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The Importance of Incorporating Social-
Emotional Learning in the Literature Classroom

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I confirm that the work is self-prepared and that references/source references to all sources used in the work are provided, cf. Regulation relating to academic studies and examinations at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), § 10.

Abstrakt:

Denne oppgaven belyser betydningen av å integrere sosial og emosjonell læring i litteraturundervisningen. Oppgaven tar først for seg teoretiske perspektiv, som sosial-emosjonell læring og bruken av litteratur i klasserommet. Med dokumentanalyse som metode belyser jeg videre hvordan ungdomsromanen *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* skrevet av Sherman Alexie kan brukes i litteraturundervisning for å fremme elevers sosiale og emosjonelle ferdigheter. Ved hjelp av utvalgte sitater fra romanen vil jeg i oppgaven illustrere hvordan litterære karakterer kan stimulere elevers evne til å være empatisk, tolerante og forståelsesfulle i møte med andre mennesker. I tillegg vil oppgaven presentere tema fra ungdomsromanen som kan være med på å åpne for diskusjon og refleksjon i klasserommet på en måte som fremmer elevers sosiale og emosjonelle ferdigheter.

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1.0 Introduction

In today's curriculum for Norwegian schools, the Knowledge Promotion Reform, there are listed five basic skills that are supposed to be integrated into all subjects. These skills are reading, writing, numeracy, oral skills and digital skills. The listed skills are focused on students' academic performance. But what about students' social and emotional skills? The Quality Framework (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2011a, p. 3) states that "The education shall help to develop the sense of social belongingness and mastering the various roles in society, working life and leisure activities". It also states that "The education shall promote cultural understanding and develop self-insight and identity, respect and tolerance" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2011a, p. 3). This manifests the responsibility schools and educators have to ensure the development of students' social-emotional learning.

Research has shown that students with increasing age perceive the school as more and more oriented on academic performance (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 36-37). Schools that focus on tests and test results send signals to students that grades are the most important in school (Skaalvik & Federici, 2015, p. 11). This focus on end-results damages motivation for learning. When I was teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in teacher's practice, a student asked – even before the activity had started – if the activity we were doing would affect their oral grade. This confirms that there is a focus on end-results in some schools. As teachers, we must try to create spaces for learning, where both academic skills and social-emotional learning are developed.

Teaching literature is one way of bridging academic and social-emotional learning. In this thesis, I will argue that the young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* can be used to promote social-emotional learning among lower secondary school students. First, I will provide some theoretical perspectives regarding social-emotional learning, the importance of social-emotional learning, and literature as a means of developing social-emotional learning. Furthermore, I will present my method of research, before moving over to the literary analysis of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The thesis will end with an elaboration of didactical considerations, and lastly, a conclusion of the thesis as a whole.

2.0 Theoretical Perspectives

2.1 What is Social-Emotional Learning?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an essential set of knowledge to have in order to succeed in life. The organization Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines social-emotional learning as “(...)the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (2019b). The listed skills above are qualities that are important for people to inhabit in a democratic society, so people can be met with respect and tolerance. Social-emotional learning can be divided into five competencies or skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a). These skills are:

1. Self-awareness

Self-awareness deals with the ability to knowing one's own emotions, interests, strengths and limitations (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a). Being self-aware also includes maintaining a level of self-efficacy and having accurate self-perception (Yoder, 2014, p. 3-4). Self-efficacy is a term within the field of social cognitive theory and entails the individual's belief in their abilities and their capacity to adapt in a given environment (Frydenberg, 2011, p. 2554). Students that are self-aware will recognize their strengths and have a positive attitude in learning situations. They will not be discouraged when meeting challenging tasks, but rather approach the tasks with confidence in themselves and with a “growth mindset” (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a).

2. Self-management

Self-management is the skill of monitoring oneself and then regulating oneself accordingly (Yoder, 2014, p. 3-4). This way students can handle daily challenges and control their emotions when they find themselves in stressful situations. A student that has good self-management skills can practice self-discipline and reflect on and assess their personal and academic goals (Yoder, 2014, p. 3-4). Achieving goals will motivate the student to continuing to set and achieve goals in the future. The skill of self-management also entails having positive motivation, hope and optimism, as well as advocating for oneself, being courageous, determined and perseverant (Yoder, 2014, p. 3-4).

3. Social awareness

Social awareness is the ability for individuals to understand perspectives of others and to empathize with them (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a). Social awareness is especially important in meeting with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Students that are socially aware can meet people with respect and tolerance. They are also more likely to acknowledge and appreciate the similarities and differences between people (Yoder, 2014, p. 3). Understanding others' perspectives during classroom discussions, and attempting to empathize and relate to characters during literary analysis of texts are ways that students can practice being socially aware.

