of depression is primarily covered in the novel *All the Bright Places* by Niven. In this novel, two possible illnesses can be found. One of the mental illnesses is bipolar affective disorder, and the other is depressive episodes, a type of depression. The characters, however, are never diagnosed by a professional in the novel. Bipolar affective disorder is recognised as a mood disorder alternating between "an elevation of mood and increased energy and activity (hypomania or mania) and on others of a lowering of mood and decreased energy and activity (depression)" (WHO, 2019). While elevated and sunken moods may determine bipolar affective disorder, depressive episodes include only lowering of mood. Depressive episodes are described as "lowering of mood, reduction of energy, and decrease in activity. Capacity for enjoyment, interest, and concentration is reduced, and marked tiredness after even minimum effort is common." (WHO, 2019). The characters in *All the Bright Places* will showcase some of these symptoms, as most people can at some time. The overarching idea is

that teachers should discuss with students when these symptoms become unhealthy, and one should seek help contrary to what one of the characters in the novel end up doing.

2.4.2 Anxiety disorders

The novel *Highly Illogical Behavior* by Whaley portrays a teenager living with agoraphobia. This anxiety disorder can involve many things, but the character is afraid of leaving his home in this case. What is typical for those with agoraphobia is that “Avoidance of the phobic situation is often prominent” (WHO, 2019), meaning that the character avoids going outside of his house. Anxiety disorders are “the most prevalent mental health condition” (Graske & Stein, 2016, p. 3048), and many different types exist. By introducing agoraphobia in the novel, the discussion can easily include other illnesses by looking at the basis of all anxiety disorders, which is having a response that “is out of proportion to the actual risk or danger posed” (Graske & Stein, 2016, p. 3048). Even though one has not had agoraphobia, the novel poses a perfect example of how anxiety is experienced.

Within education, anxiety of going to school has grown. Public health nurses in Norway have observed that more children are afraid to attend school, and public health nurses in lower and upper secondary school have also reported many youths who do not manage to attend school (Sæther, 2022). There are also examples of anxiety towards giving an oral presentation and social phobias, fears of being near other people. Since “onset of many of the anxiety disorders is in childhood and adolescence and predict later psychopathology, identification of people at risk and interventions at young ages are important treatment considerations” (Graske & Stein, 2016, p. 3048). Some treatment options are exposure therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy. Exposure therapy is about being exposed to something one fears (Malt, 2019) while cognitive behavioural therapy is about getting help to talk about problems and finding out how to solve them (Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care, 2016). While anxiety can occur at an older age, the younger population is at a greater risk of developing anxiety. As stated by Graske and Stein (2016), seeking help as early as possible is vital when discovering a possible anxiety disorder, making it essential for youth to be educated on possibilities and awareness of when a fear of something has developed into an anxiety disorder.

2.4.3 Eating disorders

Eating disorders (ED) is the last of the mental health disorders to be mentioned in this thesis, and particularly these mental illnesses are seen as “stigmatized mental disorders” (Brelet et al., 2021, p. 3). In a study by Crisp et al. examining perceptions of mental disorders, they

found out that “more than a third of respondents blamed people with EDs for their situation, thought that people with Eds would be able to pull themselves together if they wanted to” (See Crisp et al. in Brelet et al., 2021, p. 3). Prejudices towards those with eating disorders are the main argument as to why students need to be enlightened on what having ED entails. Brelet et al. write that “being familiar with or knowledgeable about EDs is associated with less ED stigma” (Brelet et al., 2021, p. 17). This means that becoming familiar with an eating disorder can help prevent the stigma and prejudices of those with an ED.

In the novel *Starvation* by Molly Fennig, the protagonist is a teenage boy with an eating disorder. While there are several different types of eating disorders, the novel focuses on the eating disorder anorexia nervosa, a disorder characterised by “deliberate weight loss, induced and sustained by the patient” (WHO, 2019). Despite the name eating disorder, for anorexia nervosa “Food restriction is only one aspect of the practices used to lose weight” (Morris & Twaddle, 2007). While most tend to arrange eating disorders into rigid boxes without them overlapping, the novel shows that some common beliefs are false and only contribute to the stigmatisation and misconception of people with eating disorders. In addition to the suggestions given above, some examples are that one chooses to have an eating disorder to “get skinny” or that only girls can have anorexia nervosa (Brelet et al., 2021, p. 23). These types of misunderstandings can make those with an ED struggle more with coping with their disorder and initiate a self-stigmatisation of themselves. The novel chosen for this thesis discards some of these beliefs and introduces eating disorders in a sense that can be educational.

2.5 Mental Health Literacy

Physical diseases have received much attention with regard to what actions to take should a disease occur. For mental health disorders “public knowledge about mental disorders (mental health literacy) has received much less attention” (Jorm, 2012, p. 231). Jorm (2012) is one of those who came up with the term “mental health literacy” after recognising this phenomenon. Mental health literacy is about “knowledge that is linked to the possibility of action to benefit one’s own mental health or that of others” (Jorm, 2012, p. 231). He also recognises that for less severe problems, individuals need to know how to help themselves. Therefore, mental health literacy is not only of importance to those who are critically ill. The purpose is also to know “first aid skills to support others who are developing a mental disorder or are in a mental health crisis” (Jorm, 2012, p. 231).

Jorm (2012) writes that some surveys on mental health literacy have been conducted in several countries, and these surveys recognise that many do not know how to label mental health disorders. Instead, they may blame symptoms of belonging to *life problems* but “these alternative labels are less likely to facilitate professional health seeking” (Jorm, 2012, p. 232). In the upcoming book analysis, there will be a focus on whether the characters are diagnosed or not. This focus is vital to make students aware that having symptoms does not necessarily mean that you have a mental health disorder, and one should be careful with claiming that it is a mental illness without the appropriate diagnosis. Nevertheless, as Jorm explains, it is necessary to not dismiss symptoms as something unimportant. The purpose of mental health literacy is for students to know how to take action when encountering mental health issues to help either themselves or others. In the novels, the symptoms and feelings of the characters should be recognised regardless of their diagnosis, and students can discuss what should have been the proper way to handle the situation according to the information given.

2.6 Reader-Response Theory

For the analysis of the novels, a reader-response theory will be used. The main purpose of the analysis section of this thesis is to find the features of the novels that can be useful for teachers when discussing mental health disorders with students. Since topics concerning mental health disorders can be delicate, especially for those experiencing them. Therefore, it is wise to analyse parts of the novels through the students’ eyes. The reader-response theory is to “analyze your response, or the responses of others” (Tyson, 2015, p. 161), making it the proper tool for analysis. What is helpful about reader-response theory is that it considers “the baggage” people have. Everyone has lived different lives and has their own experiences. As a teacher, one has to be aware of how these experiences can determine how students can interpret and react to a given text. Some students may be affected by certain sections in a novel, while others may have entirely different readings.

There are different types of reader-response theories, many of which believe that the text is created in the reader’s mind, with the text on the paper being less critical. As this thesis will acknowledge what is written in the novels, the need for a reader-response theory that does not discard these elements is important. The transactional reader-response theory, often known through Louise Rosenblatt, “doesn’t reject the importance of the text in favor of the reader; rather she claims that both are necessary in the production of meaning” (Tyson, 2015, p. 165). The theory sees that everyone has their own background when reading, but it also trusts that the text will guide the reader to avoid making wrong assumptions about the

information given in the text. That the students can correct themselves when bringing too many of their memories or feelings into their interpretations. When reading novels, students will understand that the path of the characters not necessarily parallel their own experiences.

If there were to be a transaction between the reader and text, the approach had to be “aesthetic rather than efferent” (Tyson, 2015, p. 165). When reading a text, one is introduced to some facts about the story’s plot or specific actions that unfold in the story’s plot. Focusing on the information the text provides is what Rosenblatt calls an efferent approach. Due to the content of the chosen novels, the readers would probably have difficulty reading with an efferent approach. The novels are chosen to connect the students and recognise actions and thoughts as something they find familiar or understandable. They are chosen to create a transaction between the reader and the text, which is fundamental in an aesthetic approach. The aesthetic approach allows for emotional reactions and finding elements in texts that are not necessarily visible to everyone who reads it. Every reader can interpret subtle hints given by the text as they choose and will later get information that makes them change their interpretation.

2.6 Document Analysis

In addition to analysing three different novels, this thesis will examine documents that provide statistics on mental health. Such a type of examination or analysis is called document analysis, which is “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” (Bowen, 2009). The purpose of analysing documents is to receive the correct facts on different topics, and in this case, it helps to see how extensive mental health disorders and mental health issues are in Norway and among youth. It is also useful to analyse what documents like the curriculum from 2020 express in terms of using novels in one’s teaching and what it says about mental health. Among the documents that will be analysed are The Public Health Report from 2023 and The Ungdata Report 2022.

