



Høgskulen
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MASTER'S THESIS

Representations of Anxiety Disorders in Young Adult Literature – Mental health, empathy development, and young readers in the EFL classroom

Representasjoner av angstlidelser i ungdomslitteratur – Psykisk helse, empatiutvikling og unge lesere i engelskklasserommet

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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), § 12-1.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how young adult (YA) literature is beneficial when practising empathy development and when teaching about mental health, as well as the importance of this in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. In a world where mental health is increasingly more discussed and treated, it is crucial that teachers encourage open conversations on the topic. I will establish the benefits of using fictional narratives from the perspective of someone struggling with a mental disorder when practicing empathy development will be established. In my thesis, I define empathy as the ability to imagine oneself from another's perspective and experience their feelings by learning about their situation. My research is founded on relevant theories about empathy and literature's effect on empathy development.

To investigate this, I have analysed three YA novels where the main characters struggle with three distinct anxiety disorders. These novels are *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), *Turtles All the Way Down* (Green, 2017), and *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013). In the analysis chapter, I will be analysing the anxiety representations in the novels using close textual analysis. In the subsequent discussion chapter, I will discuss the possible effects they can have on the reader as well as how these novels have the potential to contribute to empathy development in the classroom. This potential is dependent on the teacher's knowledge about mental health and if they can teach these narratives correctly.

Based on the relevant theory, my analyses of the three novels, and my discussion, this thesis concludes that empathy is crucial for our community's development. Therefore, empathy development must be a focus from a young age. As the curriculum for the EFL subject states that "English shall help the pupils to develop an intercultural understanding of different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), empathy development certainly has a place in the EFL classroom. I argue that empathy development can benefit from literature with a mental health narrative. In addition to empathy development, mental health narratives can also help young readers who identify with the fictional characters to understand and explore their mental health.

SAMMENDRAG

Denne oppgaven utforsker hvordan ungdomslitteratur er gunstig under empatiutvikling og når en underviser om psykisk helse, samt viktigheten av dette i engelskfaget. I en verden hvor psykisk helse i større grad blir diskutert og behandlet, er det avgjørende at lærere oppmuntrer til åpne samtaler om temaet. Fordelene ved å bruke fiktive fortelling fra perspektivet til en som sliter med en psykisk lidelse når man jobber med utvikling av empati vil bli etablert i oppgaven min. I denne oppgaven definerer jeg empati som evnen til å forestille seg selv fra en annen sitt perspektiv og oppleve deres følelser gjennom å lære om situasjonen deres. Min forskning er basert på relevant teori om empati og om hvordan litteratur kan påvirke empatiutvikling.

For å undersøke dette har jeg analysert tre ungdomsromaner hvor hovedkarakterene sliter med tre distinkte angstlidelser. Disse romanene er *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), *Turtles All the Way Down* (Green, 2017), og *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013). I analysekapitlet analyserer jeg hvordan angst er representert i romanene ved bruk av nærlesing som tekstanalyse. I det påfølgende diskusjonskapitlet diskuterer jeg de mulige påvirkningene disse angstrepresentasjonene kan ha på leseren, i tillegg til hvordan disse romanene potensielt kan bidra til empatiutvikling i engelskfaget. Dette potensialet er avhengig av lærerens kunnskaper om mental helse og deres evner til å undervise om disse perspektivene på en gunstig måte.

Basert på relevant teori, mine analyser av de tre romanene og diskusjonen min, konkluderer denne oppgaven at empati er avgjørende for samfunnets utvikling. Derfor må empatiutvikling være i fokus fra ung alder. Etersom læreplanen (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) sier at engelskfaget skal hjelpe elevene til å utvikle forståelse for andre måter å leve og tenke på, har empatiutvikling absolutt en plass i engelskfaget. Jeg argumenterer at empatiutvikling kan ha nytte av litteratur med et psykisk helse-perspektiv. I tillegg til empatiutvikling kan psykisk helse-perspektiver også hjelpe unge lesere som identifiserer med de fiktive karakterene til å forstå og utforske sin egen psykiske helse.

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Writing a master's thesis in English has been an aspiration of mine for a long time. Getting to include my passion for literature and shed light on mental health is undoubtedly a benefit. I have learned a lot about literature, empathy, and mental health while writing this thesis, and hopefully, by reading it, so will you. What I have learned is something I will bring with me to the EFL classroom. The journey of writing this thesis has been educational, rewarding, and certainly unpredictable. Several people deserve my gratitude – and so much more – for helping me get to the finish line.

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Table of contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
SAMMENDRAG	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Table of contents	v
1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 <i>The study's motivation</i>	2
1.2 <i>Method of analysis and research questions</i>	5
1.3 <i>Relevance</i>	7
1.4 <i>Outline of thesis</i>	8
2.0 Theoretical chapter.....	9
2.1 <i>Literature in the classroom</i>	9
2.1.1 <i>An introduction to YA literature</i>	12
2.1.2 <i>An introduction to fanfiction</i>	13
2.2 <i>Empathy and literature</i>	14
2.2.1 <i>Reader-response theory</i>	16
2.3 <i>Representations of mental health challenges in YA literature</i>	17
2.3.1 <i>Previous analysis of <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> (Chbosky, 1999)</i>	17
2.3.2 <i>Previous analyses of <i>Turtles All the Way Down</i> (Green, 2017)</i>	18
2.3.3 <i>Previous analysis of <i>Fangirl</i> (Rowell, 2013):</i>	19
2.4 <i>Mental health, empathy development, and literature in LK20</i>	20
2.4.1 <i>Using mental health to develop empathy</i>	23
3.0 Analysis and Discussion	25
3.1 <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky</i>	25
3.2 <i>Turtles All the Way Down by John Green</i>	31
3.3 <i>Fangirl by Rainbow Rowell</i>	36
3.4 <i>Comparative discussion of anxiety representations in the novels</i>	43
4.0 Didactic benefits.....	47
4.1 <i>Potential empathetic benefits from discussing mental health in the EFL classroom</i>	47
4.2 <i>Benefits from using YA literature when teaching about anxiety disorders</i>	50
5.0 Conclusion	53
6.0 List of references.....	58

1.0 Introduction

This thesis examines the topic of mental health education through literature with literary analyses of young adult (YA) novels' representations of anxiety disorders through the narrative. My research focuses on the importance of including this topic in the classroom and informing teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) about the crucial benefit of using literary narratives to teach pupils about different mental health challenges, specifically anxiety disorders. These literary narratives include the perspectives and understandings of people struggling with mental disorders such as anxiety. I personally perceive a lack of mental health education, particularly through literary narratives in authentic texts, and this is an issue I wish to explore with this thesis. The reason for this absence may be that textbook texts lack certain perspectives, i.e., the perspectives of someone struggling with mental disorders. Learning to view a situation from other perspectives is a big part of one's empathy development, and I will, through this thesis, argue that fictional novels are beneficial tools when practicing this competence.

While scholars define empathy in various ways, I here define it as the ability to imagine oneself from others' perspectives and experience their feelings by learning about their situations. The 18th-century philosopher Adam Smith, in an influential early description of what he called "sympathy, was among the first to attempt a description of empathy as an emotional experience. Believing that all humans from birth possess empathy, he considered everyone capable of experiencing it.

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Smith, 1759)

Keen argues that the fictional aspect of novels makes them valuable as the readers regularly try to imagine themselves in the story's setting, often in the main character's place (Keen, 2007). Further, in the introductory chapter, I will describe the predominant focuses of my thesis: its relevance to the EFL subject, the way I will research the topic, and the research questions I aim to answer.

Several researchers and philosophers have argued that reading fictional literature can contribute to the reader's empathy development by letting the reader practice their ability to

place themselves into the fictional character's situation and thus experience different perspectives (Lindhé, 2016). In fact, many teachers "have employed narrative fiction to steer children toward greater empathy" (Keen, 2007). This practice has raised the question of whether empathy truly can be taught or learned. According to philosopher Adam Smith, empathy skill is something all humans naturally possess. Combining these two ideas, it may be argued that even though empathy has an unsettled definition, it can be further developed and practised so that the level of empathy skill improves. As I argue in this thesis, using fictional narratives (products of the imagination (Schaeffer, 2013)) such as novels proves ideal for imagining a perspective other than your own.

Reading literature has many advantages, especially in the language classroom. The activity provides the possibility of improving the pupils' reading, writing, and vocabulary skills (Brevik & Lyngstad, 2020). Reading authentic texts additionally provides the readers with a genuine perspective on other cultures and perspectives and understandings of the world. During this thesis, I use the term *authentic text* to describe the distinction between texts that are written with the aim to assist in learning a foreign language and texts that are not written for educational purposes; in this case, English novels written for readers with English as their first language (Ciornei & Dina, 2015).

1.1 The study's motivation

This study is motivated by the idea that fictional literature is uniquely suited for practicing empathy development. My focus is on young learners aged 12-16, and I suggest that using fictional novels in the YA genre can be beneficial for these learners' empathy development. I argue that literary narratives about people struggling with anxiety disorders can affect the readers to expand their perspectives. Readers with an anxiety disorder may also identify with the characters and feel seen, knowing that they are not alone. In addition, readers who do not struggle with anxiety may gain more empathy toward people who struggle with one. Learning about anxiety disorders and other mental health issues from authentic perspectives in the classroom may open the learning atmosphere to be more including, and pupils may feel free to discuss mental health in an inclusive manner.

Cognitive neuroscientist Bobby Azarian (PhD) writes in an article for BBC that people suffering from anxiety disorders view the world in particular ways. Every individual has a unique perspective on the world based on their own experiences, but Azarian states that

“anxiety alters what we are conscious of, and in turn, the way we experience reality” (2016): the perspectives of people suffering from anxiety will be affected by their disorder, in the same way that the perspectives of someone suffering from depression will be affected. By reading a story through the eyes of someone struggling with an anxious worldview, the reader can improve their empathy level toward people struggling with anxiety disorders. Through this research, I ultimately hope to bring focus to how we can create awareness about anxiety disorders in the classroom through reading and discussing literature. Conversations about mental health are – in my experience – limited in the classroom and are most often restricted to the national day for mental health. This may give pupils the impression that mental health is something rare that is only discussed sporadically when in reality, it is a universal topic.

Another aim of this thesis is for teachers to become more aware of the benefits that can be acquired from novels, e.g., expanding the reader’s perception of the world and increasing their empathy skills. Following this, I wish to inform the readers of this thesis about the importance of including novels in the EFL classroom. Teenagers become increasingly more absorbed in the media culture, so the media culture in turn answers to this by being customised for the young and impressionable. Literature is no exception, as authors seem eager to provide teenagers with narratives about teenage experiences (Hayn et al., 2016). The pupils are already being affected by the narratives in different media, so the use of these authentic media – novels in particular – is beneficial in foreign language education for several reasons. Novels are commonly published at a length of 50,000-70,000 words, making it possible for the reader to properly dive into the narrative and the perspectives represented in the story while creating personal connections to the characters and their experiences (Siaj & Farrah, 2018).

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1.2 Method of analysis and research questions

To investigate the representations of anxiety disorders in YA literature, I have chosen to perform qualitative textual analyses of novels that can be used in the classroom, and that the pupils might very well choose to read in their spare time. By this I aim to bring forth the underlying intentions of the authors regarding how characters who suffer from anxiety disorders are represented. In addition to this, I will analyse how young readers might perceive these representations and how one can address this in the EFL classroom. To accomplish this, I will investigate the words and expressions used by the author to describe the anxiety disorder or an anxiety episode and how the author expresses the character's attitudes toward their own mental health. Analysing the latter may reveal a potential for the reader to reflect on their own mental health and how they perceive it.

To accentuate the fact that people with anxiety disorders have an experience of life and the world different from people who don't suffer from an anxiety disorder, I have chosen to focus on how they are represented through teenage main characters who are found in YA novels. YA literature is mostly aimed at 12- to 18-year-olds, and the choice of novels is conscious from my side to make it plausible for the readers to imagine themselves in the characters' position or to be able to view the character as a role model.

The data selection consists of three novels from the young adult (YA) genre: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999), *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green (2017), and *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013). Much like the assessment of method for this thesis, the novels were also chosen based on their efficacy in the classroom. Considering that the primary concern in this thesis is the representations of anxiety disorders through fictional stories, I decided on three texts where the main characters suffer from three different anxiety

disorders in three distinct manners. In addition to this requirement, I preferred novels where the characters' anxiety disorders employed an antagonistic function in the plot. The anxiety disorder should prove to hinder the characters' lives. This feeling of not being in control of their actions will be a more significant benefit in helping the reader empathize with the characters. When anxiety disorders are portrayed as the villain, the readers will see how distressing such a disorder can be and become more understanding of other people they meet who suffer from it.

During the analysis, I will focus on how the authors have chosen to represent the anxiety disorders and whether they might consciously attempt to write it in a way that the readers can relate to or whether it has an "alienation effect" (Bertolt Brecht) (Bennett & Royle, 2015), where the scenario is so shocking that the reader may question the realism of the experience, rather than identifying with the character. The main characters in the novels struggle with a variety of anxiety disorders, and the way the authors write about the struggles from the teenagers' viewpoint will be a focus in my analyses.

Through this research, I aim to answer the following research questions:

- How do Chbosky, Green, and Rowell represent anxiety in their teenage characters Charlie, Aza, and Cath?
- How can these representations affect young readers?
- How can EFL teachers use literature to raise awareness about mental health challenges and increase empathetic engagement with the mental health challenges of others?

I aim to answer these research questions through close readings of the novels, where I extract and analyse anxiety-related situations, feelings, or thoughts expressed by characters in the novels. While analysing I will use situations in the novels where an anxiety disorder is prominent and discuss how these can affect both readers that can and readers that cannot relate. To determine if a situation, feeling, or thought in the novels is affected by an anxiety disorder, I look to the characters' behaviour and attitude toward the situation they are in. According to Ingunn B. Skre (2020), anxiety is defined as nervousness, tension, and fear in assumption that something dangerous will happen. During my analyses I am specifically examining if the characters are expressing nervous or frightful feelings when it concerns non-threatening situations.