4. Relationship management

Relationship management is the skill of developing and maintaining healthy relationships with diverse individuals and groups (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a). This includes communicating in a clear way, listening to others and cooperating, resisting negative social pressures, resolving conflicts constructively and seek or offer help when necessary (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a). In order for learning to take place, students have to function well together and be collaborative. This requires that students respect diverse viewpoints (Yoder, 2014, p. 4).

5. Responsible decision-making

Responsible decision-making deals with the skill of identifying problems and making decisions that take several factors into account (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2019a). These factors can be based on ethical or moral standards, social norms and safety concerns (Yoder, 2014, p. 3). A student that is good at making responsible decisions has efficient problem-solving skills and can find several alternatives to solving a problem (Yoder, 2014, p. 5). Responsible decision-making also includes being self-reflective and self-evaluative, as well as demonstrating the ability to make responsible decisions that take both the individual and the collective in consideration (Yoder, 2014, p. 5).

Social-emotional learning concerns both the individual itself and the people surrounding us. Being able to look after yourself as well as cooperating and caring for others are not only important in the classroom, but also for navigating through future life.

2.2 The Importance of Integrating Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom

Today's school generation encounters different expectations from several areas. One of these expectations is the expectation to perform well in school. The focus on academic results is especially present in secondary school, where grades are introduced. In 2001, results showed that Norwegian students performed poorer than expected on the Organization for European Economic Co-operation's (OECD) PISA-test, a test that maps 15-year-old students' knowledge in reading, science and mathematics. The poor results have later been referred to as the "PISA-shock" by the media. Since then, the Norwegian government has made an effort to improve academic performance in school (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2011b). The focus on trying to increase academic performance has negatively affected students' motivation for learning. Both Norwegian and international research have shown that students with increasing age perceive the school as more and more oriented on academic performance (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011, p. 372-377; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, p. 37-37). Another research that examined the correlation between performance-oriented schools and students' mental health, showed that regardless of whether the students are scoring high or low on tests, testing can result in dejection, exhaustion and decreased self-worth (Skaalvik & Federici, 2015, p. 13). The consequence of schools focusing on end-results rather than the actual learning process, is that students believe that their grades are the most important outcome when they leave school. As teachers, we should ask ourselves whether the main purpose of education lies on how to be academically smart, or how to be smart in terms of taking care of oneself and others.

The ideal answer to how education should be conducted would be to incorporate both academic skills as well as skills that help us navigate through adult life. As stated by Elias cited in Yoder (2014, p. 5), student learning is enhanced when both social-emotional learning and academic learning is integrated. In a study where SEL programs in schools were reviewed, the results showed that by implementing SEL in teaching, students got increased academic achievement and social-emotional skills, improved positive social behaviors and attitudes toward self and others, as well as decreased conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, cited in Yoder, 2014, p. 5). The study was

executed with a control group that did not receive SEL in their teaching, and the results were consistent regardless of grade level, school location and ethnically and racially diverse schools. Teachers should, therefore, be able to adjust and plan their education in a way that supports development of SEL. This way both academic skills and competence within social-emotional learning can be stimulated.

2.3 Why Use Literature to Promote Social-Emotional Learning?

There are several ways to approach implementation of social-emotional learning in the classroom. However, what is special about literature is the unique ability to enter someone else's life. Literature offers a portal into what others have thought and felt. By accessing this knowledge, readers can better understand others' emotions and way of life. Reading literature is, therefore, a means of looking at the world from a different perspective than your own.

Teaching literature in a classroom with English as a second language, not only stimulates language learning, but also cultural awareness and personal growth (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 2). Literature showcases human beings' most significant ideas and beliefs and allows readers to experience a wide variety of expressions. These expressions can be of multicultural value and, therefore, enable readers to understand and acknowledge cultures that are different from their own. Reading literature is, in other words, an effective tool to learn about other cultures. Through character identification, the reader can show empathy for someone else's life situation.

Closely connected with cultural awareness, are the personal-growth benefits that literature offers. Literature can present human expressions and experiences that can be relatable to the reader. By indulging in others' stories, readers encounter different challenges or experiences that can be transferable to their own life experiences. By reflecting upon the themes and characters readers meet when reading literature, their understanding of themselves can be broadened. Reading literature is rewarding because it gives the reader a better understanding of the society and culture we live in, as well as a better understanding of oneself and one's own role *within* that society and culture (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 3). Hence, literature offers personal growth on an individual level, in addition to a better understanding of how society functions on a collective level. By processing the experiences we are given from a fictional world and relating those experiences to our own lives, we are equipped with a better understanding of how to behave in relationships with other people in the real world.

