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**Master's thesis**

**Representation matters: promoting  
intercultural competence through the  
interdisciplinary topic “health and life  
skills”**

Lektorutdanning i språkfag

2LUOPP3

**2023**

## **Acknowledgements**

The time I have spent writing this thesis has been both stressful and rewarding. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Jennifer Jønnum Brunelle for providing me with valuable feedback and support which have helped me get through to the other side of this project.

I would also like to thank everyone who has been a part of making my five years of studying at the lektor programme such a memorable experience.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how young adult literature can be implemented in the upper secondary English classroom to teach themes from the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills” in the LK20 curriculum, and also how this implementation can encourage the development of intercultural competence. It does more specifically focus on the theme of sexuality and gender, which is one of the areas that “health and life skills” focuses on, in addition to an extensive focus on the topic of identity. The importance of representing diversity and promoting a safe and inclusive class environment is emphasised in this thesis. The chosen research method for this thesis is a literary analysis, preceded by a literature review and a close reading. The research is based on a theoretical framework on intercultural competence, the didactic benefits of using literature, transgender youth, and the first-person present tense narrative. Additionally, it is based on several aspects of the LK20 curriculum which are relevant to the topics that concern the thesis.

## **Sammendrag**

Denne oppgaven undersøker hvordan ungdomslitteratur kan implementeres i engelskfaget i videregående skole for å undervise i temaer fra det tverrfaglige temaet "folkehelse og livmestring" i LK20, og også hvordan denne implementeringen kan bidra til utvikling av interkulturell kompetanse. Oppgaven fokuserer mer spesifikt på temaet seksualitet og kjønn som er et av områdene som "folkehelse og livmestring" fokuserer på, i tillegg til et stort fokus på temaet identitet. Viktigheten av å representere mangfold og å fremme et trygt og inkluderende klassemiljø fremheves i denne oppgaven. Den valgte forskningsmetoden for denne oppgaven er en litterær analyse, innledet av en litteraturgjennomgang og en nærlesning. Forskningen er basert på et teoretisk rammeverk om interkulturell kompetanse, didaktiske fordeler ved bruk av litteratur, unge transpersoner, og førstepersonsfortelling i presens. I tillegg er oppgaven basert på flere aspekter ved LK20 som er relevante for temaene som inngår i oppgaven.

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# 1. Introduction

In 1969, one of the first YA novels with LGBTQ+ content appeared, which was John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip*. The publication of this book was welcomed by some reviewers, while there on the other side was scepticism towards how a book like this could ever be appropriate for teen readers. Nonetheless, the publication of this book went on to inspire the first stirrings of LGBTQ+ YA novels, and the number of publications rose steadily in the following decades (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. xi). The rise in the number of publications seems to indicate that there has been a shift in public attitudes towards the topic. It is known that it to a degree is more accepted in society today to have a LGBTQ+ identity than it was previously, but there is still a way to go. Heteronormativity is still an issue in our society, and the default is that you are most often assumed to be straight and cisgender unless you explicitly state otherwise. Because there has been a rise in the number of published YA novels with LGBTQ+ characters, an opportunity has now arisen to challenge the heteronormativity and cisnormativity that characterise the literature that has traditionally been used in the English literature classroom, as well as the heteronormative and cis-normative attitudes that still exist in society today. There is a need for the above-mentioned shift in public attitudes to also be reflected in the classroom.

The interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" in the core curriculum has the purpose of equipping pupils with the competence needed to promote good physical and mental health, where the importance of developing a positive self-image and a confident identity is emphasised. One of the mentioned relevant areas within this interdisciplinary topic is sexuality and gender (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 14). This means that it is expected that there should be a conversation about sexuality and gender in the classroom, and it is important that diversity is celebrated when addressing the topic. One of the competence aims of the LK20 English curriculum is to be able to "read, analyse and interpret English fiction" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 11). Pupils are thus supposed to work with fiction in English, and fiction can for example be a novel, such as this thesis is concerned with. This competence aim does therefore present a potential to make a connection between aspects of the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" and the English subject through the use of literature, by choosing novels that explore themes that "health and life skills" is concerned with. "Health and life skills" is a relatively new topic, and it is interesting to explore the possibilities it entails.