I argue that these expressions have the potential to invite the reader to immerse themselves in the story and share the character's reactions. I examine these representations of anxiety in light of previous research on the subject and consider the importance of this topic in the classroom based on the curriculum for English as a foreign language after the seventh grade. My analyses of anxiety representations in novels and the curriculum's description of mental health's, empathy's, and literature's roles in the EFL classroom will show how EFL teachers can discuss the topics in the classroom through using YA literature.

1.3 Relevance

The EFL subject is, according to the curriculum LK20, meant to “develop the pupils’ understanding that their views of the world are culture-dependent” (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The teacher’s role is to create an inclusive and diverse learning environment, where the class’s variety of perspectives on the world is embraced. One way to do this is to introduce literary characters who represent a variety of viewpoints. Studying the use of narratives to increase pupils’ empathy skills and discover new perspectives on how society works may help EFL teachers to integrate such narratives into their lessons.

This thesis examines YA literature and determines its potential for discussing empathy and perspectives on mental health to young learners. Authentic literature is also a good tool when learning about other cultures and countries. Where the textbooks use non-authentic texts or list key facts about different cultures, they do not provide the learners – or the teachers – with authentic perspectives from people within that culture. This is also the case when learning about other perspectives, like the ones of people suffering from anxiety disorders. Therefore, teachers and pupils will benefit from learning about anxiety disorders from the viewpoint of people and fictional characters struggling with them. The narratives in the novels I have chosen to analyse are authentic by being written in English for an audience with English as their first language. The point of the novels is not primarily to teach a language but to convey a message through the perspective of a fictional character. Through the narrative, we become familiar with certain perspectives through the characters and their anxiety disorders, while at the same time learning how someone with their perspective can react to a challenging or unpredictable situation. In analysing these novels, I focus on how the characters’ anxiety disorders are represented through their thoughts and actions. Subsequently, I discuss how these representations can be perceived by young readers.

As I discuss in the theory section, scholars have argued that reading fiction fosters empathy, though this is not a view held universally. I argue that YA literature can assist in young learners' empathy development through the novels I have chosen to analyse. The curriculum for English as a foreign language state that pupils after grade seven should "read and listen to English-language [...] literature for children and young people and write and talk about the content" (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). As teachers of this subject, it is important to choose novels and texts that can appeal to the pupils through their relevance in their lives. The readers of YA literature are impressionable teenagers. Reading authentic texts that include a narrative with a perspective different from their own can prove to be both disconcerting, because of the inability to relate to that perspective, and educational, by learning new perspectives and experiencing a different culture through an authentic perspective. EFL teachers have the opportunity to use this situation to teach their pupils how to read authentic texts with a focus on the use of different perspectives to the best interest of the reader. There lies great potential in the topic of authentic texts, and the different viewpoints might prove to be the most important one. The viewpoint of which we see the story unfold is crucial for the reader's interpretation of the world within the novels, a point I will demonstrate in the analysis chapter.

1.4 Outline of thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The introductory chapter has presented the aims of the thesis, the research questions and how I will answer them, and the reason why this topic is relevant in the EFL classroom.

Chapter two presents theoretical background for my discussion. This background includes theory on how literature affects one's empathy development, reader-response theory, scholarship on literature use in the EFL classroom followed by an introduction to two literature genres relevant for my discussion, as well as previous research on anxiety representations in YA literature. To conclude the theoretical chapter, I present how mental health, empathy development, and literature is considered in LK20.

In the third chapter, I begin by individually analysing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky 1999), *Turtles All the Way Down* (Green, 2017), and *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013). During these close textual analyses, I will discuss the most prominent anxiety representations regarding how the reader might understand them and be affected by the narrative. Following

these analyses, I will discuss the different anxiety representations in the three novels comparatively to see the differences more clearly in anxiety disorders in literature.

In chapter four, I discuss my findings in light of my research questions and the theory from chapter two with the purpose to discuss the benefits of discussing mental health in the EFL classroom and using YA novels to do so.

In the fifth and final chapter, I conclude my findings by summarizing the main points of my discussion, answering my research questions concisely, and discussing the limitations of my study before providing suggestions for further research on the topic.

2.0 Theoretical chapter

There is prior work on the use of literature in the EFL classroom, representations of mental health in novels, and empathy development in the language classroom. However, less research exists on these topics combined, i.e., the literary representations of mental health challenges in the EFL classroom. To create a theoretical foundation for my discussion, I will be discussing the topics of empathy development through reading fiction, literature in the EFL classroom, mental health's role in literature, and how all these topics relate to LK20. My analyses are based specifically on how the anxiety disorders are represented through the characters' thoughts and actions, and my discussion will argue that these thoughts and actions can affect the reader's perspective on anxiety disorder. Therefore, my thesis will contribute both to the field of EFL didactics and YA literature research by analysing and discussing three YA novels and how they are beneficial in teaching about different perspectives and mental health in the EFL classroom.

2.1 Literature in the classroom

Brevik and Lyngstad (2020) have conducted three studies that aim to provide insight to the way literature is taught in Norwegian EFL classrooms today. The first study examines teachers' views on teaching literature, where the researchers discovered that some teachers found it essential to let the pupils choose some of the literature themselves. Other teachers decided to use the textbooks and the texts included there. One teacher chose literature for the

pupils through a student-oriented approach by asking herself what *she* would like to read if she were the age of her pupils. This study additionally proved that 68% of the teachers who were asked used textbooks as their primary source of literature for the English classroom, though only 49% agreed that this is the best source (2020, p. 169). These results demonstrate that there is a lack of knowledge about the use of literature in the classroom, and that there is room for new research that proves how essential authentic texts can be for teaching new perspectives.

The second study performed by Brevik and Lyngstad considered pupils' perspectives on reading literature. The pupils involved revealed that they chose what they wanted to read based on what was made available to them. This informs us that the teachers must be aware of the literary selection the pupils have access to, and the diversity within that selection regarding relevant topics and different perspectives on cultures. During this study, some pupils also reported that after reading an excerpt of a novel in class, they went on to read the whole book on their own initiative. The study concluded that pupils' perspectives on the effect of reading are positive. This supports my claim that EFL teachers need knowledge of literature that has the potential to appeal to young readers and provide them with new perspectives.

Their final study for this research article reflected on pupils' *choices* when reading literature or other texts in school. The study involved a reading program that was initiated in an upper secondary school, where the pupils would choose a book to read for 20 minutes each day in class. The only guidelines were that the pupils could not choose to read homework, but could otherwise choose any book they wanted, in Norwegian or in English. This study lasted six months and consisted of a class of 21 pupils. The quantitative aspect of the study was that the researchers noted what the pupils read and in which language. During the first two weeks of reading self-chosen books every day, they would also fill out digital questionnaires about what they had read each day. After those initial two weeks, only 13 of the pupils had completed the questionnaires. Out of those 13, eight pupils reported that they read English texts when they had the opportunity of choosing, and "some continued reading at home" (Brevik & Lyngstad, 2020, p. 170). This proves that given the freedom of choice – and a variety of books available for their choosing, the pupils can experience increased motivation to read and the feeling of immersing themselves in the story to the point of not wanting to stop reading.

For pupils who learn English as a foreign language, reading literature can secure many advantages in learning the language. They decode words and sentences to comprehend what is written, improving their fluency, constructing new knowledge, acting as the receiving end in communication, and thinking critically (Munden, 2021). These benefits occur in reading both authentic literature and in textbook texts, and while using reading as an activity in a language class, the teacher can focus the lesson on one or more of these educational experiences. Juliet Munden's chapter *Reading* in her book about the English subject in 5th to 7th grade discusses this and how to motivate young readers to read extensively more often (2021). She recognizes that quite a few pupils might find it more interesting to play video games or watch TV, though her opinion is that people can only learn to love reading from someone who already does. This responsibility of expressing the same motivation one wants the pupils to inhabit is something all teachers carry. When it involves an action that some pupils already may have a negative association to, it can be especially challenging. Some pupils might have difficulty reading longer texts, or they may be unable to stay concentrated long enough to decode a sentence. To help pupils like this increase their motivation to read, it can be beneficial to have a discussion with the pupil about their interests and together find out what could motivate them to read. Munden mentions Jeff Kinney's – an author of children's literature – opinion that children should read “whatever captures their attention, in whatever format” (2021, p. 366). So long as the pupils are motivated to read it, they should be allowed to read it. This agrees with Brevik & Lyngstad's conclusion that the pupils should be able to choose some of the literature they will read in class, and the teacher can focus on teaching them how to read the texts by using critical thinking and appreciating the new perspectives the texts bring. Learning these competencies may greatly benefit the pupils whenever they are reading texts throughout their life, assisting them in viewing the different perspectives that are represented in what they read.

According to Brevik and Lyngstad (2020), three approaches to literature are central to how one can interpret literature: the experiential approach, the analytical approach, and the discussion-based approach. The experiential approach is based on how the reader experiences the text they read and how the text connects with the readers' previous experiences, something that is central in how I have chosen to discuss the novels in my analyses. It is the experiential approach that Rosenblatt (1995) is explaining in her theories about how the reader provides their unique meaning to the text based on their own perspective. I have chosen to approach the relatable aspects of the novels for readers that share the same feelings

as the main characters, as well as the aspects that can be used to give the reader a new perspective on anxiety disorders.

Where the experiential approach is more reader-oriented, as it is based on how the text affects the reader and that the reader's previous experiences are vital to how the text is interpreted, the analytical approach is more text-oriented. Text-oriented in this sense means that the interpretation of the text is dependent on the author's literary choices, so the interpretation will be from a more neutral perspective than if it were interpreted through the experiential approach. With the analytical approach, the reader will be focusing on the words written and how they convey the story the author wants to present (Brevik & Lyngstad, 2020).

The discussion-based approach to literature is both reader- and text-oriented as the readers collectively discuss how they interpret the text, both by the author's word choices *and* the readers' background experiences. Using this approach in the classroom, the pupils will all get to share their interpretations of text with each other.

The analytical approach is what is most frequently used when literature is included in the EFL classroom. This is the case even though the pupils benefit more from the experiential approach (Brevik & Lyngstad, 2020). By using the experiential approach, the pupils can examine what the text provokes in them and how their previous experiences force them to interpret the text in their own way. My analyses in this thesis aim to find out how the text can speak to the reader about anxiety disorders, helping the reader to gain a new perspective on the topic, increase their empathy toward people with anxiety, and perhaps show readers that relate to the anxious feelings that they are not alone.

I previously mentioned Brevik and Lyngstad's study (2020) about the availability of literature in the classroom. The literature selection that the pupils must choose from, or simply what text the teacher wants to use in class to teach empathy, needs to be a conscious choice to make it relevant for the pupils to read. The selection of literature in the classroom is equally important as the approach one chooses to discuss the literature. Thus, when the selection of literature used in the classroom is teacher-dependent, the teacher must be up-to-speed on literature that can be helpful for pupils when teaching about relevant affairs of teenagers, such as mental health.

2.1.1 An introduction to YA literature

The main definition of YA literature that separates it from other literature is the age of the target readers, which is normally 12-18 years old. Authors choose a genre that best conveys the message they aim to communicate. YA novels are written with teenagers in mind, and the

author has chosen this target group because they believe the novels' themes are most relevant for that (Dagostino et al., 2021). YA literature is a genre *for* teenagers *about* teenagers (Hayn et al., 2016). The themes of YA novels are connected to identity development and adolescence. The most frequent occurring reason behind a novel with themes like these is to make the reader view themselves and the world with a newfound perspective, hopefully in a more reflective manner (Dagostino et al., 2021).

In YA novels, the teenage characters experience the same feelings and transformational events as the teenage reader. This can help readers through a challenging phase in their own lives. When the reader can regard themselves and their experiences mirrored in a fictional character that goes through the same traumatic events, it can assist the reader by showing that they are not alone and that there are better times waiting (Dagostino et al., 2021). YA novels are frequently referred to as *coming-of-age* novels, describing their primary theme where the main character should have a form of inner struggle from growing up and perceiving the world differently (Dagostino et al., 2021). As many teenage readers may relate to fictional characters experiencing this, YA literature may act as an emotional and/or mental crutch during challenging times.

2.1.2 An introduction to fanfiction

Fanfiction is described by Rebecca Black as “fiction written by fans about pre-existing plots, characters, and/or settings from their favorite media” (p. 10). Fans of different fictional universes have the opportunity to continue the story by writing or reading fanfiction based on the original author's published work. Fans who write fanfiction do it because they are in a community with other fans of the same media – e.g., a novel – and more content from the universe in the novel is in high demand in the fan community (fandom). Professor and self-proclaimed fan Henry Jenkins claims that “[t]o enter fandom is to “escape” from the “mundane” into the marvelous” (2006, p. 42). By this he means that fans use fanfiction and the fandom to occupy their thoughts and forget – for a while – everyday struggles. The fanfictions are viewed as a comfort zone for both readers and writers, where they get to continue to follow their favourite fictional characters in a safe space with other people who wish to do the same.

Fanfiction writers also get to fix or alter the original story to fit their vision for the characters. This is explored in *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013) when the main character Cath is a fanfiction writer basing her stories on the fictitious Simon Snow series. Pytash and Ferdig (2016) writes in an article about how technology plays a part in shaping Cath. They suggest

that Cath uses the online fandom and digital fanfiction writing to escape the external and internal conflicts she experiences throughout the story.

2.2 *Empathy and literature*

Feeling empathy toward someone else is not just about knowing how the other person feels, but about understanding their feeling and to some degree feeling with them. The empathy we experience through stories about others' experiences is called *narrative empathy*, which Keen describes more specifically as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking *induced by* [my emphasis] reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition” (Keen, 2007). Empathy can be experienced without any of these factors, e.g., by witnessing another person's external expression of feelings, but narrative empathy is motivated by stories about another person's experiences from the narrator's perspective.

Empathy is a relatively new term, previously referred to as *sympathy* (Smith, 1759), while we today use those two terms to describe two separate experiences (Keen, 2007). Suzanne Keen differentiates empathy and sympathy by illustrating how a person experiencing these two circumstances would interpret them: a person experiencing empathy would feel what the other person feels, while a person feeling sympathetic would feel “a supportive emotion” (Keen, 2007, p. 5) about the other person's feelings.