Another great benefit of using literature in the classroom is that literature opens for discussion and inquiry. Steven Wolk (2009, p. 670) states that using inquiry as a method when teaching literature, “(...)opens for minilessons that help students learn vital content knowledge”. Instead of simply teaching the facts of the novel, the teacher can use the novel as a link to bigger questions that are in touch with human emotions. Wolk (2009, p. 666) further claims that “Teaching through classroom inquiry and teaching for social responsibility have a symbiotic relationship”. The bigger questions that are raised in the classroom should not have easy answers. Hence, the students need to practice their thinking skills, as well as being able to listen and respect others’ perspectives.

Texts that are thoughtfully selected, can serve as a great learning outcome when discussing concepts, issues and dilemmas that have relevance in today’s society. By taking part of these interactive discussions, the students will develop their civic identities and their civic courage (Wolk, 2009, p. 666). Since students present their perspectives on a topic, they would have to argue for their statements. Thus, they will practice their ability to be independent and confident when speaking their mind. At the same time, their listening skills, patience and ability to show respect will be demanded, as some of their fellow classmates might not share their perspective on the matter.

3.0 Method

3.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis is a branch of qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is empirical research, where the data are in non-numerical form (Punch, 2009, p. 3-4). Qualitative research is also quite flexible in the sense that it allows for a more open approach and is not restricted to fixed questions (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 17). Glenn Bowen (2009, p. 27) describes document analysis as “(...)a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material”. The term “document” refers to a vast spectrum of sources. Books, movies, photographs, audio recordings, diaries, blogs, rapports, manuscripts, etc. are examples of what could be examined in a document analysis (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012, p. 87). What all documents have in common, is that they are representations of people’s thoughts, actions or creations.

Doing document analysis involves the processes of reading and interpreting text and is thus a way of performing content analysis. “Content analysis is the process of organizing information into categories related to the central question of the research” (Bowen, 2009, p.

32). In this thesis, I will perform a content analysis of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that examines relevant themes in correspondence to social-emotional learning. In doing this, I will present selected excerpts and quotes from the novel that reflect the different topics that will be addressed in the literary analysis.

3.2 Text Selection

There are four key considerations that should be in mind when evaluating and selecting documentary data (Punch, 2009, p. 160):

- The document's authenticity – whether the document is original and genuine.
- The document's credibility – whether the document is accurate and valid.
- The document's representativeness – whether the document is representative within the totality of documents in its class.
- The document's meaning – what the document intends to say.

When selecting a text for my thesis, it was the first two considerations that I was particularly attentive to. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was written by Sherman Alexie, who was born and raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation, just like the novel's main character, Junior (Grassian, 2005, p. 1). It is fair to say that the character of Junior is more-or-less based on Sherman Alexie's own life experiences. Both Alexie and Junior were born with severe health complications, they were both bullied by other children because of these health complications, and they both transferred to an all-white school in their early teens (Grassian, 2005, p. 1-2). Although *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a fictional work, it still showcases an authentic representation of the Spokane reservation life. The fact that the author himself has experienced many of the same challenges as the protagonist, provides the novel with an honest and genuine portrayal of the Spokane culture.

When selecting a text for my thesis, I also had to search for a novel that addresses themes and topics related to social-emotional learning. Preferably, the text would also have to be of multicultural dimension, so that students' ability to understand other's perspective would be developed. The novel's protagonist, Junior, stands as a role model for young readers when it comes to pursuing dreams and goals. The novel also opens for discussions about social issues like poverty and racial discrimination. The somber aspects of the young adult novel are important to discuss with students in order to improve their social awareness. Hence, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* validates itself as a great textual piece to use for developing students' social-emotional learning.

When it comes to representativeness, the novel is situated within the genre of young adult literature. Jonathan Stephens (2007, p. 40-41) defines young adult literature as “A story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent’s journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its ‘Grownup’ peers”. Another idea of young adult literature presented by Patty Campbell (2010, p. 70) argues that “The central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the internal and eternal question ‘Who am I and what am I going to do about it? ’”. With these two definitions in mind, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is true to its genre and an accurate representation of young adult literature.

The final consideration presented above, addresses what the document intends to say. However, when looking at *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* it becomes more appropriate to ask what the novel *shows*. The novel showcases both the positive and negative aspects of coming of age. Alexie does not present the reader with an instructive presentation of the Spokane Indian tribe culture, but rather an invitation to acknowledge and understand the culture. Alexie (cited in Cline, 2000) has said the following about his writing:

“I’ve come to the realization that many people have been reading literary fiction for the same reason they read mainstream fiction: for entertainment and a form of escape. I don’t want to write books that provide people with that. I want to write books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend”. (Cline, 2000, p. 197)

It should be in the spaces where students find themselves challenged, angered and possibly offended that critical conversations in the classroom can contribute to social-emotional learning. Oftentimes it is the controversial topics that engage classroom discussions and allow for several voices of opinion to intersect.