2.7 Previous Studies

To avoid making biased claims or assumptions about different reports or journal articles, previous studies can assist in seeing what others have made of the current information. As the topic of mental health has become more widespread than it has previously been, some studies touch upon similar topics as this thesis. This thesis will present different views than the

studies presented, but together they can provide teachers with help on how to present these topics.

One example of another thesis is the master thesis from 2022 written by Blomsø, which is analysing three different novels featuring anxiety to examine how these novels can help develop empathy among students and other benefits of using this type of literature when teaching about mental health (Blomsø, 2022). The thesis of Blomsø has some similarities to this thesis. Those similarities are the focus on mental health in the classroom and using novels. The differences are that while Blomsø examines the benefits of using such novels in the classroom, this thesis will also try to provide some answers to *how* to implement stories of this calibre into the lives of teenagers. Another difference is that while Blomsø focused on the development of empathy, this thesis wishes to examine mental health literacy, a toolbox to use when gaining life skills, a skill youth desperately need to be able to navigate the world. A third difference is how Blomsø focused on anxiety disorders alone, not depression and eating disorders too, as this master thesis wishes to do. Even though Blomsø's thesis has some disparities from the research questions of this thesis, it makes a valuable contribution and foundation to what I wish to examine.

A different study is a thesis from Sunde (2020), which uses Young Adult Fantasy fiction to teach the interdisciplinary topics "Life and Health skills". Unlike Blomsø, Sunde suggests implementing her chosen novels into the English subject classroom. Sunde differs from Blomsø and this thesis by focusing on gender roles, disabilities, identity, LGBTQ+, and multiculturalism instead of mental health disorders. However, what is valuable for this thesis is how to implement novels that concern themselves with topics youth must tackle. In summary, this thesis will benefit from previous works on similar topics and can also place itself as something different from what has already been written and add valuable research to a much-needed discussion.

3.0 Book Analysis

The research questions of this thesis will be the foundation for the sections of the novels chosen in the analysis. The research questions are:

- 1) How to employ selected Young Adult novels depicting depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders in the Norwegian upper secondary English subject classroom.
- 2) How can such novels aid students in handling the issues of mental illnesses and developing mental health literacy?

The following analysis will focus on parts of the novels that are deemed useful when implementing these novels in the classroom. For the second research question, the analysis will comment on how the different sections of the novels concerning mental illnesses may affect adolescents.

The novels chosen for this thesis have been carefully considered. It has been proven that while “teenage girls manage to relate to characters beyond their own gender and age group, boys seem to identify with a narrower range of characters and character traits” (Carlsen, 2020, p. 212). To achieve characters boys can identify with, all the novels include male protagonists with different interests or hobbies. *All the Bright Places* and *Highly Illogical Behavior* both have a female and male protagonist. In *Starvation*, however, there is only one protagonist who is male. To expand the inclusion of possible readers, the male protagonist in *Highly Illogical Behavior* is homosexual. Some characters do well in school, while others are struggling. The interests of the characters are also varying. The character in *Starvation* is a wrestler, while the characters in *All the Bright Places* are fonder of books and music.

As many young readers may be more inspired to read if the content is similar to their own interests, age or sexual orientation, choosing such books for use in the classroom can be a helpful way to go. YA fiction is particularly made for those in-between childhood and adulthood, and it is popular among young readers since “they can connect to a character close in age or have experienced similar situations” (Hill, 2014, p. 5) as the characters. Even though readers may not have a mental illness, they can still relate to characters’ family life, school life, friendships, and hobbies. Young adult fiction is made for this age group which makes it a good choice to use in lessons.

Another consideration is the length of the novels. As mentioned, many youths do not enjoy reading and it was important that the chosen novels were manageable. Therefore, the two novels, *Starvation* and *Highly Illogical Behavior* are approximately 250 pages long. The last novel, *All the Bright Places*, is 378 pages long. However, it was made into a movie in

2020 with the same name, functioning as an aid for all students, even those struggling with reading difficulties such as dyslexia. In the implementation part of the thesis, the perks of having a movie adaptation of the chosen novel will be mentioned. All the novels also either switch between two narrators, or they switch between present and past, which gives the readers some nuance in their reading.

3.1 *All the Bright Places*

In *All the Bright Places* from 2015 by Jennifer Niven, the protagonists are the teenagers Theodore Finch and Violet Markey. At the beginning of the novel, they meet on top of the school's bell tower, where they both think of jumping off the ledge. The novel then explores their relationship and struggles, moving back and forth between the two. While some readers can connect with Theodore not being popular at school, others may relate to Violet who are popular. The first-person narration allows the reader to explore and become familiar with both protagonists' thoughts. It gives the reader a look from within at how the different characters view their lives. Even though Violet is liked by many at school, readers meet a girl that no longer appreciate the attention she is receiving.

By having a first-person narration, the classroom discussion can be about the characters emotions and how they are described. The characters thoughts give the reader hints to how they are feeling, and it gives the readers hints on how it feels to have a mental illness. Both protagonists in *All the Bright Places* stand on the bell tower's ledge at the novel's beginning. During this part of the story, the reader follows Theodore as a narrator, contemplating the idea of jumping, "I would like to welcome you to my death" (Niven, 2015, p. 4). Since one does not initially read the thoughts of the female protagonist, Violet, one assumes her reasoning for standing on the ledge is the same. Since they are both standing in the same place, one can also assume that they are similar and experience similar emotions. Nevertheless, as the novel progresses, Violet's reasons for being there become more apparent. Theodore's thoughts and feelings are different from Violet's.

The first page of the novel, from Theodore's point of view, says, "I am awake again. Day 6" (Niven, 2015, p. 3). The concept of The Awake is something he mentions a lot while being afraid of not being awake. At the beginning of the novel, he informs that juggling between The Awake and the alternative is something he does from time to time and that each of these conditions may last for weeks, "I was asleep for *the holidays*, meaning Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's" (Niven, 2015, p. 4). While staying awake is something he wants to last, he fears falling asleep. The falling in and out of sleeping and The Awake can be a

concept which is hard to grasp for a young reader. While it is tempting to look at the symptoms belonging to a person with bipolar disease and get hung up with how it works, the purpose of reading about someone like Theodore may be to understand that some have moods like extreme rollercoasters, without the opportunity to get off it. Understanding struggles others go through can benefit those with disorders or undiagnosed disorders by reducing the stigma around mental illnesses. Theodore woke up from sleeping feeling “deader than usual” (Niven, 2015, p. 4), but he did not feel it was safe to share.

When the reader is introduced to Violet, she appears to be depressed. The reader is told that Violet’s sister, Eleanor, has died early on. The first time Violet narrates the story, she explains that “there are good days and bad days” (Niven, 2015, p. 24), and the good days are in the moments she does not remember her sister’s death. She describes herself as someone *after*, and when those close to her, like her parents, act in a normal way, she comments that, “It throws me when they are the parents of Before, because nothing about me is like it used to be” (Niven, 2015, p. 103). Violet’s reaction to her sister’s death and her struggling grief can easily be considered as depression, making her an interesting character worth exploring in the classroom. While Violet is never linked to depression in the novel, the introduction of her at the ledge of the bell tower would lead most people to contemplate her being suicidal and depressed. The reader does not get the answers to whether Violet became depressed or whether she is simply having a prolonged grieving period. While it is often easier to attach a label to oneself or onto the characters one is reading about, the challenge would be to see Violet’s problems as she experiences them instead of trying to find an appropriate diagnosis.

At the beginning of the book, Violet struggles with her sister dying in a car accident nine months prior. She wears her sister’s prescription glasses that gives her a headache. For the reader, this might indicate that Violet struggles to let go of her sister. Throughout the novel, Theodore convinces her to share more of her feelings about losing her sister. By sharing what she has been keeping to herself, she feels less emotionally empty, and this is shown to the reader when she walks into her sister’s room and delivers back the glasses. She also shares with her parents, “I don’t want to pretend like everything’s fine if it isn’t, like we’re fine if we’re not” (Niven, 2015, p. 360). While Theodore has strong and unusual characteristics putting Violet’s story more in the background, a lot can be learnt from her. She is the character who survives the pain. The character that chooses to share her feelings and talk about her grief, making it easier for her to live with. Therefore, teachers should not only focus on the exciting thoughts belonging to Theodore. They have to keep Violet a part of the

discussion to focus on what may assist in challenging situations and, by doing so, help the reader gain mental health literacy.