Empathy as a term came into the English language around the turn of the century from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It was then used to describe how art (including literature) could make the beholder feel certain emotions from merely studying it. Since then, twentieth century scientists and philosophers have taken an interest in the term, slowly developing the concept. By building on the original meaning of the word, it is today considered by many to be a “psychological process” (Lindhé, 2016, p. 22) in which a person reacts to another person's situation as if they were in the same situation themselves, i.e., imitating the emotional response to a situation without actually being in that situation. As I mentioned in the preliminary part of the introduction chapter, it is widely thought that fiction can positively impact the reader's empathy development. Martha Nussbaum adds to this by stating that by developing one's ability to experience situations from another's perspective, one's moral development also increases (Lindhé, 2016).

The idea that literature influences empathy dates back to Greek philosophers. Aristotle viewed literature's ability to provoke the reader's emotions to inevitably cause an impact on

the reader's moral character as well (Lindhé, 2016). This idea is consistent with Smith who, as we saw above, also found a correlation between empathy and morality (Smith, 1759). Nussbaum discusses this further and considers that narrative empathy is a necessary element to enforce in the education of our citizens. She claims that it is the narrative empathy aspect of literature that makes literature so beneficial for developing the reader's morality. Therefore, Nussbaum believes fictional literature should be a central feature in education (Nussbaum, 1995).

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum believes that literature is an ideal way to increase empathy development, as it enables the reader to view the world or a specific situation from a different person's perspective. She argues that it is easy to be biased toward perspectives that are similar to our own, finding it difficult to empathize with people who live differently. Additionally, she discusses how education today has come to focus less on critical thinking and empathy development, aiming to emphasize the need for empathy development in the classroom through tools like fictional literature. Nussbaum clarifies that “[n]ovels [...] speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them” (1995, p. 7). This supports my idea that empathy can be taught through literature because the reader finds something in the characters that they can relate to and therefore is able to feel sympathy for and view the story from the characters' perspectives.

Jennifer L. Cornell's view on literature and empathy is in line with Nussbaum's. Cornell writes, in an article about reading for empathy, that reading fictional texts gives the reader an opportunity to empathize with characters that perceive the world differently from what we do. It has been confirmed by cognitive psychologists that reading a story from a different perspective than one's own can lead to a more empathetic understanding (Cornell, 2022). Cornell's article is written to prove how reading legal cases can increase law students' empathy development. Although this study's overall research topic is not directly relevant for my thesis, she first discusses how fictional literature can promote empathy development, proven by psychologists, and then compares fictional literature to legal cases. Her conclusions of research results from empathy development in readers of fictional literature is useful to prove my point that using literature to teach empathy to young learners is necessary. Cornell concludes her article with a statement that English novels emerge around the same time as English judicial statements, and that both types of texts are made up of stories from certain perspectives, written to give the reader insight into the narrator's perception of the world.

During a study on the specific effects of literature on empathy, it was found that frequent fiction-readers showed higher scores on empathy than people who did not read fiction regularly (Djikic et al., 2013). The study resulted in a conclusion that literature was recommended to be included in empathy development, supporting Nussbaum's theories that literature is a vital part in human development.

2.2.1 Reader-response theory

During the twentieth century as empathy was both discussed and criticized, reader-response theory gained a foothold. Theorists have – and still discussed the relationship between the reader and the narrative, and how the reader can be emotionally affected on behalf of the literary character. Louise Rosenblatt was a significant influence on this theory. Rosenblatt views a text as meaningless until it is read. Until a reader experiences the text, there lies no meaning behind the words. And each reader has their interpretation of the text, giving the text as many interpretations as it has readers (Rosenblatt, 1995). This correlates with Keen's opinion that “[n]o one text evokes the same response in all of its readers” (Keen, 2007, p. 4), and it indicates that each reader reads a text in their unique way based on their mindset and previous experiences, and that each reader can find something they relate to in the text.

According to Rosenblatt (1995), teachers must teach pupils to read aesthetically. By this she means that the text can stir something in the reader, that the reader is in some way personally and emotionally affected by the text. This often happens when the reader shares something in common with the characters, which may be an experience, an emotion, or a personality trait (1995). For readers of YA novels, this phenomenon may simply be that the fictional character and the reader are both teenagers. This is an experience where it is crucial that no one feels alone in it. Learning empathy through literature, Rosenblatt claims that “such sensitivity and imagination are part of the indispensable equipment of the citizens of a democracy” (1995, p. 261). Rosenblatt's theories claims that through exploring literature, pupils can reflect on their place in society and in social settings. By reading literature, the pupils may thus qualitatively enhance their development from teenagers to functioning member of society.

2.3 Representations of mental health challenges in YA literature

In YA literature it is always positive to include mental health topics, but the representations can do more harm than good if they romanticize or otherwise misrepresent mental health challenges. Briana Hendrickson argues that using YA literature in class helps start conversations about mental health (2018). In her article, Hendrickson analyses both strengths and limitations of a selection of YA novels and determines their authenticity and reliability as representations of the mental disorders within the novels. To mention how some mental health representations in YA literature can be disadvantageous for young readers, I will refer to Hendrickson's analyses of two YA novels: *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, and *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven. In the former novel she notes that the narrative romanticizes suicide. The reader is given the impression that one can live on after committing suicide and continue to accomplish their goals even after they are deceased. Romanticizing of suicide is, according to Hendrickson, also found in *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, where the act of suicide is described as inspirational.

In addition to these representations, Hendrickson found in the two novels that “any hint of medical treatment is treated with disgust and outdated ideas” (p. 20). Also, labels like ‘bipolar’ are used as a synonym to ‘crazy’. While reading representations like these, the reader needs to think critically so as not to interpret the mental health challenges in the same disadvantageous way as the characters do. Hendrickson's analyses of these novels show how the reader can interpret the narrative of some novels that involve mental disorders, and that narratives that show mental health challenges as something that is pointless to seek help for can give the reader a misguided perspective on mental disorders. She argues that some YA novels can portray mental disorders in a way that can give the reader an inaccurate view of what it is like to live with mental health challenges. Additionally, a reader who suffers from the same mental disorder as the character in such a novel can acquire these ideas for themselves. This is something a teacher should be aware of when discussing novels or other texts that represent mental disorders in one way or another, and it is something I will consider when analysing representations of anxiety disorders in my chosen YA novels.

2.3.1 Previous analysis of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999)

To start this sub-chapter, I'll refer to an analysis of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999). In her analysis, Alison Monaghan (2016) examines how the representations of mental health in the novel are used to convey inside information about mental disorders.

First, Monaghan discusses what she calls “teen sick-lit”, a sub-genre of YA literature that involves an illness – physical or mental. Here, she mentions several novels, among them are John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), and *Fangirl* (2013) by Rainbow Rowell, covering all three authors whose work I will be analysing later in this thesis. According to Monaghan, there has been a controversy around sick-lit and the sometimes dark and emotional plotlines, to the degree that the appropriateness of the novels have been questioned by critics and parents. The main issue has been whether the novels glorify illnesses or romanticize self-harming or painful illnesses, and that texts such as these can have disadvantageous effects on the reader’s perspective on their own identity and on the illnesses in the story. Monaghan argues in favour of sick-lit that the novels are written with teenagers as the intended audience, and that the novels’ aims are to authentically represent teenagers that in one way or another struggle physically or mentally. The readers that engage in these novels are either readers that can relate to the characters or the situations, or readers that find this perspective intriguing, wanting to learn more about it. Even though the characters’ experiences in the novels are unique to them, it provides the reader with “an illness experience from the perspective of a teen” (Monaghan, 2016, p. 34), making the novels ideal for empathy development, expanding one’s perspective, and for learning about the specific illnesses.

During the analysis, Monaghan finds that the anxiety representations through the main character Charlie’s thoughts and actions in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* are in line with the way a teenager typically would act. Monaghan states that “[i]f Charlie had expertly addressed his confusion and pain [...], he wouldn’t have been a believable teenager” (2016, p. 39), a point that will be discussed further in the discussion chapter of my thesis, along with the representations of anxiety in the novels.

2.3.2 Previous analyses of *Turtles All the Way Down* (Green, 2017)

In an analysis of *Turtles All the Way Down* (Green, 2017), Alena Kahle (2020) discusses how many people do not know what obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is, and that many use it synonymous with *perfectionism*, which is a personality trait, not a mental disorder. The obsessive-compulsive part of the disorder indicates that one is driven by something else, and the person struggling with OCD is not in control of their actions. To this, Kahle raises a question that many others might also wonder about: “How can it be so difficult to just... stop?” (2020, p. 1)

The main character in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza, struggles with obsessive-compulsive thoughts, mainly regarding germs and the fear of getting an infection that may kill her. Kahle considers that from an outside perspective it can be easy to just see the obsessive cleaning instead of the compulsive thoughts that the person is struggling with. In *Turtles All the Way Down*, the reader learns how Aza's compulsive thoughts dominate her life and take her free will from her on many occasions. The most repeated OCD-caused act in the novel is when Aza several times a day changes her band-aid on her finger while making sure her wound is not infected by cleaning it with both soap and hand sanitizer. Kahle suggests that Aza performs this ritual to quiet her intrusive thoughts. She also suggests that this ritual can be interpreted as hypochondriasis but seeing as Aza knows she is not infected – it's her intrusive thoughts that try to convince her she may be infected – this is not a probable diagnosis.

Kahle argues that through Aza, Green is educating his young adult readers about OCD in an authentic first-hand perspective that psychology textbooks cannot convey in the same manner. The reader experiences Aza's inner conflicts with her intrusive thoughts, where she knows that the intrusive thoughts are irrational, but she chooses to obey them in the end as the thoughts keep getting more dominant, and thus Aza loses the conflict. Kahle suggests that "Green does an excellent job placing the reader within the brain of a person with OCD and leaving them there to suffocate with her in the ever-tightening spiral of anxiety" (2020, p. 3). Kahle makes a note that even though the novel is a work of fiction, the reader may end up learning a lot about what it is like to live with OCD. As a concluding statement, Kahle writes that "[t]hrough [*Turtles All the Way Down*], OCD becomes real" (2020, p. 6).

2.3.3 Previous analysis of *Fangirl* (Rowell, 2013):

Hersi I. Tarsila approaches *Fangirl*'s main character Cath and her "introvert personality type" (Tarsila, 2016, p. 1). During the analyses, Tarsila examines Cath's introverted personality traits based on her acting shy and steering away from social settings. In addition to this, Cath has very few friends, only her twin sister and their shared friends in their hometown. Tarsila does not mention anxiety until the last paragraph of the conclusion, where she says that "Cath felt anxious almost all of the time" (2016, p. 18). This indicates that the anxiousness Cath is feeling is merely temporary, not an anxiety disorder that she constantly struggles with. Tarsila concludes her analysis by saying that Cath's introvert personality makes Cath feel inferior, and that it leaves Cath "feeling uncomfortable toward her surroundings and having

trouble with her social life” (2016, p. 1). Tarsila states that the reason behind Cath’s social shyness is the conflicts in her life, and how those conflicts have affected her emotionally.

However, in Hicks’ (2020) analysis of anxiety representations in YA novels, it is suggested that Cath has struggles with anxiety for a while, and that it becomes more prominent when she is separated from her sister for the first time as they start university. According to this analysis, Cath has used her sister Wren as a comfort, and does therefore feel completely alone for the first time in her life, having to create a new routine in her life around new people. Hicks also suggests that Cath’s anxiety worsens in fear that she will turn out “crazy” like her father who struggles with bipolar disorder. He experiences a manic episode as a result of not being properly treated, and Hicks interprets Cath’s father’s lack of treatment as the reason why Cath never seeks treatment herself.

Despite the lack of continuous medical treatment in the novel (Cath’s father only receives temporary treatment as he is forcefully hospitalized after a manic episode), Hicks (2020) concludes that *Fangirl* demonstrates growth within Cath toward the end of the novel. In the beginning of a novel, Cath is used to people leaving her and is hesitant to trust new people. According to Hicks’ analysis, she is portrayed as more trusting in the end, leaning on the people around her for support instead of pushing them away and blaming herself, as she has been shown to do. Hicks concludes her analysis of *Fangirl* by saying that “[Cath’s] growth could be because she is willingly facing her mental illness with a positive mindset or because of the support system she has” (2020, p. 15).

2.4 Mental health, empathy development, and literature in LK20

The Ministry of Education and Research states in the core curriculum of LK20 that “[s]chool shall base its practice on the values in the objectives clause of the Education Act” (2017). The Education Act declares that “[s]chool [...] shall meet the pupils [...] with trust, respect and demands, and give them challenges that promote formation and the desire to learn” (Education Act, 1998). The formation mentioned in the act refers to the complex concept of *Bildung*. Although its meaning is widely discussed, the term is usually understood to mean the development of human beings (Biesta, 2002). In the *Bildung* scholar Gert Biesta’s opinion, education is much more than studying facts and acquiring certain skills: it is a way to prepare the pupils for life beyond school and for becoming citizens who will in turn help shape the

world for the next generation. *Bildung* is a lifelong process that should have a central role in education and throughout in life (Biesta, 2002).

Bildung can be connected to Rosenblatt's previously mentioned theories, as she believes that reading literature can provide the pupils with essential perspectives and ideas that will ultimately assist the pupil's development to become competent members of society. *Bildung* has since it first became a part of education theory 200 years ago focused on developing humans to become upstanding citizens who can think critically and change society for the better to fit the changes in humanity and the world (Sjöström & Eilks, 2020). The world has changed significantly during the past 200 years, and so the meaning and understanding of *Bildung* has changed as well. According to Sjöström and Eilks, *Bildung* is necessary "for the responsible citizen to behave and to react to challenges like climate change, the chemicalization of our world, or the need for more efficient and sustainable use of natural resources" (2020, p. 65). This description of *Bildung*'s purpose tells us that *Bildung* is essential when teaching our future leaders to care for and understand other humans as well as the planet, and about developing the world in a more sustainable direction.