4.0 Literary Analysis of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is a first-person narrative. The novel was published in 2007 and is presented as a diary of Arnold Spirit, nicknamed Junior. Junior is a 14-year-old boy living on the Native American reservation, Spokane, in Wellpinit, Washington. In Junior’s diary we are given a perspective on the difficult realities of being a Native American in present day, as well as a lens on the daily struggles as a teenager. Through Junior’s cartoons and open-hearted stories in his diary, Alexie invites the reader to encounter the culture of the Spokane tribe from the perspective of someone who has lived there. The novel addresses important social issues like alcoholism, poverty, racism, bullying and oppression of the Native

American community. At the same time, the novel is also heart-warming, humorous and a raw depiction of being human.

I have chosen to focus on two important characters present in the novel. By studying literary characters and their take on the world, students are more likely to learn something about their own character. When literature is used as a venue for examining characters' motives, students are able to examine their own morals, values and philosophies (Irvin, 2012, p. 58). Furthermore in this literary analysis, I will focus on themes that address friendship, hope, prosperity and racial issues. These themes are closely related to social-emotional learning and are valuable to examine in order to achieve an understanding of our different roles in society. By being aware of several social factors surrounding us, we are able to meet people with different backgrounds than ourselves with respect and understanding.

4.1 Short Summary

The event that sets off the novel's plot is when Junior discovers that his geometry book has his mother's maiden name written in it, meaning the book previously belonged to her and is thus over thirty years old. This becomes a pivotal moment in Junior's life. After having a conversation with his white math teacher, who encourages Junior to leave the reservation in order to become something else than an alcoholic, Junior decides to attend Rearden High School. Rearden High School is located outside the reservation and is an all-white school. As a consequence of changing school, Junior is finding himself stuck somewhere between two communities, in which none of them he feels that he fully belongs. At the reservation, Junior is perceived as an arrogant traitor, who thinks he is better than his fellow tribe members; and at Rearden High School he is the only Native American and, therefore, an outsider. By attending another school, Junior also complicates his friendship with Rowdy, his only best friend since birth. Throughout the story, Junior must balance his life between being a Spokane tribe member and a Rearden High School student.

4.2 Characters

Arnold Spirit (Junior)

Junior was born with too much cerebral spinal fluid, or "water on the brain" (Alexie, 2007, p. 1) which Junior himself calls it. Due to his disease he has had several health complications, like poor eyesight, susceptibility to seizures, stuttering and lisping. Because of these complications, Junior has been a victim of bullying since an early age: "Everybody on the rez calls me a retard

about twice a day. They call me a retard when they are pantsing me or stuffing my head in the toilet or just smacking me upside the wall” (Alexie, 2007, p. 4). Although Junior is a victim of bullying, he is, nonetheless, no weak character. When he chooses to be the first Spokane Indian to leave the reservation for another school, Junior knows that his fellow tribal members will be displeased. “Jeez, it was a lot of pressure to put on a kid. I was carrying the burden of my race, you know? I was going to get a bad back from it” (Alexie, 2007, p. 43). The excerpt testifies that Junior is aware of the gravity his choice holds, but still goes through with it. Although Junior thinks little of himself and depicts himself as a “nobody”, he stills shows self-awareness and courage when deciding to change school in order to nurture his academic potential, so that he can hope for a prosperous life.

When describing himself, Junior uses the word “weird” several times. In the beginning of the novel, Junior seldomly describes himself in any positive matter – other than stating that he is good at drawing cartoons. However, towards the end of the novel, it seems that Junior has realized that his identity is more complex than just being a Native American:

I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms. And the tribe of cartoonists. And the tribe of chronic masturbators. And the tribe of teenage boys. And the tribe of small-town kids. And the tribe of Pacific Northwesterners. And the tribe of tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers. And the tribe of poverty. And the tribe of funeral-goers. And the tribe of beloved sons. And the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends. (Alexie, 2007, p. 217)

The excerpt shows that Junior realizes that his identity has several layers, and that he is a member of several other “tribes”, or communities. In other words, Junior is a complex character and is not defined only by his ethnical background. The complexity of Junior’s character is what makes him interesting and likable to others. The various aspects of his identity are also what makes Junior a relatable character. Although Junior must deal with many of the negative social issues linked to being a Native American, he also faces the same challenges as any other teenager, namely concerning friendship, love, bullying and high school life.