One should look at the whole picture when trying to understand why someone may feel how they feel. Violet's parents, due to her sister's death, are adamant about her telling them when she will be home and where she is going. They also spend time with Violet working on her projects, "for the next two hours we brainstorm and make notes" (Niven, 2015, p. 190). While their actions are what one believes to be the typical responsibilities of parents, they contrast with Theodore's home situation. He lives with his mother and two sisters, and while Violet's parents are concerned about where she goes, Theodore's mother works two jobs and is less updated on her son's whereabouts. Theodore also describes that "when she does pay attention, which isn't often, she tries hard to be understanding about my "sadness"" (Niven, 2015, p. 39). What lies in this quote is that she is not necessarily treating Theodore poorly, but he does not feel that she is there for him. She misunderstands him. In addition, Theodore still has to see his father once a week for an obligatory family dinner, even though it is mentioned more than once in the novel that his father beat him as a child. If it helped Violet to talk about her emotions and experiences, the importance of having someone to have these conversations with should be looked into when discussing the novel and the alternatives one has when the home situation is not ideal.

Even though Theodore's family is less supportive than Violet's, he has someone to talk to, his school counsellor. Students can also discuss how the male school counsellor speaks to Theodore compared to how the female school counsellor speaks to Violet. Both Theodore and Violet meet up with each of their school counsellors after they have come down from the bell tower. The first thing Theodore's counsellor says to him is, "what in the hell were you doing in the bell tower?" (Niven, 2015, p. 13). While Violet's counsellor may not be aware of her being on top of the bell tower, her questioning of Violet's well-being is more evasive. Violet says her counsellor "never asks anything directly" (Niven, 2015, p. 19). Hence, comparing the two school counsellors can be an interesting classroom discussion. While the male counsellor is more direct and aggressive in his tone, the female counsellor has a gentler approach. These different approaches can also show how different genders experience mental health issues. Theodore comments, "it's my experience that people are a lot more sympathetic if they can *see* you hurting" (Niven, 2015, p. 15), giving the impression that he does not feel that his counsellor understands his internal pain.

However, as the novel progresses, Theodore's counsellor asks him, "what do you know about bipolar disorder?" (Niven, 2015, p. 271). By uttering this sentiment, Theodore's

counsellor shows that he is aware of Theodore's symptoms. He also explains that bipolar disorder can run in the family, which makes it clear that he understands that those with a mental health disorder cannot simply "pull it together". How the counsellors respond to the symptoms of the protagonists and what they do to help them can demonstrate what some youth may experience when talking to others about their feelings. The protagonists avoid sharing with their counsellors that they were on top of the bell tower and contemplated jumping off, and Theodore lies to his counsellor about how dark his thoughts could be. The result of Theodore not wishing to share his dark thoughts with anyone may contribute to his suicide. It can show what the consequences can be by not sharing his thoughts. Discussing what Theodore should have done with students can help them develop mental health literacy and learn of treatments possibilities.

Seeking help is one of the most important ways to deal with mental health problems. Theodore chose not to do this because of his bad experience on sharing how he felt with his friend Roamer when he was younger. He told Roamer that he could see sounds, which Roamer told others. This led to Theodore becoming known as Theodore Freak for many years. After this experience, Theodore shares, "which is why it pays to pretend you're just like everyone else, even if you've always known you're different" (Niven, 2015, p. 141). He believes keeping his disease hidden is safer. Some young readers may see themselves in him since sticking out and being labelled as different can cause much damage when you are young. Therefore, it is essential to understand that Theodore's choice to stay quiet is to protect himself. He feels that it is the best solution for him. Mental health literacy can be developed among students by discussing the options Theodore had, and at the same time they can develop empathy by understanding his decision not to say anything.

When working on a text in the classroom, some delicate details must be mentioned. In *All the Bright Places*, there are some descriptions towards the end of Theodore's suicide. Violet is present when he is brought up from the lake in which he drowned himself in, and as a teacher, one needs to be aware that these sorts of details may be harmful for students who have attempted suicide themselves or know someone who has attempted or who have been left behind after suicide attempts. If teachers are unaware of their students' experiences they should, if possible, acquire such information from other teachers before deciding to include the novel in its entirety in teaching. While the novel describes Violet finding Theodore, it does not describe the suicide from his perspective, meaning readers are spared details from when it happens. Even though the novel mentions suicide attempts and thoughts about

suicide, the characters do not self-harm. In that way, readers are spared from violent descriptions of self-harm that they may find distressful.

3.2 *Starvation*

While *All the Bright Places* discussed mood disorders and grief, Molly Fennig's novel *Starvation* from 2020 focuses on eating disorders. Wes McCoy is the novel's protagonist, and the novel starts with him being hospitalised after collapsing during a wrestling match. The novel switches back and forth between *Before* he collapsed during the match and *After* he was hospitalised and his brother had died in a car accident. In *Wes McCoy*, the reader meets in the *Before* pages a healthy athletic boy that slowly gets an eating disorder giving the reader a look at how this type of disorder can develop. The *After* pages show him and his family struggling to cope with his disorder. While Theodore in *All the Bright Places* is never diagnosed with bipolar disease, *Starvation* provides the reader with more clarity into what the character is dealing with. The doctor in the hospital asks him, "When is the last time you ate, Wes?" (Fennig, 2020, p. 3), and later he goes to a therapist for treatment of his eating disorders. Wes himself claims that "I don't have one. I'm not a girl" (Fennig, 2020, p. 25), which with all the information given, will not convince the reader that this is true. His therapist also quickly assures him that not only girls get eating disorders.

At the beginning of the novel, Wes meets with the therapist Dr Simmons for the first time, and this conversation indicates how Wes feels towards food. He describes his situation as "not being able to eat" (Fennig, 2020, p. 25). When reading the *Before* pages, Wes starts as a kid with a healthy relationship to food. He is competing in wrestling, a sport where the opponent is determined according to weight class. The novel indicates that a lower weight class can be beneficial when competing. After meeting Caila, a girl doing ballet, Wes agrees to try a pure fruit diet with her to test changing eating habits. When it becomes clear that he has lost what he needs to enter the lower weight class, his coach says, "Way to go, McCoy. Keep doing what you're doing" (Fennig, 2020, p. 44). At this point in the novel, the reader knows Wes will be hospitalised. Therefore, readers' will likely react to the coach applauding his rapid weight loss.

When Wes' mother finds out that her son has an eating disorder, she discusses it with other parents in the same situation and creates rules for Wes to follow to help him gain weight and get better. However, Wes is feeling conflicted because he does not feel that she has been there for him earlier, "All this from the woman who didn't notice I lost fifty-five pounds" (Fennig, 2020, p. 19) and that she has not checked in on him after his brother died. He had

problems with his friendships and relationships. Since parents are the ones children depend most on, it can be difficult if one is not receiving what one needs. Wes still needs support from his parents, and as he experiences that this support has been lacking before, he blames his mother for not helping him in his situation and therefore struggles to trust her now.

In comparison to his mother, Wes' father has difficulties in understanding what his son is going through, "I don't know why you have to make it so hard on us. Why can't you just eat? It's not that difficult" (Fennig, 2020, p. 40). As mentioned, there is a stigma around mental health disorders, which revolves around the idea that sick people choose to be sick. Wes' father shows this same attitude, and by doing so, Wes only has one supporting parent. However, towards the end of the novel, after Wes has been admitted to a treatment centre, Wes' father apologises, saying, "we're sorry if we contributed to this in any way" (Fennig, 2020, p. 217). Trying to get better from a mental health disorder is complex when the support system is lacking. Having Wes' father apologising for his behaviour, in the end, indicates to the reader that his earlier behaviour was burdensome and damaging.

Jason, Wes' brother who is also wrestling, provides a different view on weight loss, warning Wes from losing weight. He tells him, "Wrestling is only for a few years if that. Your body is something you have for the rest of your life" (Fennig, 2020, p. 45). Having Jason react on Wes' situation makes the reader aware that his situation already wakes attention. While the rest of his family does not recognise the problem until much later, Jason sees it early on. It is also revealed later in the novel that the car accident that killed Jason was most likely caused on purpose. Finding out that Jason took his own life will enlighten the readers on more of the background behind the beginning of Wes' eating disorder. At the novel's start, the reader is informed that his brother is gone, and maybe one will believe there is a connection between his death and Wes' disorder. Later as the details of his death are revealed, it is confirmed that his brother's death pushes Wes over the edge.