As mentioned, developing a positive self-image and a confident identity is an important aspect of “health and life skills” aims, and representation is one of the factors that can take part in achieving that. The American Library Association creates a list every year with the books that have received the most complaints, and the number of complaints quadrupled in 2021. Most of the complaints were aimed at books with LGBTQ+ content (Vik, 2022). Norwegian author Alexander Kielland Krag responds to the report by saying that art and literature are supposed to open the world up, and not just confirm a given worldview. He also emphasises that it is sad that it is mainly YA novels that are attempted to be removed from American libraries, as adolescence is a period that is particularly formative, and that art is an arena where young people seek to find out that they are not as weird as they feel. It therefore sends a dangerous message about who is accepted in society and who is not, if the books they are seeking are being removed (Vik, 2022). The fact that these tendencies and attitudes exist in our society emphasises the importance of ensuring a diverse representation within the novels one chooses to use in the English classroom. Even though this is an example from The United States, the attitudes that lie behind the desire to ban these books are transferable to a Norwegian context, which makes it a good idea to take precautions in the event that something similar was to happen here. In addition to the attempt to ban YA novels with LGBTQ+ content from American libraries, several events are happening in the world right now where transgender rights are being targeted. In this thesis, the main focus within the topic of sexuality and gender as an aspect of “health and life skills” will be on transgender youth, and some of these events that are targeting transgender people’s right to exist are therefore explored later in this thesis.

In the core curriculum for primary and secondary education in Norway, it says that school is supposed to consider the diversity of pupils and facilitate so that each pupil experiences belonging both in school and society (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5). Through my years in primary and secondary education in Norway, I have not once been presented with literature featuring LGBTQ+ characters, and there has barely even been a conversation about diversity in sexuality and gender. This thesis is therefore written based on a passion for striving to make the English classroom, or school in general for that matter, a place where everyone can feel represented and acknowledged. There is this saying that is spread through social media when discussing LGBTQ+ rights, which is that “equal rights is not a pie: more rights for others does not mean fewer rights for you.” I think that the same goes for representation, more representation for others does not mean less for you, which is a

concern I have met while talking to people about my thesis. Several people have asked me if I really think that a diverse representation is necessary, and my answer to that is a clear yes, which will be demonstrated through this thesis.

## 1.1 Structure

This thesis is made up of eight chapters. This introductory chapter includes the aim of the thesis and the two research questions the thesis focuses on, as well as the methodology that is used. Chapter two contains the theoretical framework that this thesis is based upon, starting with an account of the primary literature chosen for this thesis, followed by theory on intercultural competence, didactic benefits of using literature in the classroom, transgender youth, and the first-person present tense narrative technique. The third chapter covers the LK20 curriculum and how it is connected to the themes that are explored in this thesis. In chapter four, some previous research relevant to this thesis is presented along with an explanation of how it is relevant, and included here is research on LGBTQ+ representation in literature and in the literature classroom, transgender living conditions in Norway, and the possibilities of using YA literature to teach “health and life skills” in the literature classroom. In the fifth chapter, there is a literary analysis of the chosen literary work for this thesis, which is the YA novel *Felix Ever After*. The analysis focuses on the narrative, transgender youth, transphobia and bullying, identity, intersectionality, and coming of age. This analysis is then in chapter six discussed in light of the presented theoretical framework. The discussion also covers the importance of this thesis and relates it to current relevant events. Chapter seven presents a possible suggestion for classroom implementation of the novel, which is also supported by the thesis’ theoretical framework. Finally, chapter eight presents the findings and conclusion of the thesis, as well as suggestions for further research.