It may well be argued that the character is quite competent with social and emotional skills. Junior stands as a role model in terms of taking action in one’s own life, being perseverant, making difficult choices, resisting peer pressure and building healthy relationships. Junior is also an inspiration to anyone who wants to achieve goals and dreams, regardless of their background or obstacles.

Rowdy

Rowdy is an interesting character to examine because of his way of dealing with emotions. Just as his name suggests, Rowdy is quite an aggressive character in the novel. Junior describes him as “the toughest kid on the rez” (Alexie, 2007, p. 15). Junior also says: “He is long and lean and strong like a snake. His heart is strong and mean as a snake too” (Alexie, 2007, p. 15). It seems that Rowdy is most comfortable with being hostile and condescending. Even towards Junior, who is his best friend, Rowdy comes across as mean. “‘I thought you were on suspension, dickwad,’ he said, which was Rowdy’s way of saying ‘I’m happy you’re here’” (Alexie, 2007, p. 48). Rowdy is also extremely hot-tempered and often acts in a violent way when he is angry, or even sad. When Rowdy learns that Junior is changing school, he reacts by crying and then punching Junior in the face. Rowdy’s violence most likely stems from his alcoholic and abusive father, who often beats up his son and wife. It may well be argued that Rowdy has built up a wall against any emotion that might perceive him as weak. When his feelings are hurt, he reacts in the only way he knows how, namely with rage. However, there are glimpses where Rowdy shows a softer side of himself. This can be found in the final chapter of the novel, where Rowdy compares Junior to Native Americans who used to be nomadic:

“I’m not nomadic,” Rowdy said. “Hardly anybody on this rez is nomadic. Except for you. You’re the nomadic one.” (...) “I always knew you were going to leave. I always knew you were going to leave us behind and travel the world. I had this dream about you a few months ago. You were standing on the Great Wall of China. You looked happy. And I was happy for you”. (Alexie, 2007, p. 229)

The quote stands as a contrast to earlier in the novel, where Rowdy says to Junior “‘It’s not like anybody’s going to notice if you go away’” (Alexie, 2007, p. 15).

In contrast to Junior, it might be more challenging for students to admit any character identification with Rowdy, given his aggressive behavior. However, Rowdy’s motives and actions are equally as important to examine to get a better understanding of the reasons behind his actions. After analyzing the characters in a young adult novel that addressed dysfunctional families together with her students, high school teacher Andrea Irvin (2012, p. 60) found that even if her students could not directly relate to the characters, they were still more cautious to the circumstances of others. By using Rowdy as a literary model, students can connect their understanding to the real world and see that a person’s actions often build on their internal conflicts. Rowdy illustrates that sometimes the toughest kid around might also be the kid who is dealing with struggles unknown to those around.

When teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* there are simple steps that can be made in order to promote social-emotional learning. By asking the question “Why do you think Rowdy acts the way he acts when he learns that Junior is changing school?” instead of “How does Rowdy react to the news of Junior changing school?” in classroom discussions, students are challenged to think differently. The latter question does not require any identification with the character, but rather a more distanced and matter-of-fact answer like, “He reacts with anger.” The first question, on the other hand, forces the students to put themselves into Rowdy’s shoes and try to understand his take on the world. By raising questions like this, the teacher creates spaces for students to empathize with characters. When students have a better understanding of different and intricate factors that shape an individual’s life, they are more likely to practice social awareness in their personal life.

4.3 Relationships – Building and Maintaining them

Much of the theory on social-emotional learning dwells on communication and relationships with others. It is thus fruitful to examine how Junior deals with building and maintaining relationships in the novel. One influential relationship the reader encounters in the novel is between Junior and Rowdy. It is fair to say that their relationship is rather surprising and ironic, given that Junior is the most bullied teen on the reservation and Rowdy is the biggest bully on the reservation. The two also differ in the way that Junior is quite reserved and avoids any kind of trouble, whereas Rowdy is noisy and uncontrollable. Junior and Rowdy also contradict each other when it comes to dealing with emotions. Junior is good at expressing himself through his diary and his cartoons. Rowdy, on the other hand, has difficulties controlling his emotions, and often expresses himself through anger. Junior and Rowdy balance each other in the way that Junior is emotionally strong, but physically weak, whereas Rowdy is physically strong, but less in touch with his feelings. Despite their differences, the unlikely friendship works very well. Junior even says, “It’s like he’s a family member, an extra brother and son” (Alexie, 2007, p. 17). Rowdy has protected Junior from being beaten up since they were born. And although Rowdy tends to violent matters, his intentions are good. At the same time as Rowdy protects Junior, Junior also shows support towards Rowdy who must deal with his abusive, alcoholic father. Rowdy is welcomed into Junior’s house at any time. Thus, Junior is in many ways Rowdy’s safe haven.