The Ministry of Education and Research includes the concept of *Bildung* in the core curriculum for the Knowledge Promotion through declaring that the teaching should both "seek a balance between respect for established knowledge and the explorative and creative thinking required to develop new knowledge" and "develop the pupils' ability to make ethical assessments and help them to be cognisant of ethical issues" (2017, p. 8). LK20 declares that "[e]thical awareness, which means balancing different considerations, is necessary if one is to be a reflecting and responsible human being" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 8). This correlates with the established meaning of empathy, in short, to understand another's perspective by experiencing their feelings about a situation without being in that situation themselves. Doing this demands reflection and awareness about what the other people might be going through emotionally based on their individual situations. Under the topic Social Learning and Development, it is declared that empathy is one of the principles for education and all-round development, the latter of which regards *Bildung*. Related to the previously discussed definitions of empathy, the Ministry of Education and Research states that "[t]he ability to understand what others think, feel and experience is the basis for empathy and friendship between pupils" (2017, p. 12).

Moving on to the health and life skills section of LK20, it is stated that the pupils should gain "competence which promotes physical and mental health" (2017, p. 15), and it is followed up that this competence should help the pupils acquire a positive self-image and

develop their identity. Mental disorders are not mentioned here, only the pupils' feelings and views of themselves. To contradict the lack of mentioning mental disorders, Maureen Linker (2014) discusses the importance of talking about this subject in order to normalize this sometimes-taboo topic. According to her, conversations about mental health and other social injustices are very personal to us. Therefore, it may be difficult to change the pupils' initial perspective of this. A person's beliefs being challenged may feel invasive and they might wish to avoid internal conflict, viewing the conflict as aggressive and aiming to change their beliefs. Linker suggests working on ourselves to better understand other perspectives in such conflicts, something that can be applied to both pupils and teachers.

To more effectively engage with social issues, we need to critically assess our own beliefs and attitudes about social identities and then develop the skills to listen responsibly to the beliefs and attitudes of those whose social experiences are different from our own. (Linker, 2014, p. 8-9).

Linker explains that applying critical thinking when learning about a perspective different from our own can help pupils assimilate the new information and understand that people's perspectives depend on their social environment – an understanding that is mentioned as a competence aim in the EFL curriculum (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The pupils might learn that what they believe is due to misunderstanding or lack of knowledge. When the pupils' beliefs get challenged in this manner, they must already have learned to keep an open mind and to think critically – not only about what one reads about in novels – but about what their perspective is and originates from (Linker, 2014). Linker mentions that “we have a much easier time believing that other people's beliefs are biased but a much harder time believing that about our own beliefs” (2014, p. 9). Once pupils learn how to open their minds to new perspectives while reading, they will also be more open to acknowledging their own views and beliefs and how they fit in with the new ones in the literature they read.

LK20 lists communication as a primary method to teach and learn empathy and to learn how the pupils can deal with conflicts. Literature is considered a mode of communication where the author communicates a story or a message to the reader through a narrative. Concerning novel reading, the competence aims for EFL year 7 say that the pupils should be able to “read [...] English-language [...] literature for children and young people and write and talk about the content” (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2019).

2.4.1 Using mental health to develop empathy

This sub-chapter will discuss the *necessity* for active empathy development in the EFL classroom and why the curriculum for the Knowledge Promotion of 2020 supports this statement. Empathy development is one of the responsibilities of EFL educators. As the Ministry of Education and Research mentions in the curriculum:

The subject shall develop the pupils' understanding that their world views are culture-dependent. This can open for new ways to interpret the world, promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudice. (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2019)

Trupe (2006) claims that adults tend not to be aware of the signs of mental issues that children often may exhibit. This is, according to Trupe, due to the generational norm to keep symptoms of mental instability hidden. She argues that some members of older generations might tend to hide or suppress mental health issues (and expect others to do the same) and thus they might have developed certain misconceptions about mental health. It may therefore be difficult to recognize symptoms they have not experienced openly – either within themselves or in others. A common misconception among the previous generations is, according to Trupe (2006), the idea that ‘mental issues are not real.’ Therefore, some people from these generations may see signs of mental issues in a child and simply deem them *troublesome* or *rude*. If teachers demonstrate this lack of knowledge and acknowledgment of mental disorders, it may restrict the pupils' education, as they might need additional support in the classroom which they don't receive.

Teenagers frequently experience mental issues due to stress (Trupe, 2006). Discussing this topic in the classroom might help the pupils understand their feelings and work with them instead of viewing them as a hindrance. Literature can help teenagers confront the stigma of mental health issues, especially when the community they live in proves to be judgmental toward people with mental disorders (Richmond, 2014). Richmond states that it is English teachers' responsibility to break stereotypes, including those regarding mental disorders.

A study by Nolan et al. (2009) suggests that teaching about mental health challenges can increase the pupils' empathy toward people struggling with mental disorders. For their experiment, they used ninth grade classes where experimental classes got lessons in empathy toward people suffering from mental disorders, while control classes did not receive these lessons. The researchers gave the pupils in the experimental classes a total of six lessons about mental health, covering the topics stress, depression, suicide, self-harm, eating disorders, being bullied, and intellectual disabilities. The pupils' understandings of mental

health were measured with a questionnaire twice at an eight-month interval, before and after the six lessons. The questionnaires proved that the pupils in the experimental classes showed an expanded perspective toward mental disorders. It was concluded that the pupils in the experimental classes appeared extensively more empathetic and compassionate toward people suffering from mental disorders. Considering the apparent improvement of empathy within the experimental classes, the teachers of the control classes were also given the lesson plans for the mental health lessons that the experimental classes benefited from (Naylor et al., 2009).

This study further proves the necessity of teaching about mental health, so that the pupils can increase their empathy toward people struggling with mental health challenges. It also proves that the knowledge the teacher has about mental health is crucial for the way the pupils understand the topic. My research will build on this study by examining three YA novels and discuss how anxiety representations found in them can provide the reader with an authentic perspective on anxiety, and furthermore affect the empathy development of the readers.

3.0 Analysis and Discussion

With the purpose of analysing representations of anxiety disorders in young adult literature, I have chosen three novels in the genre where the main character is a teenager who suffers from an anxiety disorder. As I chose novels for this analysis, these were my primary concerns. I have chosen the contemporary classic *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999), the modern ‘chick lit’ novel *Fangirl* (2013) by Rainbow Rowell, and the semi-autobiographical (Flood, 2017) *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017) by John Green. I will begin this chapter by analysing the novels’ anxiety representations individually while discussing how these representations may affect the reader empathetically. After the analyses, I will comparatively discuss my findings of the three novels and discuss the diverse representations of anxiety.

3.1 *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

This epistolary novel revolves around Charlie, a boy who struggles with his mental illness(es) throughout the story. Charlie expresses himself through letters to an unfamiliar source, aiming to stay anonymous by using pseudonyms for the people in his stories. The recipient cannot provide him with responses, consolation, or advice, meaning that the letters are one-sided. He chooses to write to this person so that he can share his feelings without the recipient being able to use the information against him. In his second to last letter, Charlie describes the reasoning behind choosing this person to write his letters to:

I saw a girl in class, who didn’t notice me, and she talked about you to a friend of hers. And even though I didn’t know you, I felt like I did because you sounded like a good person. The kind of person who didn’t mind receiving letters from a kid (p. 221).

The fact that Chbosky uses an epistolary form to tell Charlie’s story can be interpreted as giving the reader the freedom to see themselves as the sole receiver of the letters, especially considering his use of “Dear friend” when starting each letter. Not identifying the recipient by name or physical appearances makes it easy for the reader to acquire that role for themselves. Charlie uses these letters with a hope that it will help him deal with his anxiety. At the end of his first letter, he writes that “[t]he reason I wrote this letter is because I start high school tomorrow and I am really afraid of going” (p. 7), providing us with the information that Charlie feels anxious going into new and unpredictable situations. During this analysis I will

examine how Charlie's anxiety is represented in the novel, and how that can affect the reader's perspective and contribute to their empathy development.

In the first chapter of this novel, we are introduced to Charlie during a distressing time in his life, when his best friend Michael has recently committed suicide. Starting out, he uses the letters to share his journey of coping with his friend's suicide as he is starting high school, and the struggle of not knowing why he did it. During a group counselling session with a therapist, Charlie is asked what he thought about the situation after Michael's suicide. He then answered, "Well, I think that Michael was a nice guy, and I don't understand why he did it. As much as I feel sad, I think that not knowing is what really bothers me" (p. 5). He continues to muse about the reasons and can't settle on the topic. The counsellor suggests to Charlie that Michael might have had trouble at home and felt like he had no one to tell. Perhaps Charlie is afraid that if he, too, keeps inner conflicts to himself it will give the same outcome as with Michael. This is a moment where many readers can sympathize with Charlie. If not for the fact that he has lost a friend, which, sadly, some teenagers can relate to, then the unknown aspect of the situation; the uncertainty of it, that there are questions to be asked, and no one is left to answer them. His struggles increase through the novel, and Charlie keeps needing to write down his reactions to his emotions to release some of the burden he carries.

Charlie also deals with the loss of his aunt Helen, who died in a car crash as she drove on snowy roads to buy a birthday present for Charlie. Because of the circumstances surrounding her death, Charlie blames himself for her death. He feels that if he had been born on a less snowy time of year, Aunt Helen would still be alive. A recurring theme in this novel is blame. A familiar feeling that many teenage readers may recognize in themselves. Charlie blames himself that he might not have been available for Michael in his times of distress, and he blames himself for Aunt Helen's death because he was born at a cold time of the year with snow-covered roads. Through his letters, he also depicts himself as the reason behind his panic attacks. Each year on his birthday, he suffers from a panic attack because he is reminded of Aunt Helen's death. During his birthday in the novel, his parents start arguing over the phone. He felt bad eavesdropping, so he instead went to his room. When his mother found him there afterwards, she asked if it was the thought of Aunt Helen that brought him down, to which he reflects:

It was the way she said it that started me feeling.

"Please don't do this yourself, Charlie."

But I did do it to myself. Like I do every year on my birthday.

“I’m sorry.” (p. 84)

Charlie’s mother shows compassion when he is anxious, as she herself is shown to worry and overthink during the story. However, when she does not understand where the panic attack originates from, she cannot recognize the feeling and thus alienates it. Readers can see that Charlie is not at fault regarding his anxiety attacks, as they have read that he recently witnessed a conflict between his parents and that his mother reminded him of his trauma. Amid these negative emotions surfacing, he is feeling the blame for it all. Readers that connect with the feeling of guilt and interpret Charlie’s blame as misplaced, can subsequently reflect on whether they, too, carry feelings of guilt through no fault of their own.

In this novel, Charlie is often defined by his mental illness. His teacher often refers to him as “special”, and his peers recognize his otherness above anything else and might use this for their benefit. An example of this is when he is invited to a party by his new friends, stepsiblings Sam and Patrick. After declining the offer of a beer, he is handed a piece of brownie, not understanding that brownies are frequently intoxicated at parties. His first thoughts were that “it tasted a little weird, but it was still a brownie, so I still liked it” (p. 37). He only realized he was intoxicated after someone told him, not realizing the connection himself. In situations like this, the reader might understand the full extent of the situation before Charlie does. This can lead the reader to realize that people can have different perceptions of a situation, and perhaps grow more patient with people they interact with. The knowledge that not everyone understands a social situation the same way can be a valuable contribution to the reader’s empathy development.

The fact that Charlie has difficulties understanding social codes also provides him with an inability to lie, which follows him throughout the novel. At one point in the book, Charlie and his friends attend a birthday party for the girl Charlie is romantically involved with at the time. They play ‘truth or dare,’ and Charlie is dared to kiss the person he finds the most beautiful in the room. Thinking he would choose Mary Elizabeth, the girl he was romantically involved with at that time, people were shocked to see him kissing one of his new friends, Sam. He didn’t understand that the action would hurt someone’s feelings when he did it. “That is when I chose to be honest. In retrospect, I probably could not have picked a worse time” (p. 144). After the kiss had happened, Charlie had difficulty reading the nonverbal reactions of his friends. His girlfriend went to the bathroom, and his friend had to translate that later as “she didn’t want anyone to see her cry” (p. 145). When Sam says to him, “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he realizes he had done something terrible. Charlie’s personality

trait of not wanting to disappoint people gives him an anxiety attack after leaving the house. This episode results in a mental breakdown as Charlie realizes that “[s]omething really is wrong with me. And I don’t know what it is” (p. 147). During a week of vacation, he reads *Hamlet* while trying to figure out what is wrong with him. Charlie finds reassurance in knowing that someone else had been through the same he was experiencing. “It didn’t give me any answers necessarily, but it was helpful to know that someone else has been through it” (p. 147). Here, Charlie gets a revelation that many people reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* might also share as they read about Charlie’s mental health journey. The author uses this situation to construct a parallel narrative between Charlie and the reader, aiming for the reader to become self-conscious of their narrative in the story while reading about Charlie’s epiphany. In this situation, the reader does not just empathize with Charlie: they share his experience.

During *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, we as readers witness different representations of anxiety. The first example we meet is through Charlie’s aspiration to know the truth about his friend’s suicide. Part of Charlie’s anxiety is his fear of the unknown, something we regularly see in Charlie’s letters throughout the novel. Another anxiety trait we often see is overthinking. At one point he says, “I’m just lucky that I have so much schoolwork and I don’t have a lot of time to think” (p. 186). In the aftermath of the ‘truth or dare’-incident, it takes a while for Charlie’s friends to talk to him again, which causes him to overthink. Charlie is constantly thinking about everything around him, and his thoughts often end up spiralling in a negative direction.

I just wish that God or my parents or Sam or my sister or anyone would just tell me what’s wrong with me. Just tell me how to be different in a way that makes sense. To make this all go away. And disappear. I know that’s wrong because it’s my responsibility, and I know that things get worse before they get better because that’s what my psychiatrist says, but this is a worse that feels too big. (p. 149)

This is point in the novel where I recognize the start of his breakdown. It is where he blames himself for all the difficulties that the people he loves are going through. He only removes himself from the guilt when he can visibly see that things are starting to work out again. When Charlie at last gets in contact with Sam again after the ‘truth or dare’-incident, he realizes something he didn’t know before, and that could have changed the way he acted.

I guess Mary Elizabeth really liked me a lot. That made me feel sad because I didn't know that she liked me that much. I just thought she wanted to expose me to all those great things.

That's when Sam said, "Charlie, you're so stupid sometimes. Do you know that?"
"Yeah. I really do. Know that. Honest." (p. 165).