What can be learned about eating disorders from this novel? Clearly, that the reasons for contracting such a disorder can vary. The novel presents two of these reasons through Wes and Caila. Wes starts losing some weight to go down a weight class in wrestling, which seems normal. Neither Wes' dad nor the coach reacts to him trying to lose weight. For Caila as a ballerina, weight is essential as the dance must appear light and flowing. It can begin as a goal to get better at the sport or the dance. The positive results, especially for Wes, become a motivation to keep going until it has become something one cannot stop. While eating disorders are often associated with wanting to be thinner, *Starvation* provides an angle that introduces other reasons. It shows how there can be unhealthy ideals in some sports or types

of dance. By understanding that it does not have to be about wanting to be thin, one may understand the complexity of the disease and see that it does not have to appear in one particular way. This can be beneficial if one starts developing similar thoughts or observes others speak of such thought processes. That is one way this novel can help with gaining mental health literacy.

Wes' eating disorder develops after his brother's death. At first, he decides not to eat to help Caila with her school project, then he continued eating fruit since it helped him go down a weight class in wrestling, then Jason dies, and he needs to feel that he can control something in his life. He lists up his actions days before his brother's death:

“...had I not given Caila my sweatshirt, had I not fallen asleep, had I not looked for the Stanford sweatshirt and just gone with Jason, had I not filled my water bottle that day at the tournament where I met Caila, had I not messaged her back, had I not gone over to her house, had she not gotten sick, had I woken up sooner in the morning”
(Fennig, 2020, p. 141).

Wes experiences that negative things happen when he loses control. With control intact, he could possibly prevent bad things from happening: “If I just controlled something so it didn't feel like everything was inevitable and overwhelming and stupid that it was all over a sweatshirt” (Fennig, 2020, p. 142).

As a teacher, it is important to realise that the students know that thoughts presented in the novel are not the only possible thought for people with eating disorders to have. As with other mental health disorders, there are no answers to what the thoughts and feelings of those with mental health disorders will be. Mental illnesses can be experienced differently. Even though there are some similarities between Wes and Caila and their representations of anorexia nervosa, they are still only two characters and do not represent everyone with this eating disorder. Therefore, students need to understand that this novel, as with the other novels, looks at how it can be, not how it always is.

Starvation has some descriptive parts of eating disorders, which can trigger students with the same diagnosis. It may also be a particularly vulnerable subject due to the extreme stigma people with eating disorders face. While anxiety is a more prominent diagnosis in school that often occurs in different formats, such as performance anxiety or school anxiety, eating disorders may be a diagnosis that is not addressed in school. Perhaps in fear of saying something wrong, the decision is often not to say anything. The problem with staying silent as a teacher is that students do not stay silent. They will continue to discuss or create rumours

about one another, and to protect one's students, teaching about the reality of things such as mental health disorders can be worthwhile. Therefore, looking at how the characters justify having an eating disorder and how those around them react can provide a much-needed discussion about the subject in the classroom.

3.3 Highly Illogical Behavior

In *Highly Illogical Behavior* by John Corey Whaley from 2017 (originally published in 2016), the reader is introduced to the protagonists Solomon and Lisa. Solomon is suffering from the anxiety disorder Agoraphobia. He has therefore, not left his house in three years, since the day he dove into the school's fountain to calm himself from a panic attack. Lisa, needing to write an essay on her experience with mental illness to get a full scholarship into a college psychology program, decides to befriend Solomon to help him get well. The novel is written from a third-person point of view, switching back and forth between the thoughts and views of Solomon and Lisa. By acquiring the protagonists' thoughts, readers will learn how a person with an anxiety disorder can feel. However, they will also understand how others can experience people with mental health disorders.

The novel begins with Lisa sending a letter to Solomon's mother, asking to meet with her son. As he does not have contact with anyone other than his family, Solomon's family agree to build him a pool in the backyard if he meets her once. He becomes close friends with Lisa and her boyfriend Clark, and eventually, Solomon goes outside to his backyard to swim in the pool. However, Clark says, "They were digging a damn hole in the backyard before we ever showed up" (Whaley, 2017, p. 230), indicating to the reader that they were not the only reason Solomon walked outside. The book tells how his friendship with Lisa and Clark made him feel like he was missing out on something as they could walk outside, and he could not. Therefore, even though Lisa's plan consisted of figuring out what she needed to do to help Solomon, her becoming his friend was something that challenged Solomon's idea of wanting to stay inside his house.

Lisa is obsessed with the idea of being the hero and saving Solomon. She reckons that with her help, he will want to go outside. Teaching students about mental illnesses gives them a realistic view of how mental illnesses work. Lisa is on a mission to be Solomon's saviour, but he has a severe case of anxiety disorder which has kept him from walking outside and living an everyday life. The novel does not create an unrealistic picture of Lisa walking in and getting rid of his anxiety disorder; rather, it questions her actions' outcome. At the end of the novel, the reader is told that Solomon still sees his home as the place he wishes to be for the

moment, “He never needed to leave it again. But that didn’t mean he never did” (Whaley, 2017, p. 245). The novel is realistic in the sense that Solomon does not become magically cured at the end. Some mental health disorders take a long time to fight, and often a professional is needed to provide that person with the correct treatment.

Compared to the other novels chosen for this thesis, Solomon’s family all support him and understand his disease. His mother encourages him to try to become friends with Lisa as “your only friends shouldn’t be middle aged and they certainly shouldn’t be your parents” (Whaley, 2017, p. 25). As a reader, it does not appear that his parents put pressure on him beyond what he can take. Solomon mentions that he had seen several therapists but convinced his parents to discontinue seeing them. It should be wise to discuss with the students whether the parent’s approach to their son’s mental illness is helping. As mentioned in this thesis, exposure is a way to deal with anxiety disorders. If one never faces the things one fears, one will continue to avoid them, thinking it will harm or even kill them to face their fears. For Solomon, walking outside of his house is a potential threat, and the reader will note that while being supportive, their son has not left the house in three years and is not seeing a therapist. One would have thought that having supportive parents would help, as it has been discussed that it could have helped Theodore in *All the Bright Places*, but anxiety operates differently than mood disorders, and it requires other means of action.

What readers can learn from *Highly Illogical Behavior* on anxiety disorders is that one avoids things that cause extreme discomfort even though it means that one must give up how life used to be. When Solomon’s parents try to convince him to see Lisa, he answers, “try to understand that bringing someone else in here – changing everything – that it could make me go crazy again?” (Whaley, 2017, p. 40). For Solomon, the idea of changing the things he has become used to is making him uncomfortable, which is a typical symptom of anxiety. As a reader, one will probably react to his use of the word “crazy”, that he felt crazy for experiencing a lot of anxiety and panic attacks. He is also referred to as the “crazy kid” who dove into the fountain by other characters outside of his family. Instead of figuring out *why* he dove into the fountain, it was assumed that it was because he was crazy judging by his peers.

When Lisa’s mom hears about Solomon’s situation, she says to Lisa, “What kind of parents let their child act that way? Never leaving the house? Not going to school? Sounds like he needs a beating to me” (Whaley, 2017, p. 131). This illustrates how easy it is for others to believe that not leaving his house is an option, and teachers should be prepared for a similar reaction among students. As mentioned, anxiety disorders are based upon an irrational fear towards something that is not necessarily that alarming. Therefore, understanding how

anxiety works can be complex, and it may require many conversations and a willingness to learn. It is complicated to understand how someone gets an anxiety disorder, and the novel does not provide any answers to that. Nevertheless, since it mentions how Solomon used to go to school, readers will understand that it is a disorder that evolves, becoming worse if not treated.

While it would not cure Solomon to have people understand the real reason for him diving into the fountain or behaving the way he does, it would be interesting to discuss with students if it could have made a difference if people had knowledge of mental health disorders. By using the novel to discuss the behaviour of others, they may be more aware of how they would react to witnessing such a situation. As mentioned, never leaving the house is an extreme case of anxiety disorder. However, Solomon's thought processes are similar to those with other types of anxiety disorders. Letting students be educated about these thought processes can be beneficial in understanding how those with anxiety feel when faced with their phobias. It can help develop positive attitudes towards anxiety disorders and not have a negative response if someone is very anxious towards something. It can also help those with anxiety feel safer sharing and consequently help students recognise their own fears.

An important thing to consider when employing novels in the classroom is how students may respond to them. For the two other novels, I have commented on whether they can trigger the students reading them. *Highly Illogical Behavior* is not a novel where the same precautions should be taken. While the novel portrays a mental health disorder, it has almost no explicit or graphic scenes. There is one incident where Solomon has a panic attack and starts hitting himself, which could be discussed in the classroom. If someone has an adverse reaction to why he slaps himself, others with a similar panic attack can get uncomfortable in the classroom. As with this specific scene, teachers discussing these novels, in general, should be prepared to receive reactions from students who do not understand the behaviour of characters with mental illnesses. A teacher's task will be to help the students understand the thought processes described by the characters.