## 1.2 Thesis aim and research questions

This thesis aims to make a connection between the English subject and the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”, with a specific emphasis on the subordinate topic of sexuality and gender. This is done by working with a YA novel where the main character is transgender. The chosen novel for this thesis is *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender. The aim is to analyse the themes of the novel and then discuss the analysis in light of the LK20 curriculum, theory on intercultural competence, didactic benefits of teaching with literature, issues that transgender youth experience, and current relevant events. The reasoning behind



writing this thesis is to challenge the practically non-existing diversity of characters that I have encountered myself through the literature I have been presented with through primary and secondary education. Heteronormativity and cisnormativity are being challenged in society, and there is a need to also bring the discussion into the classroom. The literature teachers choose to use in the classroom may have become more diverse since I was in school myself, but I see nonetheless a need for putting representation on the agenda. The overarching idea behind this thesis is that everyone should be able to feel represented in the classroom and experience that their identity matters and that who they are matters. One way to contribute to this is to challenge the traditionally homogeneous representation of characters in the literature classroom. This thesis argues that using a YA novel with LGBTQ+ representation in the classroom can promote the acquisition of intercultural competence as well as promote the aims of the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”.

The research questions that are investigated in this thesis are:

1. How can using YA literature with LGBTQ+ representation in the classroom cultivate intercultural competence?
2. How can the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills” be implemented in the English classroom through the use of YA literature?

These research questions are explored throughout this thesis and a possible answer to them is presented in the conclusion.

### 1.3 Methodology

The nature of the research approach of this thesis is qualitative. The methods that are used in this thesis include a literature review, a close reading, and a literary analysis. This subchapter accounts for the different methods that are used.

#### 1.3.1 Literature review

The first method I have used in this thesis is a literary review for the purpose of getting an overview of existing literature and research in my chosen field of research, to create a theoretical framework to support the thesis. I reviewed literature on intercultural competence, the use of literature in the classroom, transgender issues, and the first-person present tense narrative. Literature on these different fields is what makes up the theory chapter of this thesis. I have also gathered and reviewed a selection of previous research related to the use of

YA literature in the English classroom and making an inclusive classroom for LGBTQ+ pupils. In addition to reviewing literature on these different areas, I have also done a literary review of the different parts of the Norwegian LK20 curriculum to create a synopsis of the aspects that are most relevant to this thesis. The focus here is on intercultural competence, health and life skills, and the use of literature in the classroom.

### 1.3.2 Close reading

Before I could delve into the main method of this thesis, which is a literary analysis, I had to conduct a close reading of my chosen novel *Felix Ever After*. In close reading, closeness “describes a practice of reading that is strict, searching, and minute; it remains close or near to the text” (Schur, 1998, p. 2). The characteristic of a close reading is that the reader gradually moves through a selection while using highly specific textual evidence to make broader claims and connections. This allows for microscopic and macrocosmic views to combine (Schur, 1998, p. 2). In other words, I read the novel carefully while looking for specific pieces of textual evidence that fit within the themes I am looking at. The themes I had in mind while doing the close reading were, in addition to the setting and characters and narrative, identity, transphobia and bullying, transgender youth issues, intersectionality, and coming of age. The textual evidence I made note of while doing the close reading formed the basis of my literary analysis.

### 1.3.3 Literary analysis

The main method that is used in this thesis is a literary analysis, as the analysis of the chosen primary literature *Felix Ever After* is what the discussion of this thesis is based on. The purpose of the literary analysis is to explore and show how YA literature can be used to implement the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills” in the English classroom. When an analysis is conducted, several “parts” of something are analysed to discover the relationships between the parts (Griffith, 2011, p. 12). When the purpose is to generate and communicate an interpretation, analysis is a powerful and necessary strategy (Griffith, 2011, pp. 12-13). The ability to analyse literature is helpful to see how meaning is generated in each “part” and how the parts contribute to the meaning of the whole work (Griffith, 2011, p. 12). A literary analysis is, in other words, a means to discovering the meaning of a text, and how that meaning is created through the different parts of the text, such as the different themes in *Felix Ever After* that are analysed in this thesis.