It is apparent in the novel that Charlie has some issues on how to behave in social settings as well as understanding social codes such as sarcasm and implied messages in conversations. He takes what is said quite literally, while the reader receives necessary information to understand the underlying meaning. When Charlie is in a situation like this, we as readers learn about his intention for what he's doing, but when he fails to express the intention behind his actions, his friends consider him offensive. The reader learns that Charlie assesses situations thoroughly because he is unsure of how to manage a problematic situation. Considering that the people around him can't hear his internal monologues, it can be challenging to comprehend the context of what he is saying out loud. What he says out loud is an extension of his private thoughts. The reader notices his frustration when his actions are not being interpreted correctly and the reader may understand his anxiety when this keeps happening to him.

Post-breakdown, Charlie experiences something that triggers a memory from his childhood, and he realizes that he was sexually abused by his Aunt Helen, whom he loved very much when she was alive. The memories reveal themselves through his dreams, and he eventually admits that the dreams might be more than just dreams. His aunt molested him as she too had been molested when she was young. After he realized this fact, he struggles with his sense of reality and self, and is ultimately admitted to a mental institution to receive the support he needs to navigate through his newly acquired diagnosis: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Having lived with this anxiety disorder for years without the proper aid must have been challenging as he, therefore, is unable to legitimize his anxiety. For the first time he can recognize that he is not to blame for his anxiety after all. This is a revelation for Charlie that he shares with many other people who are diagnosed with PTSD, and this perspective will be beneficial for the readers as they learn how social situations and the world in general is perceived by someone struggling with an (untreated) anxiety disorder.

In this novel, Charlie is not the only one who suffers from anxiety, it is true for his mother as well. Around holidays, Charlie notices his mother worrying more than what is normal; "She just stood outside the dressing room and worried out loud. The things she said

went all over the place” (p. 58). Charlie follows up with “I understand how my mom thinks. I really do” (p. 58). They have anxiety in common, and by expressing that he understands his mom’s anxiousness, the readers are given a moment to reflect on the empathy Charlie shows as he at this point can imagine his mother’s anxiety. The readers may also consider their own ability to show compassion and understanding toward others.

We also see Charlie asking for and providing reassurance quite often in dialogues, even when he is writing to the receiver of the letters. He frequently asks “really?” when being told something or says “I really do” when expressing his genuine feelings. This illustrates Charlie’s need to know he has understood someone correctly, and the need to assure someone that what he expresses is his true feelings. Going back to Charlie’s inability to understand social codes and nonverbal communication, he does seem to realize that people sometimes say things that don’t align with their actual feelings. Charlie possesses a need for reassurance that he has in fact understood the true intention in a dialogue; and because he craves this reassurance, he also provides others with that reassurance.

During the novel, readers experience different variations of empathy through understanding. The fact that Charlie is as invested in Michael’s reason to commit suicide as he is, shows that he has trouble accepting a situation unless he can understand the others’ perspective. This might be in recognition of the readers, and of the fact that they, too, cannot truly understand another person’s situation until they have learned their perspective. What we read is that Charlie, in not receiving an explanation from Michael, cannot show empathy toward actions where he doesn’t understand the underlying motive.

Several times in the novel, the reader learns about Charlie doing some questionable actions. Were it not for Charlie explaining the situation from his perspective, the reader might not be as understanding and sympathetic toward him. We also experience from Charlie’s perspective that when *he* does not understand the reason for someone else’s actions, he cannot empathize with them. Charlie takes the time to write down the reasons behind his actions to the recipient of the letters, hoping that the reader will understand his perspective and not judge his actions without seeing his point-of-view. It is therefore a possibility that Charlie writes these letters to validate his feelings and actions, and that he is actively seeking empathy from the reader.

3.2 *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green

The second novel I have chosen to analyse is *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green (2017). In this novel, the main character, Aza, struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). According to Richmond (2014), OCD is often used synonymous with ‘detail-oriented’, and it can be difficult for people who do not struggle with OCD to understand the obsessive and compulsive thought patterns that occur. As the narrative is in a first-person point-of-view from Aza’s perspective, it gives the readers a direct access to the intrusive thoughts and how they contradict her personal beliefs. We read about how the intrusive thoughts change Aza’s mind, even though she argues with her intrusive thoughts that they don’t make sense and are, in fact, dangerous. The novel is written in retrospect; Aza is looking back on this story as an adult, to see all the obstacles she went through to her present point in life. The main plot of this story is her experiences with how her intrusive thoughts take over and control her behaviour, most often when bacteria are involved. In this analysis, I will examine Aza’s experiences with and attitudes toward her anxiety disorder and discuss how a young reader may be affected by and interpret those.

A repeating struggle for Aza involves a cut in her middle finger which she has had for years. Aza never gives the wound time to heal as she frequently becomes concerned that the cut has become infected and will lead to *Clostridium difficile* (C. Diff), like one person she read about in an article online. The person in the article only experienced two of the most common symptoms, so Aza becomes frantic when she gets a headache or a sour stomach. To quiet the intrusive thoughts, she presses her thumbnail into the cut to reopen it, squeezes the cut to see if infection “puss” comes out, then washes her hands, pours hand sanitizer into the wound, and puts on a new band-aid. This happens several times a day, and it has become such an automatic routine that she sometimes can’t remember if she cleaned her cut or not. If she becomes unsure, her intrusive thoughts convince her to clean it again, just in case. These intrusive thoughts make her doubt her ability to get better, and she believes that she will never improve and be good enough for anybody. Aza’s reasoning for this is that she keeps obeying her intrusive thoughts, showing no willpower, and thus views herself as helpless. She believes that she is nothing but a burden to everyone around her.

Aza’s narrative is often represented through internal dialogues between herself and her intrusive thoughts. The intrusive thoughts are written as if they represent their own individual,

from which Aza distances her personality. She argues and debates with her intrusive thoughts, tries to quiet them, and pleads with them to show her mercy. An example of this can be found when she is reading the article about *C. Diff* mentioned above:

I scrolled down farther to a list of symptoms, none of which I had, except for the excessive abdominal noises, although I knew from previous searches that the Cleveland Clinic had reported the case of one person who'd died of *C. diff* after presenting at the hospital with only abdominal pain and fever. I reminded myself that I don't have a fever, and my self replied: *You don't have fever YET.* (pp. 4-5)

Aza views the world around her negatively and without hope, as if it consists primarily of many life-threatening and contagious diseases. The people in Aza's life seem to be understanding regarding her mental illness, but Aza still refuses to believe them as she thinks that no one can love her so long as her "other thoughts" can take control of her actions. Even her therapist claims she is being too cruel to herself. This tells the reader that Aza does not view her intrusive thoughts as part of herself but as their own individual that aims to break Aza down. In a therapy session, the doctor had called Aza's thoughts *intrusive*, whereas Aza heard the word *invasive*. She thought *invasive* was a better fit "because, like invasive weeds, these thoughts arrive at my biosphere from some faraway land, and then they spread out of control" (p. 45). Regarding Aza's intrusive thoughts, she has a conversation with her therapist where it seems that Aza is content with being mentally unstable, and she does not seem to recognize the potential healing benefits that can come from therapy.

"Do you feel that you're able to resist the--"

"No," I said. "I mean, I'm still crazy, if that's what you're asking. There has been no change on the being crazy front."

"I've noticed you use that word a lot, *crazy*. And you sound angry when you say it, almost like you're calling yourself a name."

"Well, everyone's crazy these days, Dr. Singh. Adolescent sanity is so twentieth century."

"It sounds to me like you're being cruel to yourself."

By writing this, Green is speaking to every reader who thinks badly of themselves. Like Chbosky, Green uses a situation his main character is going through to make the reader conscious of whether this is happening to them as they read the novel. Green also brings adolescence into the discussion when Aza claims that being an adolescent is not supposed to be easy and that feeling crazy is a feeling all growing teenagers can relate to. When Aza

expresses that she is crazy, but that it is just how the adolescence experience is like, young readers may also recognize that they have the same perspective of themselves that Aza has of herself. Frustrated with herself, Aza explains that “I was so good at being a kid, and so terrible at being whatever I was now” (p. 25), a thought that many teenage readers may relate to. Readers with OCD can especially understand and appreciate Aza’s frustrations with her own mind.

Aza’s mental illness is represented as continuously wanting to control her actions. This is perhaps the reason why she is so anxious about physical diseases, too. From Aza’s perspective, physical diseases aim to overtake her body in the same *invasive* manner that her mental illness aims to. Perhaps she is so consistent about avoiding bacterial infections because that is something she feels she can control, as opposed to her intrusive thoughts, which she – like physical infections – also views as something infectious that spreads and worsens once it has entered. In addition to being anxious about bacterial infections, she often gets disturbed by the human microbiome – that she has millions of bacteria always living inside her body. We can see that she limits her person to these bacteria on page 87 of the novel; “I’m not a human person so much as this disgusting, teeming blob of bacteria, and there’s not really any getting myself clean, you know, because the dirtiness goes all the way through me.” As she seems to consider physical and mental illnesses related, I suspect she might view her body and mind the same. Aza explains that she “[f]elt my spine straightening” (p. 213), as if it was the spine doing it, not her. She describes this common action as if she has no control over her own body. Aza does not seem to trust her own body with all its bacteria; therefore, she cannot trust her own mind. She cannot trust herself, so she will not let anyone else trust her.

All my life, I’d been unable to think straight, unable even to finish having a thought because my thoughts came not in lines but in knotted loops curling in upon themselves, in sinking quicksand, in light-swallowing wormholes. (pp. 112-113)

During Aza’s internal monologues, we get to know both what she considers her genuine, honest thoughts and her intrusive thoughts. She does not recognize the intrusive thoughts as her own, but rather as something invasive that has manifested inside her mind. Then, when she ends up doing precisely what the intrusive thoughts ask her to do, she feels disgusted by herself. The turning point in the novel includes a similar episode. Aza is admitted to the hospital due to being in a car crash. As we readers know from earlier in the novel, Aza has read that hospitals are a very likely place to get C. Diff. Her intrusive thoughts then tell her to drink from the hand sanitizer container hanging on the wall by the door. After a long

argument with her intrusive thoughts, she does just that. This results in her passing out, condemning herself for not standing up against the force of her thoughts. Looking back at the episode from where she is now (an adult), she thinks to herself: “I knew how disgusting I was. [...] I wasn’t possessed by a demon. I was the demon” (p. 229). We can see the conflict between Aza and her intrusive thoughts as Aza notices the hand sanitizer on the hospital wall, where her intrusive thoughts are marked in cursive:

It’s the only way that’s stupid if it worked alcoholics would be the healthiest people in the world you’re just going to sanitize your hands and your mouth please fucking think about something else stand up I HATE BEING STUCK INSIDE YOU you are me I am not you are we I am not you want to feel better you know how to feel better it’ll just make me barf you’ll be clean you can be sure I can never be sure stand up [...] Please let me go. I’ll do anything. I’ll stand down. You can have this body. I don’t want it anymore. (pp. 227-228).

This part of the novel is written as if it was not her free will allowing it to happen, but instead that she was controlled by something or someone else. She believes that whatever bad may happen to her because of her intrusive thoughts is what she deserves. Aza may feel like she should be able to control her thoughts and that she is failing when she is unable to, and that whatever happens because of her intrusive thoughts is her responsibility. She views herself as a disappointment, both to herself and to others. This negative self-image is something many teenagers are, regrettably, familiar with. The readers can interpret Aza’s perspective as too negative, wanting to protect and defend her, and realize they also have similar thoughts about themselves.

Aza’s negative view of herself is only enhanced during a heated argument with her best friend Daisy. Daisy writes fanfiction, and when Aza reads it for the first time, she notices a character who seems based on her and whom the other characters in the fanfiction finds draining to be around. This results in a confrontation where Aza does not feel heard and understood by her best friend.

“I love you, and it’s not your fault, but your anxiety does kind of invite disasters.” [...] “It is kind of a way of coping with—I mean, [Aza], you’re *exhausting*. [...] I know you have the mental problems and whatever, but they make you... [...] Great in small quantities, but then a lot of you is... a lot.”

I didn’t need Daisy to point out what a shitshow I was. I knew.

[...] “I’m sorry it’s not fun hanging out with me because I’m stuck in my head so much, but imagine being *actually* stuck inside my head with no way out, with no way to ever take a break from it, because that’s my life.” (pp. 214-217)

What Aza is going through here, explaining her inner thoughts and frustrations to her best friend, parallels as a description for the readers to understand what is going on when someone suffering from a mental disorder gets told that their mental disorders are not suited for social settings. Aza does not mean to ruin anything for anyone and being told this just proves that the negative thoughts she has about herself and her lack of ability to be loved are true. Here, I recognize a breakdown in Aza, where all her worst fears are coming true. She has long suspected that she is just being tolerated and that she is difficult to love, and Daisy is now telling her that this in fact is the case. When her intrusive thoughts were right about this fact, Aza might find it easier to believe the other things her thoughts are saying.

The underlying plot is about a millionaire who has gone missing after being wanted for arrest. Coincidentally, this millionaire is the father of Aza’s childhood friend-turned-love interest, Davis. Daisy encourages her to join her in searching for the fugitive millionaire in order to claim the one hundred-thousand-dollar reward, and Aza in turn gets back into contact with Davis. Aza uses the mystery regarding Davis’ father as an escape from her thoughts, to do something different. When she is scheming with Daisy and plotting possible places for Davis’ father to be, she is not experiencing the intrusive thoughts. It seems that when she is left alone to think that her intrusive thoughts come forward.

In the epilogue, we learn that Aza and Davis are no longer in touch. Aza argues that her OCD will not improve with time, something perhaps other people who have a mental disorder may recognize in themselves. Perhaps her idea that her mental disorder will always oppress her ultimately results in her being institutionalized as an adult, not being able to take care of herself or her children. Giving her intrusive thoughts the power that she did was her ultimate defeat. The readers who suffer from something like what Aza is experiencing, or a different mental disorder, who can recognize the feeling of not overcoming their thoughts, might see how Aza ended up and want to do things differently from her.