When Junior decides to change school, their friendship is jeopardized. For several months Junior tries to maintain his friendship with Rowdy by sending him e-mails and drawing

cartoons for him. Rowdy ignores these attempts to reconnect. After the three deaths of Junior's grandmother, older sister and his father's best friend, Eugene, Rowdy eventually visits Junior. Over a one-on-one game of basketball their friendship is finally restored. It seems that Rowdy has realized that the two need each other's support, and that they can still be friends, even if they do not share the same dreams. Although Junior makes several attempts to restore the friendship throughout the story, he never pressures Rowdy. Instead, he respects that Rowdy is hurt and gives him time and distance to process feelings.

The relationship between Junior and Rowdy can be interesting to discuss with students, because of the cross-pressure Junior faces. On one hand, Junior wants to nurture his academic potential by attending Rearden High School. On the other hand, he knows that Rowdy and other tribe members will be displeased by his choice. Gordy, another character in the novel, points out this cross-pressure in the following quote: "Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community" (Alexie, 2007, p. 132). Conversations around where to draw the line between doing what is best for oneself and making sure the people around us are content can be an interesting topic to explore when teaching the novel. Students can also reflect on which factors influence their decision when making a choice, and whether these factors are in consideration to those around us. These types of reflections will help students develop a set of problem-solving skills. This way they can be responsible decision-makers that take several factors into consideration.

Another important social relation in the novel is between Junior and the Rearden High School community. Although Junior is perceived as an outsider at first, he is eventually able to build friendships at Reardon High School. The people Junior becomes closest to are Penelope, Gordy and Roger. When Junior first enrolls at Rearden High School, there is a notable distance between himself and the Rearden students. For example, Junior objectifies the students by focusing on their skin color: "Those kids weren't just white. They were *translucent*. I could see the blue veins running down through their skin like rivers" (Alexie, 2007, p. 56). In this excerpt, Junior creates distance between himself and the Rearden community by pointing out racial difference. Another example of Junior's attempts at distancing himself from the Rearden students, is that he hides the fact that his family is poor and that that he sometimes must walk the twenty-two-mile-long way to school because his father cannot pay for gas. Junior tries his best to shelter his secrets from his Rearden friends. However, as the story progresses, Junior cannot keep the negative realities of living on the reservation at bay anymore. To Junior's surprise, his Rearden friends still care for him even though he is poor, and Junior admits the following: "If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing" (Alexie,

2007, p. 129). The distance between Junior and his Rearden friends eventually vanishes as he forms relationships with them. Even though Junior finds it slightly difficult to accommodate to Rearden High School life at first, he becomes integrated as a part of the community in the end. When Junior arrives back to Rearden High School after the tragic death of his sister, he is met by his peers and teachers who show their support:

They were worried for me. They wanted to help me with my pain. I was important to them. I mattered. Wow. All of these white kids and teachers, who were so suspicious of me when I first arrived, had learned to care about me. Maybe some of them even loved me. And I'd been so suspicious of them. And now I care about a lot of them. And I loved a few of them. (Alexie, 2007, p. 212)

Junior's reflections show that his relationship with the Rearden community has changed. Junior has gone from being an outsider, to being integrated and accepted as a friend by the Rearden community.

4.4 Hopes and Dreams – Who has them?

A reoccurring topic in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is hope, and more specific, hope for a successful, future life with good health and prosperity. Even though Junior is surrounded by obstacles such as poverty, death and alcoholism on the reservation, he still dreams of becoming something else than a drunk when he grows up. However, when he realizes that his geometry book is over thirty years old, his hopes and dreams about a future are crushed.

My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the whole world. And let me tell you, that old, old, old, *decrepit* geometry book hit my heart with the force of a nuclear bomb. My hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud. (Alexie, 2007, p. 31)

It is hope and dreams that fuel Junior's decision to change school. When Junior is about to tell his parents that he is planning on enrolling at Rearden High School, he asks them, "Who has the most hope?" (Alexie, 2007, p. 45). The rhetorical question addresses some important issues regarding race and privilege. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Rearden students are associated with perfectionism: "Those kids were *magnificent*. They knew *everything*. And they were *beautiful*. They were beautiful and smart. They were beautiful and smart and epic. They were filled with hope" (Alexie, 2007, p. 50). Junior lists qualities like excellence, knowledge, intelligence and beauty and then connects these qualities to hope.