4.0 Use in the Classroom

4.1 Document Analysis

The document analysis will examine the Ungdata 2022 report (Bakken, 2022) and the Public Health report (Bang et al., 2023) that study youths' mental health. In this thesis it is suggested that teachers should implement novels about mental health disorders. By understanding the general state of students, it would be easier to know what to expect when bringing topics on mental health into the classroom. When teachers are updated on their students' mental health, they will know the climate and the general conditions for discussing these issues. Teachers must adapt classroom approaches according to the classroom they enter and the group of students they teach. The reports are based on statistics and can therefore not provide a completely accurate take on how all teachers' students are doing. It will, however, help to see how an average student is doing. After years with the pandemic, teachers should examine how and if the pandemic has affected students' mental health.

4.1.1 The Ungdata 2022 report

The Ungdata report gets data from lower secondary and upper secondary school surveys; 109 700 students participated in the 2022 survey. While the Ungdata surveys typically are representable for all youth in Norway, 124 municipalities participated compared to the 356 municipalities that exist. The study has decided to be nationally representative despite having fewer participants than before (Bakken, 2022). As the study participants belong to different regions of Norway, both Agder in the south and Nordland in the north, it may be dispersed enough to be correct as it represents broadly. However, note that this survey stands out from the other Ungdata surveys that had representation from most of the country.

Although the Ungdata survey covers all topics that are a part of teenagers' lives, such as "local environment, the future, media, violence and harassment" (Bakken, 2022), the sections about *health* and *life quality* are noteworthy for this thesis. The study shows that teenagers feel their life quality is overall good, with the numbers matching those of 2021 when many were affected by the pandemic.

After questions about youths' satisfaction with their lives, researchers concluded that "8 out of 10 place themselves above the centre point of the scale" (Bakken, 2022, p. 10, my translation). 8 out of 10 is good statistics as most youths are satisfied with their lives. Yet, 2 out of 10 place themselves below the centre point. In a classroom of twenty, approximately four students would not be as satisfied with their lives as the rest. Knowing these numbers as

a teacher is valuable since the teacher's job is to ensure an inclusive classroom environment (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Life satisfaction does not automatically signify how youths' mental state is as their reasons for not being satisfied can revolve around having had a fight with friends or being stressed about schoolwork or other issues. However, among the questions asked about life quality, the survey found that "every fourth youth express that they are scarcely or never optimistic about the future" (Bakken, 2022, p. 10, my translation). When 1 out of 4 express that they are not optimistic about the future, likely, they are not very motivated to do their best at school. Students often work hard at school to get into the education programs they want. Suppose they are not optimistic about the future. In that case, they may lack this motivation or feel the possibility of getting into the desired program is lost. What this means for this thesis is that teachers need to be prepared that many of the students may lack the motivation to work at school to reach a good outcome. The survey does not separate between lower and secondary schools in these results. However, the statistics on their general life satisfaction appear to be similar.

The Ungdata report provides insight into gaining awareness of students' state of mind when working with topics on mental illnesses. The report shows that on the question "percentage that has had many mental health issues the last seven days" (Bakken, 2022, p. 35, my translation), there was 28-30% of female students and 11-13% of male students in upper secondary school. The survey does not give any intel on how many also had a mental health disorder. However, suppose as many as 30% of females and 13% of males feel their mental health issues are so significant that they are bothersome. In that case, they should learn about what they are experiencing. Even though they do not have a mental illness, learning about mental health disorders and gaining mental health literacy can help those experiencing difficulties. Understanding feelings can happen by gaining general knowledge about what it looks like when it has gone so far that one should seek help. Learning what they should do to avoid having their mental health problems developing into mental illness can be a preventive measure.

Even though there are students who answered that they are not experiencing mental health issues, for them to be learning about mental health disorders is equally essential. As mentioned, it benefits students with a mental illness and those without one. Learning about mental health can help students develop empathy towards those around them with mental illnesses. In addition, it can also help them learn what to do when met with mental health disorders and it may help to recognise it should they later develop it.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been some interest in whether youths' mental health has deteriorated due to the lockdowns and other changes in their everyday lives. Some schools were affected more than others during the pandemic, bringing variations in how much students' lives were changed. The lockdown and closing of schools brought concerns about how it would affect students, those who were already struggling, and those who had not struggled before. Concerns of this matter led to discussions on whether to have lockdowns to prevent the further spreading of the virus or to avoid lockdowns to consider the mental health of the Norwegian population. This year, 2023, is the first year where the aftermath of the pandemic can be examined as to what consequences the decisions made during the pandemic had.

One report that comments on students' mental health after the pandemic is the Ungdata report from 2022. The report states that "there is little indication that the pandemic contributed to more mental health issues than before" (Bakken, 2022, p. 35, my translation). These results show the immediate result after the pandemic, as 2022 is the first year without lockdown. However, the results do not show the long-term effect of the pandemic, what youth have missed out on and its effects may become more evident after a few years. The results show that the pandemic has not yet influenced students too profoundly.

4.1.2 The Public Health report

The Public Health Report by the Norwegian Institute on Public Health shows the health situation in Norway through statistics and other information, for example, registration numbers in the specialist health service in Norway. It is a report on mental health and all topics that can affect both physical and mental health. What is of interest for this thesis is the information on youths' mental health. While an English version of the Public Health Report has been published, it has not been updated since 2019, compared to the Norwegian version, which was updated with new data in 2022 and new definitions in 2023. Therefore, as the most recent data are of interest, the Norwegian version will be used.

One of the chapters in the Public Health Report is "Mental health problems and illnesses in children and adolescents" (Bang et al, 2023, my translation). As the chapter gives information about children and youth from 0 to 24, only the statistics concerning those in upper secondary school will be commented on. The report mentions how the numbers provided may not give the reality of the mental health situation among youth since not all seek medical help. However, this report and the Ungdata report can help teachers gain a more realistic picture.

The novels mentioned in this thesis all depict male characters struggling with different mental illnesses because boys are more particular with what type of characters they can identify with compared to girls, who can read about characters with different sex and age (Carlsen, 2020). The purpose is to use the novels in a way that can benefit both boys and girls. Therefore, it is essential to understand what kind of mental illness is typical for the different sex to be prepared as a teacher for the different reactions to the novels. Suppose more girls than boys will likely get a specific mental health disorder. In that case, the chances are that more boys than girls will struggle to understand this mental illness and gain empathy and mental health literacy.

The report provides two different statistics, numbers on those registered in the primary health service and those registered in the specialist health service. For the primary health service, it is not a requirement that a thorough clinical examination takes place, as it would have in the specialist health service. This means that the diagnoses can be less accurate, while it also looks at how many youths are seeking medical help for their mental health problems. There are fewer boys diagnosed with mental illnesses in the primary health service in the age group 16-19 years compared to girls of the same age. This gap is similar in the specialist health service. The report explains this difference because more girls than boys develop mental health disorders after puberty (Bang et al., 2023).

The differences between boys and girls are visible within the chosen mental illnesses for this thesis. While 2-3 per cent of girls at 16-19 years are diagnosed with depression by the specialist health service, only 1 per cent of boys are diagnosed with the same mental health disorder. For anxiety disorders, the numbers are 2,9 per cent in 2020 among girls at the same age as with depression, and for boys, it is 1 per cent. Over 1 per cent of girls are diagnosed with an eating disorder compared to 0,1 per cent of boys (Bang et al., 2023). In addition to indicating how many are registered with specific mental illnesses, these numbers help to see how many more girls are diagnosed with these mental illnesses than boys.

Due to social media and other influences, mental illnesses are more spoken about than before. As a teacher, one cannot refuse to see students' difficulties as it will affect their performances in school and how they deal with their lives. The Norwegian Institute on Public Health report states that more boys and girls between the ages of 20-24 have been registered with a mental illness by the primary health service (Bang et al., 2023). These numbers represent those students teachers had before they finished upper secondary school. Knowing that these numbers increase according to age also means that even though the students are not affected by anything while attending upper secondary school, they may develop a mental

illness later in life. Helping students develop mental health literacy means that they can be more prepared for the difficulties they are experiencing while attending upper secondary school and the issues they might face after graduating.

4.1.3 Comparison

The two reports discussed both give their take on teenagers' mental health. While the Ungdata 2022 report looks at youths' impressions and emotions about their health, the Public Health report adds statistics on how many of these teenagers are seeking help. The Ungdata report shows that more than 30 per cent of females and 13 per cent of males are experiencing many mental health problems. The Public Health Report gave a lower percentage for boys and girls diagnosed with depression, anxiety and eating disorders. Even though there are many other mental illnesses, there can be more youth that are struggling or have severe problems than those registered in the Public Health Report.