John Green ends *Turtles All the Way Down* with a message for his readers in *Acknowledgements*: “It can be a long and difficult road, but mental illness is treatable. There is hope, even when your brain tells you there isn’t” (p. 290). This can easily sum up his intention behind this novel; to spread hope to the readers who feel there is none.

3.3 *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell

The final novel I have chosen for my analysis is *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013). This novel revolves around an 18-year-old girl named Cath, who starts university at the beginning of the book. She considers herself shy and introverted and prefers to sit in her room writing her fanfiction instead of meeting her peers or generally socializing. Cath and her twin sister Wren used to write fanfiction together but starting college has been a different experience for each of them. When Cath stays in her room on a Friday night, Wren goes out drinking with her peers. For eighteen years, Wren and Cath have supported each other, and Cath loses that support the same day she moves from home and is also required to live in a dorm room with a stranger. This much change in such a short time is naturally stressful for a teenager who is used to a more predictable everyday life. During her first days in college, she says she was “already overdosing on *new* and *other*” (p. 18), and Cath didn’t feel like socializing with someone new. Her way of relaxing was then to curl into a corner in her bed with her laptop, continuing her fanfiction based on the fictitious book series *Simon Snow*.

The title *Fangirl* is an indicator of how Cath views the online Simon Snow fandom as a significant part of her personality. When asked in her Fiction Writing-class *why* she writes, she thinks the reasons to herself: “[t]o be somewhere else”, “[t]o stop being anything at all”, and “[t]o disappear” (pp. 23-24). Cath expresses herself through her fanfiction, diving into a fictional universe to avoid dealing with her insecurities in real life. She needs a pillar to lean on, a safety net. That pillar has always been fanfiction and her twin sister Wren. From Cath’s perspective, the world is big and scary, and she prefers to create her own world through writing and living in this world where she is in control of what happens at any time. Wren seems agitated with Cath being as enclosed as she is and chooses to stay in instead of joining her at parties. Wren has difficulty viewing situations from Cath’s perspective. Cath experienced a loss in her life after Wren left their fanfiction, which is Cath’s comfort zone and safe space, but Wren sees it as Cath being stuck and not able to move forward in life. The fanfiction was something they shared, and Wren left it before Cath was ready to.

In her fanfiction, everything is predictable and safe. This anxiety trait tells the reader she is anxious about the unknown in the world, afraid of not knowing what will happen, and not knowing how she will react to what happens. Cath’s reluctance toward the new and unfamiliar is becoming an obstacle to her university experience. This is demonstrated in a conversation between Cath and her new roommate Reagan. Reagan notices that Cath only eats protein bars in her room and asks why she doesn’t eat in the dining hall. Cath responds

that the reason is that she does not know where the dining hall is located. When Reagan then asks if Cath would like her to show her where it is, Cath protests:

“No.” Cath could already feel the anxiety starting to tear her stomach into nervous little pieces. “It’s not just that. . . . I don’t like new places. New situations. There’ll be all those people, and I won’t know where to sit – I don’t want to go.” (p. 39)

Reagan ultimately convinces Cath to join her for dinner in the dining hall. Cath, although still reluctant, reflected on her unwillingness to simply have dinner among other people: “And she thought about winning. About how she was letting *this* win, whatever this was – the crazy inside of her.” (p. 40) After going to the dining hall with Reagan regularly, Cath falls into a routine, and the dining hall is now familiar. “If Reagan missed dinner, Cath would go down to the dining hall anyway and sit at their table.” (p. 48) As long as she keeps to established routines, Cath does not experience the anxiety – “the *crazy* inside of her”.

Very early on in the novel, we notice how Cath views anxiety as a physical thing: “She just needed to settle her nerves. To take the anxiety she felt like a black static behind her eyes and an extra heart in her throat and shove it all back down to her stomach where it belonged – where she could at least tie it into a nice knot and work around it” (p. 5). The anxiety is something she is familiar with; she is used to feeling it in her gut. The anxiety is written as a temporary feeling, not a disorder. Like it emerges from time to time, instead of being a constant struggle in life. As Cath’s high school boyfriend breaks up with her in the start of the term, “[s]he felt lightheaded and strained, like something too big was hatching inside her ribs.” (p. 76) This feeling of anxiety comes from Cath being left by all the constant people in her life, having to learn how to go through life in a new way with new people. Even though Cath didn’t really miss her old boyfriend Abel, she did not try to stay involved in his life; it was something stable from her high school life that made her feel rooted to a time when everything was familiar and safe. After the breakup she describes to Wren:

“I’m embarrassed that I held on for so long. That I really thought we could go on like we were. And I’m sad because it feels like now high school is finally over. Like Abel was this piece of a really happy time that I thought I could take with me. [...] he made me feel safe.” (p. 78)

All this anxiousness about the new era in Cath’s life, and her insistence on keeping things that remind her of the previous stability in her life, originates from when her and Wren’s mother

abandoned them when they were younger. Her main support during that traumatizing time was Wren. Cath remembers how she used to cry at school and how she and Wren would hold hands as the feelings became too much. I interpret this as a way to not physically lose each other like they lost their mother. When Cath now does not have Wren to hold her hands when her anxiety intensifies, Cath “clenches” her own hands, a term that is frequently repeated throughout the novel when it concerns anxious feelings. Cath continues to have a negative attitude toward her mother throughout the story and doesn’t want anything to do with her. When her mother then reaches out to them for the first time since she left, Cath refuses to answer her. This happens during Cath’s adjustment to her new life, making her efforts to create stability in her life even more challenging. Cath has gotten used to not having her mother around, and considers her family whole with just her, Wren, and their father.

“Back when we needed her, she wouldn’t even return our phone calls. When we started our periods, we had to google the details. [...] *after we’ve got shit figured out – now she wants to get to know us? I don’t need a mother now, thanks. I’m good.*” (p. 171)

Wren, on the other hand, decides to give their mother a chance, making Wren even more alienated than usual from Cath. Not only does Cath feel betrayed by their mother for leaving them and starting a family somewhere else, now she feels betrayed by Wren for forgiving their mother and pursuing a friendly relationship with her. At one point, Wren argues with Cath about the topic and says “[y]ou hate everything. You hate *change*. If I didn’t drag you along behind me, you’d never get anywhere,” (p. 246) although fear of change is not the only reason Cath is content with not having a relationship with her mother. She explains to Wren:

I’m probably going to be crazy for the rest of my life, thanks to her. I’m going to keep making fucked-up decisions and doing weird things that I don’t even realize are weird. People are going to feel sorry for me, and I won’t ever have any normal relationships – and it’s always going to be because I didn’t have a mother. *Always*. That’s the ultimate kind of broken. The kind of damage you never recover from. I *hope* she feels terrible. I hope she never forgives herself.” (p. 247)

Cath sees her mother as the reason behind her anxiety – or the *crazy* as she calls it. This is Cath’s core struggle in life, and she believes it makes her less worthy of love and friendship. She is constantly worried about the social norms and codes, and she is consumed with not standing out in a crowd. When someone who does not struggle with anxiety reads this, they might recognize the feeling as everyday nervousness instead of a mental illness.

During the initial months of her first year in university, Cath experiences a complete change of friend group, something that makes her feel anxious. She loses contact with her sister and is not in touch with the friends they had in common. In Wren's place Cath starts to hang out with Reagan and Reagan's friend Levi who is constantly hanging out in their dorm room – despite Cath's hesitance to get to know him. When Cath comes home to her dorm room one day after class, Levi is sitting outside waiting. He expects to be allowed inside to wait for Reagan, but when Cath refuses to let him inside, she claims it is because she doesn't know him enough. She ends up crawling onto her bed to write fanfiction but is still acutely aware of Levi sitting outside her room, making her feel trapped. Through Cath's actions, the reader observes that if Cath is given time to get used to the changes, she becomes more comfortable with them. When she has gotten familiar with what was originally unfamiliar, this becomes a new constant in her life. An example of this is Reagan and Levi, whom she initially feels anxious around, but eventually becomes a stable and predictable part of her everyday life. As Levi was a new and unfamiliar element in her life, learning how to let him in was a big step for her in dealing with her social anxiety. Cath and Levi eventually develop a romantic relationship, which gives Cath even more anxiety as she experiences new situations and feelings. However, whenever Cath becomes visibly anxious around Levi, he asks her to read him fanfiction knowing that it calms her. As Cath falls into a rhythm with Levi, she feels comfortable whenever he's around. When Cath then sees Levi kissing another girl at a party, she feels yet another betrayal from someone she had come to consider a constant in her life. She requires stability in her life, and repeatedly she has found stability through people in her life, only to have it unpredictably taken away from her because these people are doing something Cath doesn't see coming. It is evident that the basis of Cath's trust issues is her fear of being left behind by people she cares about, similar to what happened when her mother left. In her fanfiction, *she* decides what happens, Cath is in control, and she therefore turns to her fanfiction universe whenever real life gets too unreliable.

Cath also finds stability in her fiction writing-class, feeling that she excels in this class as writing is a big part of her life. She develops a mentor-mentee relationship with her fiction writing professor, Piper, and seeks validation from her in her writing. For one assignment Cath turned in a new chapter of her fanfiction, a form of writing she feels confident in. When she then failed the assignment, she felt attacked since the fanfiction is so personal to her. The reason why the professor failed Cath is that she considers fanfiction plagiarism, as Cath had written about another author's characters and universe. Cath argues and says “[i]t's not

illegal” and that “I don’t own the characters, but I’m not trying to sell them, either” (p. 110-111). To which Professor Piper responds: “This is college – what we do here is real. I’ve allowed you into an upper-level course, and so far, you’ve greatly impressed me. But this was an immature mistake, and the right thing for you to do now is to learn from it” (p. 110). Cath experiences an invasion of her most sacred support in life, and is determined to defend both the characters she loves and her choice to write fanfiction:

“I’d rather pour myself into a world I love than try to make something up out of nothing. [...] When I’m writing them, I get lost in them completely, and I’m happy. When I’m writing my own stuff, it’s like swimming upstream. Or... falling down a cliff and grabbing at branches, trying to invent the branches as I fall.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to feel.”

“Well, I hate it.”

“Do you hate it? Or are you just afraid?” (pp. 275-276)

Like in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the author here tries to communicate with the reader through her character’s revelation. To all the readers who have ever hated the feeling of resistance in life – one way or another – do they really hate the resistance or are they afraid of the unfamiliarity of what they might find? This point in the novel is where I recognize a change in Cath’s attitude toward her life. In addition to having moved to a new place and having to create a new daily routine, Cath has lost her entire support system except her fanfiction, and even that has been ruined for her by her professor.

This breakdown happens before Christmas break, and Cath has no stability left in her life on campus – except her fanfiction. Even her father, who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder cannot be leaned on for stability. During her exam period before Christmas, Cath receives a call that her father has had a manic episode at work and therefore is admitted to a mental institution. She leaves campus and yields her final exam to see him at the hospital and to take care of him. That is something she has done all her life and she knows she can succeed at it. When she arrives at her childhood home, she notices all the signs that would have told her that something is wrong if she had been home. She blames herself that she was unavailable because she could have steered him back on track before it got too bad. This blame causes Cath to consider quitting university so she can stay home and focus on her father. When Christmas break arrives, Cath is home with her father to make sure his mental state is stable. At this point, Cath has experienced so many bumps in the road that she doesn’t want to return to university where all her problems will be waiting for her. She has a make-up

exam to take, she didn't turn in her final assignment in her fiction-writing class as she finds it difficult to write original texts, and the conflicts with Levi – him kissing another girl – and with Wren – who stopped keeping in touch with Cath – remain unresolved. Several young readers might relate to the feeling of failing something that they thought they would succeed at. After declaring that she wished to stay at home and not return to university, her father argues that she is only running from her conflicts:

“You think it would be easier if you lived here.”

“Yes.”

“That’s a crappy way to make decisions.”

[...]

“Isn’t giving up allowed sometimes? Isn’t it okay to say, ‘This really hurts, so I’m going to stop trying’?”

“It sets a dangerous precedent.”

“For avoiding pain?”

“For avoiding life.”

This speaks directly to the readers who at any point have felt the urge to give up something just because things got harder than they imagined. Without resistance one cannot develop as a person, and thus one cannot grow from the challenging experiences. At this point, Cath is anxious toward everything in her life that makes her put in effort, including her fanfiction, as her readers become more agitated to receive the ending of the story. What she wants is to go back to when her life was comfortable and safe before starting university. After talking with her father and Wren about it, she decides to try university one more time. This turns out for the better as she passes the make-up exam, gets a second chance at her writing assignment, and is forced to confront Levi, which results in giving him a second chance, just as she had been given second chances. After reading her conversation with her father about her reasons for wanting to give up, a young reader might find comfort in Cath's second chances. They might recognize hopelessness of challenges in life, and the feeling of failing no matter how hard they try to succeed. When the reader can relate to that feeling and then read about how the character gets back up again afterwards, they might feel motivated themselves.

In contrast to the betrayal Cath felt when she started college and Wren chose not to live together anymore, in the end Cath is the one choosing not to live together. Wren suggests that they get a dorm room together for their sophomore year, while Cath has already promised Reagan to share a room with her. Cath has grown enough during the past school year to not

constantly need her sister anymore. During the first semester, Cath feels like a rug has been pulled out from underneath her feet as she is losing Wren to parties and drinking, and other activities Cath feels too anxious to engage in. She is forced to learn to live her life without leaning on Wren for support. Although it is not without complications, she manages to gain new friends to lean on in times of distress.

I recognize Cath's internal conflicts, such as being nervous around new people as she is afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, and external conflicts, like her conflicts with her sister Wren, with Levi, with her Fiction-Writing professor, and with her mother. Where Tarsila (2016) assumes Cath's introverted personality based on her avoiding social settings, I acknowledge that Cath in general avoids unfamiliar and unpredictable situations. Here, I recognize the difference between Tarsila's hypothesis that Cath is merely introverted, as opposed to the wider perspective that there is more to Cath's introverted personality than simply shyness. Referring to Tarsila's conclusion, it is stated that Cath is feeling anxious most of the novel, only discussing the anxiousness as a feeling, rather than a mental disorder. Cath's introverted personality is undoubtedly something that the readers might relate to, and it will also be beneficial to read about it for the readers that cannot relate. Still, when an anxiety disorder is as emphasized as it is in this novel, it is something worth elaborating on.