The literary analysis covers first the setting and characters of the novel, to establish some context for the remainder of the analysis, and then continues to look at the significance of the form of narrative that is used in the novel and how it affects the storytelling and the meaning of the story. The rest of the analysis is concerned with how themes from “health and life skills” such as identity and sexuality and gender, are covered in *Felix Ever After*. It is also explored how these themes are connected to other aspects of the LK20 curriculum, such as intercultural competence and core values such as *human dignity*. The discussion delves deeper into the findings from the analysis and looks at these in light of the thesis’ theoretical framework and relevant previous research. The theoretical framework is accounted for in the following chapter.

## 2. Theory

This chapter forms the theoretical framework that this thesis is based upon. Provided in the first subsection of this chapter is an account of the term *intercultural competence*, including two different models on the topic. These are Byram's *model of intercultural competence* and UNESCO's list of *basic components of intercultural competence*, which is applied when discussing the didactic benefits of teaching with *Felix Ever After*. The second subsection delves into the didactic benefits of using literature. The chosen theories include Nussbaum's concept of a *sympathetic imagination* and Kintsch's *Construction-Integration model*. In addition, the second subsection is concerned with young adult literature and why we should use it in teaching. It is necessary to have a theoretical framework on why using literature in the classroom is beneficial because this thesis explores the potential of using YA literature in the classroom. The third subsection is concerned with transgender youth and some of the issues that they face in everyday life. These challenges are also portrayed in *Felix Ever After*, which is why it is necessary to explore some of these issues here in this chapter. The purpose of looking at these issues through reading and working with *Felix Ever After* is to create awareness about issues and struggles that do not only exist within the novel but that are also very real for many people in our society today. This chapter also looks at the significance of the first-person present tense narrative technique, which is the narrative technique that is used in *Felix Ever After*. This is necessary in order to analyse how the storytelling is affected by the author's chosen narrative technique. All of the topics that have been mentioned here in the introduction of this chapter are therefore relevant theoretical framework that is essential for putting forward the argument of this thesis.

### 2.1 Primary literature

The chosen literary work for this thesis is the YA novel *Felix Ever After* written by Kacen Callender which was first published in 2020. The novel is written in a first-person present tense narrative, and we follow protagonist Felix Love as he struggles with issues regarding identity, love, growing up, self-love, transphobia, and bullying. Felix is black, queer, and transgender which means that he belongs to several minority identities, and the novel depicts how his life is affected by his identity. The novel can arguably be seen as semi-autobiographical because Callender themselves are black, queer, and transgender. The novel therefore covers several themes that are relevant to the interdisciplinary topic "health and life

skills”, such as identity, sexuality, gender, and self-image. It also has relevance to other aspects of the LK20 curriculum such as the core values and the development of intercultural competence. This is further elaborated on in the chapter about the LK20 curriculum.

## 2.2 Intercultural competence

This thesis is concerned with how teaching with literature can develop intercultural competence. Originally, the term *intercultural*, which emerged in the 1950s, related to the dialogue and cooperation between people from different nations. A lot has happened since then, and it was stated by the Council of Europe that “every interpersonal situation is potentially an intercultural situation” (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 19). Considering this, it is possible to define intercultural competence as “the ability to relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one’s own” (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 19). Intercultural interaction can therefore be applied to everyday life and can concern encounters with any type of diversity, such as differences in life situations, family background, or maybe different political views (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 19). Intercultural competence is therefore in short being capable of interaction and relation with others, regardless of their background or identity. Intercultural competence is therefore an important knowledge to have to successfully navigate in a world where we have so many different cultures, identities, and ways of life. Intercultural competence can therefore arguably be relevant when relating and communicating with people who for example have a different gender identity or sexual orientation than yourself, which also creates a connection between intercultural competence and “health and life skills” because the latter is concerned with identity and sexuality and gender. Following is an account of two different models of intercultural competence, which are Byram’s model of intercultural competence and the UNESCO publication *intercultural competence* which deals with some of the basic components of intercultural competence.