The Public health report also writes that 17 per cent of girls and 12 per cent of boys are diagnosed with a mental illness. This gives the impression that most of those boys experiencing issues in the Ungdata report have sought help from medical services. However, as typical diagnoses for boys are ADHD and behaviour diagnoses, there is a chance that it is not symptoms for these mental illnesses that made those 13 per cent report "many mental health problems" in the Ungdata report. In addition, the Ungdata report is a survey asking students. At the same time, the numbers in the Public Health Report do not state whether those diagnosed are students, as not all youth attend upper secondary school. In summary, it is uncertain whether the boys diagnosed are the same boys experiencing many health problems.

4.2 How to Use Novels as a Tool

4.2.1 Advantages and challenges

One advantage of using novels in English language teaching (ELT) is that the English subject curriculum (LK20) wants students to "read, discuss and reflect on the content and language features and literary devices in various types of texts, including self-chosen texts" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). As this competence aim mentions using various texts, novels should be included. The students must discuss and reflect on the content and the use of literary devices. Using full text novels gives students more content to work with and using novels can also help them become better readers. The best way to reach reading abilities is by reading more and helping them "develop reading confidence and stamina" (Williams, 2021, p. 141). When the students have become better readers, it becomes a tool for acquiring more of the language as they will be met with more text than if they only read shorter texts.

In addition, reading is listed as a *basic skill* in the English subject curriculum. Various texts shall be used to “contribute to reading pleasure” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). To achieve reading enjoyment, students must read a text that interests them. In a class, finding a text that all can enjoy may be difficult. One possibility is for the students to choose what novel to read. If a discussion of the novel is wanted, give the students options that may appeal to them in different ways, but that belongs to the same topic or theme. For this master thesis, this topic would be mental illnesses. To help the students choose, teachers can write or find a short synopsis for each book and allow the students to decide based on that. The synopsis could include the characters’ hobbies or some part of the plot that might interest students or that they could recognise themselves in. As one of the competence aims wants students to reflect on self-chosen texts, this is one way to allow for some autonomy in what texts they read. By allowing students to select between several texts, they can also avoid reading books similar to their own experiences.

One challenge of novel implementation is that while it can help foster reading skills, the mission is “exploiting teenagers’ potential as lifelong readers” (Williams, 2021, p. 143). Reading one novel in upper secondary-level class will not immediately create passionate readers. The teacher’s task is to discover how to help students become fond of reading beyond those few novels they read in class. Working with novels should be engaging and fun, so students are encouraged to continue reading outside the classroom. How teachers choose to implement the novels is important to achieve this goal, but also what novels they choose.

4.2.2 Things to consider when picking novels

Frydman & Eisenbach (2022) provide five points to consider when choosing mental health literature for the classroom. The first one is to select texts that are suitable for one’s specific classroom. All students have different backgrounds, so even though one text worked in one classroom, it may not be suitable for a different classroom. For example, suppose a student has had a close relative that has recently died of suicide. In that case, a novel describing suicide should be avoided. While it is important to speak about topics like suicide to prevent hurtful attitudes and develop students’ mental health literacy, it may not work as intended. Instead, it can spotlight the student who has had such experiences. The purpose of using novels to educate students on such topics is for them to discuss the experiences of someone other than those in the classroom, someone fictional.

Then Frydman & Eisenbach (2022) write that teachers must validate that the characters introduced in the novels are giving one perspective on mental illnesses and do not

account for all perspectives. This point has been highlighted during the analysis of the novels to ensure that students do not believe the representation in the novels to be the only truth for those with mental health disorders. Teachers must also think about whether the novels can trigger the readers. This part has been examined in the analysis of each novel to help teachers determine if they wish to include the three analysed novels in their teaching.

Also, the characters in the novels “should not be defined by their mental illness” (Frydman & Eisenbach, 2022, p. xvii). In all the chosen novels for this thesis, the characters’ mental illnesses have progressed into serious illnesses. Since readers witness the story through their thoughts, their mental health disorder may appear all-consuming. The risk of having characters that are so ill is that their mental illness becomes all one sees. However, Theodore in *All the Bright Places* shares that he does not want to get diagnosed with anything out of fear that it will reduce him to someone with a mental illness. By making such comments, he makes the reader also aware of how those with mental illnesses can be diminished. Despite their disorders or possible disorders, all the novels attribute their characters with interests and other characteristics. Theodore struggles to find his identity. Violet loves to write and sees the world as she would write it. Wes wishes to make his father proud, and Solomon does not want to give up his nerdy interests to impress a friend. In addition, the protagonists are affected by their interactions with friends and family, and they add a dimension that shapes how the characters appear.

It is also presented that teachers have to “Critically Examine the Text and Research and Learn More about the Author” (Frydman & Eisenbach, 2022, p. xvii). Some sick-lit is less realistic than others, opening for love and magic to be the solution to curing mental health disorders. Therefore, it was important to examine how mental health problems are dealt with in the analysis of the novels. The novels introduce school counsellors, therapists, and institutions, and none of the protagonists become miraculously cured at the end of the books. However, most characters see some improvement or begin to improve.

Frydman & Eisenbach want teachers to find out information about the authors due to it being informative and possibly helping develop mental health literacy to know some background information (2022). The author of *Starvation*, Molly Fennig, is a PhD graduate student in clinical psychology specialising in eating disorders, giving the novel some credibility to it appearing realistically. At the same time, the author of *All the Bright Places*, Jennifer Niven, writes that her life inspires the story as she had a boyfriend who struggled with bipolar disease. The author of *Highly Illogical Behavior*, John Corey Whaley, does not inform of any experience or knowledge of mental illnesses. However, he is a former teacher

with an M.A. in Secondary English Education, making it reasonable to assume that he knows what can hurt or help young adults.

In addition to these guidelines on what mental health novels should contain for implementation in the classroom, is that they have to be interesting for the students to read. Whether the novel will be enjoyed depends on the students' interests and personality traits. As mentioned in the book analysis, the characters chosen for this thesis have different characteristics (straight, gay, male, female, athlete, and geek) to reach more students. If the students do not find the novel captivating, they will not want to read it, and some may refuse to do so. Even though finding the characters interesting or recognising themselves in the characters can make students enjoy novels more, a thrilling storyline can also be engaging. However, it may be more difficult for teachers to determine what engage students. Some teachers only have a few students in more than one subject and have not spent much time with those they only have in one subject.

4.3 Preparations before Implementing Mental Illness Fiction into the Classroom

A classroom should be where students feel free from judgment and can share thoughts and feelings. Discussing mental health disorders can bring up topics that can be experienced as sensitive to some students. Safe space can be used when discussing difficult conversations in the classroom. As a safe space can focus too much on protecting the students, it may stop students from giving their input and opinions since it is believed this could challenge the safe space. Therefore, the concept of "brave space" has been created. The purpose of the brave space is for it to be "a mechanism to create supportive environments so that all students may equally participate in challenging dialogue" (Ali, 2017, p. 9). Students shall continue to treat each other with respect and consideration. However, they are also allowed to have different opinions and ask questions about how things are. When discussing mental health one can risk that students do not understand or participate in the classroom discussion if they are not allowed to give their input.

A brave space's characteristics are that it "had an unbiased professor who often adopted ground rules, peers who spoke openly and honestly, and seating arrangements that allowed everyone to see each other" (Ali, 2017, p. 8). In the analysis part of this thesis, some possible reactions from students have been presented in that they may feel that the characters are acting unreasonably. To be an unbiased teacher, one cannot reject the opinions of one's students. The core curriculum states, "Each person's convictions and principles must be taken

seriously so that we can all think, believe and express ourselves freely” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). If students are to express themselves freely, the classroom environment must facilitate this by first of all having a teacher that does not strike down on opinions that differ from what the teacher believes. As Ali (2017) mentions, the teacher does have to have some ground rules, and these rules are what prevent the classroom dialogue from discriminating against those with mental health disorders. Classroom discussions should never be aimed at individual students; using fiction will divert the attention towards the characters instead of making the conversation personal.

While one can, as a teacher, establish a framework that will ensure a brave space, teachers are not health care professionals. Teachers can create relations with the students and work on having a classroom environment that promotes learning and growth. However, leaping into lessons about mental health disorders can evoke reactions one would not be prepared for. Most schools have personnel that are more trained and educated in handling topics such as these, so to guarantee that one is moving forward in a well-considered manner, involving these mental health professionals can aid teachers who are not specialised in mental health. It would be more effortless if teachers lay all responsibility onto these employees to avoid having to teach about mental health. However, a teacher should prepare students for the life they will meet after finishing school and give their students tools to succeed academically and personally. As youth struggling with mental health problems “are at an increased risk for negative socioemotional and academic outcomes” (Frydman & Eisenbach, 2022, p. ix), it makes it something that cannot be refrained from the classroom.