Tarsila's analysis blames Cath's social shyness on her introvert personality, disregarding any kind of mental disorder. I disagree as the feelings Cath is presented with in social or conflicted situations are affecting her physically. One example of this is found early on in *Fangirl*, when Cath is so overwhelmed by her thoughts, social expectations, and questions she doesn't have the answers to, that she decides to avoid all unpredictable situations. The reactions Cath has to unfamiliar situations can be either familiar feelings that the reader relates to, or foreign ideas that may give the reader a new perspective, and even increased tolerance toward introverted people they interact with socially.

As Hicks (2020) mentions in her analysis of *Fangirl*, the reader notices Cath's fear of turning out like her dad, and that she mentions how she views herself as "crazy" like him. What is essential to notice regarding this situation, is that Cath's father experiences his manic episodes when his bipolar disorder is untreated. Cath mentions several times that if she was home, she could see the signs and she would help him keep to his routine so that he does not get overwhelmed. This is something she constantly does for herself, especially in social settings. She listens to herself and recognizes her limits, moving in her own pace, something that seems to soothe her anxiety. If Cath had acknowledged that she does in fact take care of

herself and listen to her needs, and that doing that will keep her from spiralling, the reader might also reflect on their own limits and become aware of them.

3.4 Comparative discussion of anxiety representations in the novels

All three novels begin at a point in time when something traumatic has happened to the main characters. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the reader learns that Charlie has recently lost his best friend to suicide and that he doesn't quite know how to feel about it as he does not relate to the feeling of wanting to die. This shows that Charlie has an inability to express empathy toward his deceased friend because he does not understand Michael's motives, even though empathy is precisely what we want the reader to experience. His most pressing thought is that his friend could have just talked to Charlie, and somehow that would have made things better. This inner conflict in Charlie sets the atmosphere for the rest of the novel, where he never quite understands the actions or thought processes of others around him, and thus finding it difficult to understand their reactions to specific events. The main character, Charlie, has recently lost his best friend Michael to suicide and, as I previously mentioned, finds himself unable to come to terms with the situation as he does not know *why* it happened. Chbosky's choice to not include a suicide note is assumed by Monaghan to highlight "the singularity of a suicide and the inability to understand a person's motives for taking his own life" (2016, p. 35). Charlie focuses on the fact that Michael left without disclosing the reason behind the suicide, something that according to Monaghan will appeal to teen readers who have some connection to suicide, whether they have lost a loved one to it or someone they love is depressed with a high risk of committing suicide.

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza is not starting her story with a crisis, but rather an event that led her down what eventually became a breakdown. The start of her story is however traumatic as she is continuously dealing with her potentially life-threatening intrusive thoughts. As she is telling her story as an adult looking back on her teenage years, we know the start of the story is something significant for the ending. Aza's conversation with Daisy about the billionaire Russell Pickett who vanished is the start of a series of events that challenges Aza's anxiety disorder and helps us learn how she deals with these intrusive thoughts as they appear in distressing situations.

In *Fangirl*, however, we once again start the novel with a crisis, where Cath experiences a lot of change at the same time, to the point where her one constant is her

fanfiction. Everything else has changed in one way or another, especially the relationship with her twin sister. She is therefore reluctant to anything or anyone new, which complicates her university experience tremendously.

In all three novels, we learn about different representations of anxiety disorders. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, we notice some words that are repeatedly being used to describe anxiety; *nervous*, *thinking*, *worry*, *breathing*, and *wonder*. In addition to this, the reader learns about Charlie's anxiety disorder through his actions and his justification of them. Even though he knows a specific action to be wrong when he looks back on the situation, he justifies it by what he was feeling and thinking at that point, not considering that his actions might affect other people.

On the other hand, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, we read about Aza's internal arguments with her intrusive thoughts. Since John Green has stated that he suffers from OCD and that this informs his representation of Aza's condition, this could also be considered an especially authentic or well-informed representation of this anxiety disorder (Flood, 2017). From Aza's perspective, we experience her thoughts by the way she perceives them, ergo, how John Green perceives his own intrusive thoughts. In *Turtles All the Way Down*, anxiety is referred to as a mental state, something that affects Aza's thought patterns. The words that are most often used to describe the anxiety in this novel is *think*, *intrusive* (thoughts), and *crazy*. This authentic view of how OCD can dominate one's everyday life has great potential to be used to teach others about OCD and anxiety, showing the learners what this particular 'invisible disease' (Monaghan, 2016, p. 34) can look like from the inside.

Rowell also shows us what anxiety can look like from the inside, by describing the anxious feelings in Cath as something physical. "Cath felt something sticky blooming again in her stomach." (p. 114-115) Describing the psychological illness as physical can be beneficial in explaining the feeling to people who cannot relate to the psychological part. In addition to representing the anxiety disorder as a physical thing, the word most often used to describe Cath's attitude toward her anxiety is the word "crazy". *Turtles All the Way Down* and *Fangirl* have this in common, showing the readers what happens on the inside when the outside might seem distressing. Charlie, on the other hand, writes the letters in retrospect, so the reader won't necessarily understand his immediate feelings, but rather how he remembers them in the aftermath, giving him the chance to reflect on his actions and reactions before expressing his feelings about them. The exception is toward the end of the novel when he seems to be asking the recipient for help in figuring out what is wrong with him, as he then is distressed

while he writes the letters. Otherwise, he writes about the distressing situations after he has already come to terms with them.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower and *Fangirl* both include a situation where the reader gets the opportunity to share an experience with the main character. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, this happens when Charlie is reading Hamlet and realizing that even though the reading experience didn't provide him with a solution to his own problems, it helped him to know that someone else felt the same way as him. This is a declaration for the reader to tell them that whatever they are feeling inside, someone else feels the same.

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, the reader is given the opportunity to share in Aza's reflections when she is represented as an adult writing about and reflecting on her experiences as a teenager. During the time the story occurs, Aza feels that she does not deserve love and that she is only tolerated by the people around her. She believes that it is only a matter of time before Daisy will have had her fill and stops hanging out with her. The same thought pattern occurs when her romantic relationship with Davis is developing, and she is convinced that he will stop caring about her once she learns about her consuming struggles with her intrusive thoughts. As an adult, Aza and Daisy are still best friends, something she views as a success in life. When she reflects on her time with Davis, she realizes that "you remember your first love because they show you, prove to you, that you can love and be loved" (p. 285). She has taken the time to reflect on her experience with Davis, realizing that she was, contrary to what she thought when she was younger, capable of being loved.

In *Fangirl* this reflective experience appears on two occasions. The first is during Cath's conversation with her professor, where Cath is determined to keep to her fanfiction while her professor wants her to write something original. The fanfiction is here a metaphor for the familiar as it has been the one constant thing in Cath's life for years, while the original fiction that her professor wants her to write is a metaphor for the new, unexplored, and scary that Cath will do anything to avoid. By writing the conversation like this, the reader can feel affected even though they're not a writer who can relate to this specific situation. The professor asks, quite bluntly, "Do you hate it [the unfamiliar]? Or are you afraid?" (p. 276), making it effortless for the readers to apply this to their own life and whatever they find challenging.

In the novels, all three individual main characters aim to somehow control their own narrative. Charlie aims to do this by writing down what happens in his life in letters where he

controls the narrative himself. This way he decides the way the situations are meant to be explained. However, as I mentioned before, Charlie seems distressed while writing the part that I recognize as his mental breakdown. Here it looks like he needs to write his feelings down while they occur in an attempt to make sense of them, and he is not entirely in control of the narrative. This may be a point from the author to highlight Charlie's deplorable state of mind to the reader. Aza tries to control her narrative by keeping her thoughts inside. The reader can see that Aza is very little involved in dialogues, not offering more of herself than what is necessary. This may be because of the endless arguments with her intrusive thoughts that make her want to control how she is perceived and what she shares with others since she can't control her mind and thoughts. Cath uses the fictitious environment in her fanfiction to control her narrative when her physical environment becomes unstable. When the people around her become unpredictable, she turns to Simon Snow's universe where the only person who decides what happens is her. This is her way of taking back control in her life when she feels powerless or when her anxiety leaves her paralyzed to do anything but write her fanfiction.

4.0 Didactic benefits

This is a discussion chapter where I will first discuss the importance of mental health education in the EFL classroom. Following that, I discuss how YA novels can be used to teach about anxiety disorders and different perspectives. Both discussions will be supported by relevant theory and previous research, and the latter discussion will be based on my analyses and discussion of the three novels from the previous chapter.

4.1 Potential empathetic benefits from discussing mental health in the EFL classroom

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves would feel in the like situation. (Smith, 1759, chapter 1)

Although empathy is undefined as a term, this quote from Adam Smith is among the first definitions of the emotional experience, and it is to this day how many understand the concept of empathy. Even though we cannot directly experience a situation from another person's perspective, we can get an idea of how we would react if we were in their situation (Smith, 1759; Lindhé, 2016). It is important that pupils learn to be aware of this. Smith believes that everyone is born with a degree of morality, which has a close connection to empathy. If we are to trust this idea, these qualities must be practised and developed from a young age. A lack of empathy is often connected to sociopathic behaviour, proving the importance of empathy development from a young age. This is connected to the idea that empathy is considered such a basic human quality that a lack of it is viewed as inhumane (Keen, 2007). This idea is also mentioned in the core curriculum for LK20, where the Ministry of Education and Research states that “[e]thical awareness [...] is necessary if one is to be a reflecting and responsible human being” (2017).

Biesta (2002) continues the thought that education should focus on developing human beings, and not just teaching the pupils key facts and objective knowledge. When he discusses *Bildung*, he emphasizes that it should have a central role in education, considering the concept is all about the constant development a person experiences throughout their life. Sjöström and Eilks (2020) add to this idea by suggesting that *Bildung* is an essential part of the

development of the world as well. If *Bildung* is a prominent part of education, it will essentially result in people with the ability to experience empathy, think creatively, show responsibility, and reflect on the actions and reactions in and of society. Considering empathy development is such a significant part of the pupils' all-around education, it certainly belongs in the EFL classroom communicative and cultural competencies are central elements. To further support this statement, the Ministry of Education states that the subject should help the pupils to "provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking" (2019, p. 3)). They also state that "[b]y learning English, the pupils can experience different societies and cultures by communicating with others around the world", and that this skill can "open for new ways to interpret the world, and promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudices" (2019, p. 3).

As I explained in sub-chapter 2.4.1, Nolan et al. (2009) suggest that teaching about mental health challenges has documented effects on pupils' empathy development. The results of their study showed that pupils who received lessons about mental health expressed more empathy toward people who struggle with mental disorders, in comparison with pupils who didn't receive these lessons. Teaching about mental health and mental disorders is essential regarding empathy development, which is a fundamental part in the EFL subject on several accounts. The core curriculum of LK20 (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) states that communication is key in developing empathy and understanding the world around us. Through communication, people can uncover others' perceptions of the world, discuss different perspectives about a situation, and learn to reflect on their own beliefs. According to Linker (2014), it is easy for people to understand perspectives that are similar to their own. Accordingly, she claims that people find it challenging to understand perspectives that are different from their own.

As I mentioned previously in this sub-chapter, the EFL subject has the potential to show the pupils new perspectives on the world, and to prevent prejudices. Even today there are prejudices and misconceptions about mental disorders. Hendrickson (2018) mentions that a commonly used adjective for someone who struggles with a mental disorder is the word *crazy*. When used in this sense, it is with negative intention. Trupe (2006) mentions some other misconceptions about mental disorders: that mental issues are not real, that children with mental disorders are simply *troublesome* or *rude*, and that mental disorders are something to hide. These misconceptions might make it even more challenging for pupils to understand the perspective of someone struggling with a mental disorder. To avoid extending

these misconceptions to the next generations, it is imperative that teachers gain enough knowledge about mental health and mental disorders to educate their pupils about the subject.

I argue that teaching about mental health in the EFL classroom is necessary for the pupils' empathy development. Linker (2014) supports this idea, as she believes promoting mental disorders leads to more openness and understanding toward them, and according to Richmond (2014), English teachers have a responsibility to challenge stigmas and teach the pupils to reflect on topics such as mental health. Hendrickson's (2018) study shows that people with a better understanding of mental disorders have more empathy toward people struggling with one. This tells me that the lack of empathy toward mentally ill people stems from a lack of knowledge. Teachers cannot teach about what they do not know. With knowledge being a crucial factor in empathy development, the teacher must attain this knowledge to teach it to their pupils.

Linker (2014) explains that applying critical thinking when learning about a perspective different from our own can help pupils assimilate the new information and understand that people's perspectives depend on their social environment. Regarding Linker's discussion about critical thinking and empathy development, it can be wise to teach the pupils to think critically while learning about other perspectives. She argues that to understand the world and the people around us, we need to challenge our beliefs and our perspectives and learn about "those whose social experiences are different from our own" (Linker, 2014, p. 9).

Both Naylor et al. (2009) and Hendrickson (2018) provide this thesis with essential views on mental health in the classroom and how the pupils may react to learning about mental health perspectives from different sources, respectively lessons in the classroom and reading YA novels. Using novels to teach perspectives on mental health can be rewarding for the pupils if the teacher is aware of what narrative toward mental health the author provides, and as long as they can discuss this narrative accordingly. We also learn that thorough lessons on mental health can be done without novels, where the teacher provides the narrative. In this circumstance, it is imperative that the teacher can provide the pupils with discussions on the topic based on authentic sources instead of simply stating facts and symptoms of mental disorders. An example of an authentic source that can be used in such lessons is stories from the perspective of someone struggling with a mental disorder. These stories can come in the form of literature written for teenagers, i.e., YA literature.

4.2 Benefits from using YA literature when teaching about anxiety disorders

Using YA literature to teach about anxiety disorders is necessary as the young learners get to empathize with someone around their own age, going through the same life events as they do during their teenage years. The YA genre is specifically made to relate emotionally and personally to teenagers and inspire them to listen to the expressed message. Rosenblatt (1995) states that novels that cause the readers to react in such a manner, aid the reader's identity development. This correlates with the Ministry of Education and Research's claim that EFL is an important subject for the pupils' identity development. They also demand that pupils should learn to "express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions and can provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns" in the EFL subject (under Health and life skills) (2019).