Junior's depiction of the Rearden community stands in high contrast to his depiction of the Spokane tribe:

But we reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get those chances. Or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are. It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor. You start believing that you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and *there's nothing you can do about it*. (Alexie, 2007, p. 13)

Junior associates his own tribe with unfulfilled dreams, poverty, lack of intelligence and unattractiveness. Junior even goes as far as suggesting that being a Native American is an unfortunate destiny that cannot be escaped. However, as the story progresses, Junior complicates his beliefs about race:

"I used to think that the world was broken down by tribes," I said. "By black and white. By Indian and white. But I know that isn't true. The world is only broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not". (Alexie, 2007, p. 176)

In this excerpt Junior implies that race does not designate personal qualities, and that it is not necessarily your ethical background that determines your identity. Junior is living proof of breaking "the ugly circle" he previously thought he was destined to live. Dreams and hopes can come true if one is persistent and motivated.

Other social issues present in the novel are concerned around alcohol and mortality. Junior showcases this to the extremes in the following quote. "I'm fourteen years old and I've been to forty-two funerals. That's really the biggest difference between Indians and white people" (Alexie, 2007, p. 199). Most of the deaths on the Spokane reservation are caused by alcohol. Alcohol is also to blame for the three deaths of those who are very close to Junior, namely his grandmother, his older sister and Eugene. What the three occasions of death have in common is that they are senseless, but still cause immense pain. At one point in the story, Junior is so consumed by grief that he does not know how to handle himself. "Things had gotten so intense, so painful, that my body just checked out" (Alexie, 2007, p. 206). Dealing with grief is something that all humans will have to deal with in the course of a lifespan. One of the five competencies within social-emotional learning – namely relationship management – deals with knowing when to seek or offer help. Discussing our options when finding ourselves in crises, as well as talking about different ways of coping, can help students develop strategies that can be used when going through great emotional distress.

Towards the end of the novel, it seems that Junior is well on his pathway to living a fulfilling life. However, he still cannot escape the devastating realities that will continue to take place at the reservation:

I was crying because I knew five or ten or fifteen more Spokanes would die during the next year, and that most of them would die because of booze. I cried because so many of my fellow tribal members were slowly killing themselves and I wanted them to live. I wanted them to get strong and get sober and get the hell off the rez. (Alexie, 2007, p. 216)

The helplessness evident in his comments leave the reader with an unsettling and poignant feeling. Even if Junior seems to ensure that his future will not be destroyed by alcohol abuse, the same cannot be said about all other Spokane tribe members. In spite of Junior's promising start at chasing a fortunate and healthy life, it is the constant misfortunes happening on the Spokane reservation that hinder the novel from having a happy ending. As readers, we are left dissatisfied and with room to reflect upon people's different fates.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian implies that there is a vast gap between white middle-class people and Native Americans and their beliefs about prosperity. Melissa Schieble (2012, p. 215) states that the "(...)characters and their circumstances highlight historical and current injustices that maintain white privileges related to institutions, such as education, housing, and employment". The connection between race and prosperity can be an interesting topic to discuss with students. Having students reflect on how institutional advantages take part in the construction of identity and future life will increase students' social awareness. When students understand how different aspects such as ethical background, education, etc., are part of shaping people's lives, they can be better equipped to meet people with respect and diligence.

5.0 Didactic Considerations

5.1 Intercultural Competence

The concept of empathy can oftentimes be confused with sympathy (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2012, p. 128). It is necessary to stress that these two concepts have different meaning. Cambridge Dictionary defines "empathy" as "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" ("Empathy", n.d.). The term "sympathy" is defined as "a feeling or expression of understanding and caring for someone else who is suffering or has problems that have caused unhappiness" ("Sympathy", n.d.). The difference between the two emotional conditions is that "sympathy" elicits a more

negative understanding than “empathy” does. The term “sympathy” involves a power relation, where the person showing sympathy may look down at someone else. When teaching with multicultural texts, the teacher and students must try to avoid extensive sympathizing with characters. If we are to constantly feel pity for a people of another culture, the result will be that the culture is undermined because we center our own culture as superior to the other. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the Spokane tribe culture is not presented only in a negative way. A different side of the Spokane culture is displayed when a white billionaire receives his public comeuppance in Junior’s grandmother’s funeral.

And then my mother started laughing. And that set us all off. Two thousands Indians laughed at the same time. We kept laughing. It was the most glorious noise I’d ever heard. And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean, but, dang, we knew how to laugh. When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing. And so, laughing and crying, we said good-bye to my grandmother. And when we said good-bye to one grandmother, we said good-bye to all of them. Each funeral was a funeral for all of us. We lived and died together. (Alexie, 2007, p. 166)

The excerpt shows that the Native American culture is a close community that support each other and share their joys and sorrows. Cultures can be quite complex, and it is thus important that students acknowledge all aspects of it, and not just focus on the differences in relation to own culture. When doing critical conversations, it is vital that different cultures are not depicted as insects being examined through a microscope. Instead students should acknowledge and appreciate differences between groups of people. Thus, it is important for both teacher and students to be open-minded when doing critical conversations.