4.4 Implementation of Novels in the Classroom

4.4.1 Pre-reading strategies

One pre-reading activity English teachers should use before using a novel in their teaching is to “tap into their students’ prior knowledge about the subjects” (Olan et al., 2022, p. 105), and activate what the students know beforehand. This will give the teacher some information on what students know on the subject, in this case, mental illnesses. Suppose teachers allow students to share what they already know. In that case, they will get an idea of what their beliefs are and what true information they have compared to what is based on stereotypes and stigmatisation.

Before beginning to read novels that are about a specific topic, teachers should give the students’ background terminology to understand the characters’ actions and feelings. Having this knowledge to recognise some tendencies that can occur with mental health

disorders will also be beneficial. By doing so, students will get more out of their reading and the class will better discuss the novel (Olan et al., 2022). One example is at the beginning of *All the Bright Places*, when the first thought by Theodore is, “Is today a good day to die?” (Niven, 2015, p. 3). The thought of dying is connected with being suicidal, but it may not be seen as a symptom of depression. Giving the students the correct terminology for them to be able to label mental illnesses can help to achieve mental health literacy. Another example is how grief and depression can often be confused, as “Being sad as a teenager is part of the developmental process” (Olan et al., 2022, p. 101) and is not the same as being depressed.

In addition to activating the students’ background knowledge and giving them the terminology, teachers can show the students movie trailers or book trailers. The purpose of this is to “introduce the initial excitement and anticipation of meeting a new and unknown text, building on the “film trailer” model” (Williams, 2021, p. 161). Giving the students a visual look at the novel before starting to read can make them more interested in learning what the rest of the story is or what will happen. *All the Bright Places* has been made into a movie, and one can use the trailer. At the same time, with *Highly Illogical Behavior* and *Starvation*, teachers can use the book trailers. Book trailers are not as intriguing as movie trailers as there has been less money into making them. However, they will still give the students something visual to hold on to before diving into an entire novel.

4.4.2 While reading

“In many young adult novels, authors give what might be called “red flags” to clue readers in to characters’ intentions or motivations through dialogue, descriptions, or plot development” (Olan et al., 2022, p. 102). These signs will make it easier for the reader to have something to grasp when reading. Therefore it is essential to find novels that provide readers with these signs. To catch up on such “red flags”, the reader should have some knowledge about mental illness. It would be the teacher’s job to give the students this knowledge before reading the novel.

There are several ways a teacher can go about when choosing to implement a novel into their teaching. One way is to read the novel from start to finish over multiple weeks. The teacher can give the students time in each lesson without interfering with their progress until the due date for when they should be done with the novel. As an alternative, teachers can also dedicate each week to discussing one or two chapters to split the novel and make it seem less overwhelming for students who dislike reading. In that way, the teacher can also help the reader notice parts of the novel as they are reading to get more out of the content.

As mentioned, many students do not like to read. To reach reading pleasure among students, teachers would have to find out how to make reading more fun. One way of doing this is while reading different parts of the novel. Teachers should be sure that “text-sections [...] should naturally exploit cliff-hangers and dramatic textual moments or tensions wherever possible” (Williams, 2021, p. 161). By ending texts in cliffhangers, students may be more engaged in continuing their reading. This also allows discussion on what they think will happen and how the story will progress. To break up the reading, they can also get a writing task to continue the story, letting them create something. This is a possibility for when they are finished with the novel. However, it may be even more exciting to continue after a cliffhanger.

Splitting the novel into different sections opens different ways to work with the novels for each lesson. In one lesson, the teacher can plan for a classroom discussion, while terminology can be in focus for other lessons. It all depends on what the students need for reading a specific part and how much switching up they want during their lessons. Some students prefer predictability, while others get bored doing the same things over and over again. What is particularly important is that the teachers help students understand how the characters feel and think since it may be difficult to understand the mind of someone with a mental illness.

4.4.3 After-reading

Due to the possible sensitive topics, the teacher must be prepared for future reactions. This may be in lessons while reading but also after finishing the books. Some novels may be read for students to get reading practice, but when working with these suggested novels, teachers should prepare ways for students to reflect upon what they have read. The purpose of using these novels in the teaching is for students to obtain mental health literacy and develop empathy. To do this, they should work on the text in different ways.

A suggested activity for students when reading the novel is to sit in groups of six where they are to discuss the novel they have read. Murty et al. (2021) proposes these six roles:

- a. Discussion leader – who keeps the discussion going
- b. Summariser – who summarises the main events of the story
- c. Connector – who finds connections between the story and the real world
- d. Word master – who finds new and interesting vocabulary
- e. Passage person – who finds some of the most important passages

f. Culture collector – who compares the culture in the story to their own (p. 191). It can be wise to keep the discussion in groups so that the students feel safer sharing their thoughts, as the thoughts can relate to their own experiences and feelings. While the idea is not for students to share their own experiences, their interpretation of the novels will be coloured by their persona.

For the sixth role, the culture collector, a suggestion is to have students focus on the culture towards mental illnesses. How do those around respond to the characters' struggle, and how do the characters themselves feel about society? Students can also have an input on the general culture, for example, if the story takes place in the USA, what characterises this culture in comparison to the Norwegian culture? But focusing on mental health is the priority for this thesis and for these specific novels. Imagine teachers wish students to be aware of other cultures in other English-speaking countries. In that case, they can ask the students to discuss whether the culture in the novel on mental health disorders is similar to what they recognise from Norwegian culture. In that way, the discussion will keep some cultural aspects while still focusing on mental health.

4.4.4 Some notes on implementations of the chosen novels

Wood, Degennaro and Eisenbach propose using The Health at Every Size Model (HAES) when teaching about eating disorders in the classroom (2022). The model is about moving “attention from weight loss to self-care” (Marks et al., 2020, p. 5) with principles such as weight inclusivity and awareness of weight stigma and discrimination. The belief is that “When we embrace the HAES principles, we can honor differences and make for better spaces for all people in our classrooms and communities” (Wood et al., 2022, p. 43). The purpose is to implement the principles into the classroom environment to make it possible to get good discussions about eating disorders without stepping over any boundaries.

Even though *All the Bright Places* is a longer novel than the two others, it is also a novel with a movie adaptation. Since some students might struggle with getting through a large novel, using multimodal texts such as movies can help all students get caught up with the story's plot. While there are other ways to include all, such as choosing excerpts from the story for the students to discuss, understanding how the characters develop through the story will be easiest achieved by reading the entire novel. The movie has taken some creative liberties that make it differ from the novel. However, it will help the students to get a look at the story in its entirety.

Starvation and *All the Bright Places* can be read as serious novels with more mentions of death or descriptions that can make others uncomfortable. Eating disorders and suicide are topics not spoken of spontaneously among people, and they may require more attention to eventual reactions from students. In comparison, *Highly Illogical Behavior* has a touch of humour in Solomon and writing. In addition to anxiety being less deadly than the other two disorders, the way the novel is written makes it less delicate. Due to this, teachers may not have to keep too much attention to students' reactions except for statements from other students on how ridiculous the disorder is. Solomon has a phobia against going outside. Students can react to this with disbelief which can be uncomfortable to others in the class with anxiety disorders, even though they do not have agoraphobia like Solomon.

4.4.5 Dyslexia and reading difficulties

5-8 per cent of the Norwegian public have dyslexia, a learning disorder that causes difficulty with reading (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). The percentage of those with low reading abilities without necessarily having dyslexia is 20 per cent (Klinkenberg, 2018). Dyslexia cannot be cured and then there is the situation with those who do not read much and do not enjoy reading. This creates a challenge when working with longer texts but does not make it of less importance. That is why teachers should be aware of the challenges before embarking on novel implementation in the classroom. However, it should not discourage teachers from using novels in their teaching.

When reading a novel in a class where multiple students have reading difficulties, it is possible for them to use movie adaptations more when answering and contributing to questions about the novel. That way, they can participate with the rest of the class more. Other possibilities are for the students to listen to the text as an audiobook, preferably while keeping track of the text in the book. Even though dyslexia cannot be cured, strategies like giving the students audio to the text can make it possible for the students to get through texts. A last option is for the students to receive short excerpts of the text that are important. This requires more work for teachers to tailor so they get the important parts of the novels. It may be the most valuable solution, but it depends on how severe the reading difficulty is.