In troubling and confusing periods of life, such as teenage years, pupils may act out just for being confused about their feelings and their minds changing and developing at a quick pace. The teacher can assist the pupils when they go through this by showing them through YA novels that they are not alone in what they are feeling. The anxiousness they are feeling by not being completely in control of their feelings is common for many teenagers and is often represented through YA literature. The narratives should not function as therapy for the pupils who identify with the character, but rather as a support. The pupils can learn that not only is someone else feeling the same, but they are experiencing it through a different perspective, making them more reflective of other perspectives on the same situations (Dagostino et al., 2021).

When using fiction in the classroom to learn about different perspectives and states of mind, the teacher might encounter one or more pupils who struggle reading a lengthy novel. This can be because of dyslexia, ADHD, or other learning disabilities. Either way, the teacher should have other options available to ensure that all pupils have the same learning opportunities. A solution for this when using fiction could be to use audiobooks where the whole class listen to the same story collectively, instead of reading individually. Using audiobooks in this manner opens the opportunity to discuss the novel along the way.

As we've seen from my analysis of the novels, the representations of anxiety disorders and the characters' attitudes toward their own disorders can be relatable and educational for many readers going through identity development. I.e., the representation of the word "crazy" in *Fangirl* and *Turtles All the Way Down* is in both cases used with negative intention, and if

discussed in the classroom, there is potential to let the pupils reflect on the meaning of the word and how people who struggle with anxiety might react when the word is used about them.

Circling back to the introduction chapter, I mention the lack of knowledge and how studying the narratives of novels can increase the learning potential by providing new perspectives for the learners. By attaining knowledge from narratives associated with an anxiety disorder – either directly or indirectly – the reader will view the situation from a new perspective and assimilate this into their existing knowledge on the topic. This will also help the pupils reconsider preconceived notions about the specific anxiety disorder.

If *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Turtles All the Way Down*, or *Fangirl* is to be used when teaching about anxiety disorders in the EFL classroom – which I highly recommend, some things are to be considered. These novels represent three distinct anxiety disorders, which indicates that no experience of anxiety is the same. If a pupil recognizes one or more of the anxiety symptoms in the novels, it does not mean they will have the same experiences as the characters. When using a novel to teach about the perspectives of someone struggling with an anxiety disorder, it is important to keep in mind the probability that one or more pupils can relate to the symptoms expressed through the narrative. It is in this case important to have already informed the pupils that everyone who struggles with anxiety, struggle in a unique way, and if the character views their mental disorder or treatment negatively, does not mean the readers should. It is important to teach the pupils critical thinking in regard to this, so that during reading, the pupils can reflect on this themselves. On the other hand, some pupils may not be able to place themselves in the characters' situation at all. In this situation, the pupils should be asked to reflect on how they themselves would feel if they were in the same situation as the character. Challenging the pupils to do this will assist their empathy development and make them more equipped to consider other people's perspectives in future situations.

Another element to consider when reading these novels are misconceptions that the pupils may have learned in their social environments. In order to teach young learners about anxiety disorders, it is imperative that they learn how serious it is. One misconception about anxiety that teachers should be aware of is that anxiety is synonymous with *nervous*. The anxiety representations in the novels in this thesis prove otherwise, and a beneficial discussion point can be the authenticity of the representations. When the pupils learn that this is how some people live, they may experience increased empathy toward the characters and

acknowledge how serious anxiety disorders can be. Reading these novels can also show the reader the difference between struggling with an anxiety disorder versus *being around* someone who struggle with an anxiety disorder. In *Turtles All the Way Down* we notice how Daisy perceives Aza: that Aza is exhausting to be around. What Daisy doesn't realize, but that the reader knows, is how exhausting Aza finds herself. Seeing this situation from Aza's perspective can help the reader understand how it feels to struggle with an anxiety disorder. Consequently, before reading novels such as these, the teacher should teach the pupils to notice how the different perspectives make them feel as readers and how they react to the text, both from the perspective of the main character and from their own.

Using a discussion-based approach in the classroom to discuss novels with a mental health theme can prove beneficial as the pupils all get to appreciate the others' perspectives and interpretations. This will increase the learning potential for a lesson about empathy (Brevik & Lyngstad, 2020).

Just as literature has an essential role in the EFL classroom, literature has an important role in the novels I have analysed. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), Charlie continuously reads novels given to him as assignments from one of his teachers. The teacher gives these assignments to Charlie alone, separate from his class, because they share an interest in literature. Charlie becomes engaged in his literature assignments, both about reading the novels he receives and about writing about his experiences and thoughts while reading them. It is while reading one of these novels that he experiences a revelation that can be shared with the reader of his letters; he learns that a character in the novel feels the same way as he does, and he finds comfort in knowing that he is not alone in his feelings.

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza uses literature from the writing perspective. She writes her story in retrospect as an adult who reflects on her experiences as a teenager because her therapist thought it would help to go through the events that brought her to where she is today. She expresses that while writing about the events she gains clarity about the situations, and when she thought she had failed as a teenager, she realizes as an adult that it was something she had to go through in order to learn something from the traumatizing events.

In *Fangirl*, literature is used as a comfort and reading about this experience with literature can help the reader see the value in the literature they are reading. As Cath is using literature to escape her anxiety and dive into a different world, the readers can be made aware that they are doing the same. Cath mentions several times throughout the novel that she writes fanfiction because she feels safe in that universe, and the characters there would never let her

down like some people in her life already have. If the reader is enforcing critical thinking while reading, they, too, can become aware of the effect literature has on them while they are reading. Reflecting on these uses of literature in class may inspire pupils to also use texts to examine their own beliefs, their actions, and their perspective.

5.0 Conclusion

To sum up the potential benefits of using literature in the classroom, I refer to a quote by Dagostino et al.:

When a teacher combines the reader's emotional response to literature with the discussion of a broader response to the literature at hand, there is great potential not only for learning but also for action. The classroom environment in which students can exchange ideas and perspectives can contribute to the way students can assimilate ideas into actual behaviors and into their identities. (Dagostino et al., 2021)

In addition to the valuable benefits listed by Dagostino et al. in this quote, I would like to include the benefit of empathy development. Although Smith (1759) believes that empathy is something every person has naturally, it does not mean that it cannot be practised and developed further. I argue that empathy can be increasingly developed by reading literature that includes a mental health narrative, instead of simply learning objective information about mental disorders. This idea is supported by several sources, among them Djikic et al. (2013) who through a study discovered that frequent fiction readers documented higher empathy scores than people who did not read fiction regularly. The ideas of Cornell (2022), Lindhé (2016), Nussbaum (1995), and Aristotle (Lindhé, 2020) also promote literature's valuable effects on empathy development.

In addition to empathy development, Siaj and Farrah include the following benefits to reading novels in the EFL classroom: "authenticity, motivation, language improvement, cultural enrichment, personal involvement, creativity, and critical thinking development" (2018, p. 55). The most criticized issue regarding the use of novels when teaching about mental health and developing empathy has been whether the novels glorify illnesses or romanticize self-harming or painful illnesses, and that texts such as these can have disadvantageous effects on the reader's perspective on their own identity and on the illnesses

in the story. This misconception of sick-lit is one reason why I have chosen to approach mental health representations in this thesis. Teachers in particular need more information about mental health representations in YA novels considering many adults have, according to Monaghan, misguided views on YA literature with a mental health theme.

Unfortunately, misconceptions like ‘mental illnesses are not real’ still exists today (Trupe, 2006). These harmful precedents can, if carelessly expressed, be passed down to impressionable children and teenagers who then manifests these ideas and grow up with the same perspective as the adults they acquired them from. Reading authentic novels like the ones I have chosen for this thesis may help them gain a new perspective on the struggles and realize what this is like for some people. It becomes more real when one can read these feelings and experiences from an authentic perspective. If the reader is struggling with an anxiety disorder, whether they are aware or not, it can be comforting to see what they are experiencing in someone else and learn more about themselves. That way they can see that they are not alone in it.

Mental health is one of several social inequities that have should be discussed in more depth in the classroom. People with mental disorders may find it challenging to function today, especially as mental health is still considered a restricted conversation topic. It is necessary to acknowledge this injustice and use the resources available to turn the topic of mental health into a natural conversation topic with learners. These resources include narratives from the perspective of a literary character who struggles with a mental disorder can therefore prove beneficial in the language classroom, as one gets to discuss empathy, new perspectives, and social inequities at the same time. In this thesis, empathy is referring to the way the readers are relating to the characters and acknowledge their feelings as real, in the sense that a considerable amount of people experiences these emotions, even though the character is fictional.

Below I will answer the research questions for my thesis based on my conclusions from the analysis and discussion.

Research question 1: How do Chbosky, Green, and Rowell represent anxiety in their teenage characters Charlie, Aza, and Cath?

During my analyses of the novels, several distinct representations of anxiety were present. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, we may see the anxiety disorder as an unwanted companion or a confusing cloud in Charlie’s head. They are expressed in Charlie’s letters through his own reflections about his actions. However, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, the

anxiety is described as a prison that Aza feels she can never escape from. Aza's experience of her OCD is expressed through her internal arguments with her intrusive thoughts, which gives us a unique perspective on how the intrusive thoughts affect Aza's perception of the world. In *Fangirl*, the anxiety is represented as something physical that aims to cause Cath discomfort, often in her stomach. Here, the anxiety is expressed through Cath's actions, like when she actively avoids unfamiliar or unpredictable situations. The distinction between these anxiety representations is worth taking note of, as it illustrates that people who struggle with anxiety disorders do not experience them in one universal way. Everyone who struggles with a mental illness experience them and approach them in their own way, something that is important to point out to pupils when teaching about this topic.

Research question 2: How can these representations affect young readers?

The representations identified in RQ1 can affect the readers in various ways. A shared effect of the anxiety representations in these three novels is that the reader learns how the world is viewed and perceived by someone with an anxiety disorder. Separately, the novels can affect the reader in various ways.

When Charlie writes his letters to an anonymous source while reflecting on his actions, the reader can assume the letter is written to them. Charlie expresses his actions from his own perspective, and thereby conveys the episodes in a way that makes the reader feel empathy toward him, even when Charlie is at fault. When Charlie experiences a lack of understanding from his friends, when they did not understand that his actions were affected by a mental disorder, the reader can also reflect on their own ability to show compassion and understanding toward others.

Aza has expressed that her anxiety disorder is just a part of adolescence. As adolescents are the target group of the novel, it can make them reflect on the way they are affected by the stressful factors in their lives. It can also let the adolescent readers know that they are not alone in going through a difficult time emotionally and mentally. Aza's struggles with OCD can at times be overwhelming, even for the reader. This can lead to a feeling of alienation for readers who cannot relate to the struggle: the anxiety episode is so extreme that the reader finds the idea of someone living this way unimaginable. At the end of the novel, however, the reader learns that Aza as an adult has a better relationship with her disorder and has found a manageable way to live with it. This lets the reader know that no matter how difficult they might experience a mental health challenge, it can get better.

In *Fangirl*, the reader can be affected by Cath's reluctance toward unfamiliar and unpredictable situations. Cath strongly dislikes such situations and feels anxious about them, even if they are not likely to happen. Readers who identify with this feeling can reflect on this and on why they feel this way. The reader might also notice how Cath is aware of her limitations, and how she accommodates them to not feel overwhelmed. This can inspire young readers to embrace the same mentality and take care of their psyche. During Cath's breakdown, she feels a strong sense of frustration toward herself for not doing her best at school and for being in conflicts that provide her life with instability. If the reader recognizes these emotions and situations, they might feel encouraged by Cath's second chances and by seeing that her complicated situations are solved in the end.

Generally, the anxiety representations in the novels can affect the reader's identity development by representing feelings they can identify with, and the reader can thereby reflect on their feelings based on how the characters reflect on the feelings expressed in the narrative. The anxiety representations can also cause a feeling of alienation in the reader if the reader feels they cannot relate to the character at all. In this case, the reader will learn that people experience and react to situations differently and they might develop higher empathy for people who struggle with anxiety.

Research question 3: How can EFL teachers use literature to raise awareness about mental health challenges and increase empathetic engagement with the mental health challenges of others?

In the EFL classroom, one of the learning aims is to be able to communicate and understand that others' ways of communicating are based on their individual background and perceptions of the world. People's perceptions of the world are based on their experiences and their mental state. Like Azarian (2016) mentioned about anxiety, someone who suffers from a mental disorder has a different perception of the world than someone who does not suffer from a mental disorder. Based on the findings of this thesis and the theory I have used to support my discussion, I argue that the key to truly understanding how mental disorders can affect people who struggle with them is to read fictional literature from the perspective of someone who suffer from a mental disorder.

Since teachers cannot prepare the pupils for all different kinds of mental health representations, they should rather teach them to reflect and think critically when reading about other perspectives (Brevik & Lyngstad, 2020). This way, if the pupils identify with the character, and is anxious that they will suffer the same outcome as them, the pupils can

instead reflect on how the text they read makes them feel. If we use Charlie and his reflections on his actions as an example, we notice how he wonders why he acts the way he does when all it results in is a lack of friends. His friends distance themselves from him when he does something that they deem as inappropriate and rude, but he doesn't understand why they get upset until someone explicitly tells him. Many teenagers may feel insecure in social settings and be anxious to not do or say anything wrong, like Charlie. Readers may identify with Charlie and feel like they are not alone in feeling this way, but they may also assume that since they identify with him in this aspect, they will also share Charlie's outcome and end up in a mental institution. Because of this, it is crucial to teach the pupils critical thinking before learning about perspectives that can make them question their own mental state. Although it is healthy to reflect on our mental health regularly it must be done in a healthy manner and reading about different mental disorders from authentic perspectives is through this thesis concluded to be valuable regarding reflecting on one's own perspective and that of others.

Literature that positively represents mental health can offer empathy-building, relatable experiences through other perspectives, and a conscious understanding that certain aspects of mental health experiences are not being discussed. Discussing these topics helps to build an enriched society *by* and *for* all its citizens.

For further research on the topic, I suggest experimental research on how mental health is taught in EFL classrooms today, as well as investigating teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward mental health and its role in the EFL classroom.

6.0 List of references

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