5.2 The Genre of Diary

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is, as previously mentioned, composed as a diary. What characterizes a diary, or a journal, is that it contains a person’s daily experiences and reflections. Hence, the diary is perhaps the most personal genre within the spectrum of all literary genres. Writing a diary, or a journal, is a form of self-expression, a way of keeping record of events, but also a form of therapy (Boud, 2001, p. 9). The act of doing diary-writing itself, can be a way of promoting social-emotional learning. One of the five competencies within social-emotional learning – namely self-management – deals with the skill of monitoring oneself. In the young adult novel, Junior displays his inner thoughts and emotions in his diary – both in writing and through cartoons. The diary becomes a medium where thoughts are

converted into physical, visible words or drawings. Thus, by keeping a diary, one is, in a sense, systemizing and organizing one's own thoughts and experiences. Once put on paper, it can be easier to contemplate experiences and reflections. The diary can also function as a place to vent, thus, providing an outlet of emotions that are repressed inside oneself.

Diary-writing is a way of keeping record of one's own emotions. By looking back at given times in the diary, one can reflect on own progression and development. This way, students can evaluate personal goal achievements. Another activity that promotes social-emotional learning when working with the genre of diary, is having students write entries from another person's perspective. Students can, for example, imagine that they are Junior, and then write a diary entry from his point of view. This activity enables students to practice empathy.

6.0 Conclusion

Working with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* when teaching literature can strengthen students' social and emotional skills because the novel opens for a wide variety of emotions to be felt. The novel can engage self-discovery, as many of the topics in the novel challenge reflection and formation of own opinion.

Through character identification with Junior, a perseverant and complex character, the reader is introduced to ways of communicating with others, making difficult – yet smart – choices for oneself, and overcoming obstacles. The novel also teaches us that relationships and friendships can be formed regardless of differences and that having a solid support system can make a good resource when tackling challenges in life.

Much of literature allows for character identification to occur. However, the challenge teachers face when selecting good texts for teaching social-emotional learning is to find books that both allow for character identification to occur and at the same time include topics that can create discussions and reflections in a way that promotes social-emotional learning. Another consideration when selecting texts, is to avoid books that come across as moralizing. Books with a preachy tone may sometimes be viewed as a straitjacket and does not allow for students to reflect and process the content in their own manner. Instead, good books are open and inviting and leaves the reader to form their own thoughts. Examples of other novels that can be used when teaching social-emotional learning through literature is *Wonder* (2012) by R. J. Palacio and *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angela Thomas. *Wonder* is about ten-year-old boy Auggie, who was born with extreme facial deformity and is starting fifth grade in a private middle school. Up until now he has been home-schooled by his mother. The reader follows him on his

journey to forming friendships and overcoming fears and challenges he is faced with when adapting to his new life situation. *The Hate U Give* is about sixteen-year-old Starr, who is balancing her life between two different worlds: the poor black neighborhood where she lives and the upscale prep school she attends. One night she witnesses her childhood friend, Khalil, being shot at the hands of a police officer. The incident causes riots in her community, and the reader follows Starr's experiences in the midst of all turmoil.

The development of social-emotional learning is a constant process and is not a skill that one will ever graduate from, even as adults. However, by giving attention to social-emotional learning in the classroom, a constant development of how to behave in a kind and respectful manner will take place. As this thesis has shown, there are sometimes only simple steps that make the difference between "plain" literature teaching – where one is simply teaching the facts of the story, and a social-emotional learning-approach – where students must practice being emphatic and understanding.

In reference to the renewal of the National Curriculum that takes effect in 2020, Minister of Education and Integration, Jan Tore Sanner, has stated that the school's purpose is to teach students basic skills and competence in the different subjects (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). Moreover, Sanner states that students must also learn how to take care of themselves and each other, understand others and build healthy relationships, and become active and participating members of society (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). Hence, it is reason to believe that social-emotional learning will gain more focus in the classroom for the following years to come.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian ends with Junior and Rowdy playing basketball throughout the night, and the final sentence reads as follows: "We didn't keep score" (Alexie, 2007, p. 230). Perhaps schools and educators should learn something from this. As this thesis has commented, students' motivation for learning will decrease if schools only focus on test scores and academic performance. Naturally, teachers need to monitor their students' academic achievement to a certain degree. However, they must also focus on the importance of fostering independent, healthy, kind and caring human beings. As Irvin (2012, p. 60) explains it, both minds and hearts must be nurtured. As educators we must strive to balance both academic learning as well as social-emotional learning. Thus, when a student asks if a learning activity will have relevance to his or her oral grade, we will be ready to reciprocate with the following answer: "This will have relevance for your future life".

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