5.0 Conclusion

During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, there was much focus on mental health, and the fear was that it would greatly impact youth that spent much time at home. The documents and surveys I have analysed for this thesis cannot find such an impact. Yet, the state of youths' mental health has stabilised at a high number. A teacher has to expect several students in the classroom to have mental health problems (Bakken, 2022). These mental health problems can develop and lead to more difficulty if students are not given the knowledge they need to recognise and take action to help their potential problems. Three mental illnesses often appearing in adolescence are depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.

This thesis has provided different views on young adult literature, with Crowe (2001) writing that some adults want young people to only read classical novels and not Young Adult fiction. The purpose of this thesis was not to analyse whether the novels have literary value as art. Young adult fiction is written to engage its readers to be interested in reading. In addition, many YA novels contain content that can be used to educate their readers. While Sick-lit novels within the YA literary field have been controversial due to their, to some extent explicit content on mental illnesses, Testoni (2016) argued that the best way to manoeuvre these novels is by putting them into the classroom. Teachers are responsible for preparing students for the world that meets them after school, and shying away from subjects on mental health disorders could make it difficult for them if they face these experiences later in life.

The English subject curriculum has many parts that indicate why teachers should include topics like mental health. Under its section on *relevance and central values*, it states that the English subject is supposed to help with identity development (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). To help with this, teachers can implement tasks that deal with typical topics that appear with changes in identity. During both lower and secondary school, youth will be met with many challenges and experiences for the first time that can change how they see themselves and others. How they respond to these challenges and experiences can influence their mental health and, therefore, their identity. Helping students with their identity development can be to give them tools to prepare them for upcoming challenges and experiences. Such tools would require teachers to engage in a wide range of matters, such as matters concerning mental health.

In addition to identity development, I have mentioned that the subject curriculum includes the interdisciplinary topic of *health and life skills* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). This topic aims for teachers to help students develop their language to

express themselves. By including novels that discuss mental illnesses, students are given a language with the appropriate terminology to help them discuss mental illnesses in general and be able to speak and understand their own mental health.

A reason to implement the selected novels is to help students gain reading pleasure and become better readers (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). In addition to the basic skill of reading, life requires that people are good readers as they will have to read and extract information in various situations no matter what they choose to do after school. Reading will immediately become important for those in general studies as most of them choose to continue studying in higher education. Making students comfortable with reading longer texts will help prepare them for the texts they will be exposed to later. As most do not enjoy reading, finding reading material that can interest them is a good starting point. As mentioned, the young adult literary field was written for those between childhood and adulthood, and these types of books engage students. Reading pleasure is not necessarily gained by only making them read novels that have high literary merit among critics.

Research question 1: How to employ selected Young Adult novels depicting depression, anxiety, and eating disorders in the Norwegian upper secondary English subject classroom.

There are different ways to employ novels in general in the English subject classroom. Novels are long texts, so teachers must be careful with overwhelming students who do not like or are accustomed to reading. They should not prevent students who enjoy reading from reading the entire novel before the others as long as they do not spoil the novel's content for those who have not read as far or as fast. For students who do not read the whole novel in one go, teachers should section out the text, letting each section end with a cliffhanger or something more exciting to motivate students to keep reading (Williams, 2021). Teachers should also place activities before, during, and after reading, ensuring that students are supported in the reading process. The purpose of including tasks and activities is to make the reading process more interesting but also to ensure that the students understand what they are reading.

As these novels have topics that can evoke emotions, pauses in the reading process create opportunities to answer questions and deal with students' reactions right after reading. In *All the Bright Places*, readers get to dive deep into the mind of Theodore, who is contemplating taking his life from the novel's beginning. The part where Violet discovers Theodore after he has taken his life is a part that can be difficult to read for someone who has had or know of a similar experience. As proposed by Frydman and Eisenbach, teachers should "Consider Your Unique Classroom and Context" (2022, p. xvi). If you do not know all of the

students' backgrounds, ask other teachers or speak to a healthcare professional at your school on how to proceed. The purpose of implementing the novels is to educate, not trigger unwanted responses. If students become too affected by what they read, they may not be able to receive and learn what they are supposed to from the novel.

One way to implement novels in teaching is by giving students questions to answer, individually or in groups, after each reading section. As mentioned, mental health disorders are a delicate topic that can evoke many feelings of disbelief, sadness, and insecurity. I have proposed using a brave space to make it possible to have non-damaging and educating conversations on mental illnesses (Ali, 2017). The idea is to have an environment where everyone respects each other, and where everybody is allowed to contribute with their thoughts and ideas. In comparison to the safe space, the thoughts of all students are accepted as long as they do not discriminate against other students. By allowing all thoughts, teachers can also ensure that all students wish to contribute to the conversation as they are allowed to speak their minds. Society has become harsh towards some ways of thinking, and many have become afraid to utter their thoughts or ask questions. If students dare to speak, they can also get a response which lets them be educated about the subject.

Research question 2: How can such novels aid students in handling the issues of mental illnesses and developing mental health literacy?

A focus in answering research question 2 has been to look at what qualities the novels have that can help students develop mental health literacy. Mental health literacy is “knowledge that is linked to the possibility of action to benefit one’s own mental health or that of others” (Jorm, 2012, p. 231). For this thesis, I have chosen the mental illnesses depression, anxiety, and eating disorders and have found three novels that educationally represent these mental illnesses. I argue that these three novels can help students face mental health problems and mental illnesses.

In addition to developing mental health literacy, students need knowledge about mental illnesses so they do not contribute to mental health stigma. A problem with stigmatisation is that many of those with a mental illness struggle more with their diagnoses. They are misunderstood and judged based on lack of knowledge among others. With that in mind, “research suggests that educational programming aimed at reducing mental health stigma has proven particularly effective with adolescents” (Frydman & Eisenbach, 2022, p. xi). Therefore, it is more to be earned by including mental illnesses in lessons. One example is eating disorders, where Brelet et al. (2021) wrote that giving students knowledge about the disorder also helped reduce stigmatisation.

These novels can aid students in developing mental health literacy by looking at the information the novels give them. Such information can be how they are feeling and their thoughts, which is possible due to the point of view the reader is presented with. In addition, students should look at the characters' relationships with family and friends. In *All the Bright Places*, Theodore comes from a less present family than Violet. I have discussed how their interaction with their family can affect how they deal with their problems. It is possible that since it is more likely that Theodore has a mental illness, while Violet does not, both bipolar disease and grief can be lethal as well as not lethal, as some of it depends on the help they receive. It can be extremely fruitful for students to understand that mental illnesses do not have to develop as they do in the novels and that it depends on their actions to reach improvement.

In all three novels, the characters try different ways of getting help. Theodore and Violet go to a school counsellor, and Wes goes to an eating disorder specialist and is admitted into an eating disorder clinic. On the other hand, Solomon speaks of having a therapist a couple of years prior. By letting students read about different options for help, they will also be educated on mental health literacy, that is, "knowledge of help-seeking options and treatments available" (Jorm, 2012, p. 231). Unless teachers open up for students to choose which of the three novels they wish to read, they will not get to compare these different healthcare options provided in the different novels. However, reading about one of the treatment options allow for further discussion of whether the characters took enough action to become better.

All the Bright Places is also a novel where the character finds a strategy that helps her with her problem. Violet struggles with grief and figures out that speaking about it to her family and Theodore instead of keeping her feelings locked up makes her recover from the devastation her sister's death caused. In her case, the mental health problem was milder than those of the other characters in the other novels, but including her in the analysis was essential because she provides readers with an "effective self-help strategy for milder problems" (Jorm, 2012, p. 231) which is a part of mental health literacy. The novel can aid students in seeing that they do not need to have a mental illness to find solutions that will help.

In *Highly Illogical Behavior*, readers meet Lisa, the character determined to save Solomon from his anxiety disorder. Students can discuss her character. She realised that she helped Solomon more by being a friend than with her efforts of appearing as a health care specialist. One of the points of mental health literacy is "first aid skills to support others who are developing a mental disorder or are in a mental health crisis" (Jorm, 2012, p. 231).

Looking at Lisa and Solomon and the novel's outcome, readers learn they are not to function as a professional when having a friend with a mental health problem. Rather, they are to support their peers. Recognising what Lisa did wrong and coming up with other scenarios of how she should have acted would help students develop mental health literacy.

Novels depicting mental illnesses can help students develop mental health literacy as well as continuing the fight to get novels back into the classroom. By allowing students to be educated in mental health, teachers are investing in a future that has a population that knows how to handle mental illnesses. For further research I propose to look at to what extent English subject teachers in Norway have mental health literacy and how they use it in their lessons.

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