### 2.2.1 Models of intercultural competence

There exist several models that tell us something about what intercultural competence is. The model of intercultural competence that is arguably most influential, for the purpose of foreign language education, was developed by British scholar Michael Byram. Byram’s model of intercultural competence is made up of five *savoirs*. *Savoir* is French for “to know” and these *savoirs* are concerned with different types of skills, knowledges, and attitudes which Byram

believes need to be developed by learners for them to become interculturally competent (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). The first of the five savoir is *attitudes* (savoir-être), which includes “the ability to relativize oneself and value others” (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). What goes into this is being able to meet others with an open and curious mind, and being able to respect others’ beliefs and opinions regardless of how they might differ from your own. This thesis promotes the capability to learn about different identities and ways of life without being prejudiced or judgemental. There is so much we can learn from others if we choose to approach them with openness and respect. Byram’s second savoir is *knowledge* (savoir), which concentrates on the knowledge “of self, of others, and of interaction processes” (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). This can be interpreted as having knowledge about how interaction functions between different social groups and identities, based on the knowledge one has about oneself and others, and the ability to use this knowledge to successfully interact with others. *Skills of interpreting and relating* (savoir comprendre) is the third savoir (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). One could look at this as interpreting behaviour, experiences, or beliefs from different cultures and identities, and relating these to experiences from one’s own identity and culture. Savoir number four is *skills of discovery and interaction* (savoir apprendre/faire) (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). This can be interpreted as discovering and acquiring new knowledge about other cultures or identities and being able to use this knowledge to achieve successful interaction. The fifth and final savoir is *critical cultural awareness* (savoir s’engager). “This includes political education and the ability to evaluate one’s own and other people’s behaviour critically (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). Accordingly, in addition to being able to acquire knowledge about other cultures and identities and being able to use this knowledge, one should also be able to actively evaluate the behaviour of others and oneself. In addition to that one should respect different beliefs and values, it is also important to have the ability to recognise deviant or hurtful behaviour. These savoirs can be useful to have in mind while reading and working with a novel, such as with *Felix Ever After*. When relating to the story and the characters, it is valuable to be open-minded and curious, as well as to have respect for different identities, as the first savoir is concerned with. One can also equip the second savoir, by using the knowledge one has about oneself and others and how interaction works between different identities and social groups while reading the novel and trying to apply the dynamics and interactions in the novel to the real world. In addition, the third savoir can be useful for trying to relate to what is happening in the novel by comparing and relating this to one’s own personal experiences. The fourth savoir is also relevant, as one is able to acquire new knowledge about different identities and

cultures while reading the novel. And lastly, the fifth *savoir* is also highly relevant as it is beneficial to actively evaluate the behaviour of the characters in the novel, while at the same time applying this evaluation to one's own life and reflecting upon how one might make changes to one's behaviour based on the assessments one has made while reading the novel. Byram's model of intercultural competence as a tool to understand and achieve the different components of intercultural competence is therefore relevant to this thesis.

There are different ways in which scholars describe intercultural competence, but some components of it are consensually regarded as essential. The UNESCO publication *Intercultural Competence* reflects upon this consensus and also presents the minimum requirements to acquire intercultural competence (Dyppedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). The first of the basic components of intercultural competence presented in this publication is *respect*, and valuing other people's backgrounds is one of the mentioned aspects of this (Dyppedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). Respect is arguably vital when working with intercultural competence and learning about different identities and cultures in the classroom. Chances are that there are pupils in the class who belong to the culture or identity that is being worked with, and it would not create a good learning environment or social environment for these pupils if they experience disrespect towards their identity or culture. Of course, one should always be respectful regardless of whether what you are talking about represents someone in the classroom, and the truth is that one can never really be sure whether this is the case or not, which is why respect is always important. The second basic component is *self-awareness*. "This includes awareness of one's own identity and understanding the lens through which the world is interpreted" (Dyppedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). When working with different cultures and identities, it is useful to be aware of how one chooses to identify oneself, in addition to gaining awareness about how one sees the world through a specific lens and that others look at the world through their own lens. Everything one has experienced in one's life has contributed to how one looks at the world, and it is important to keep in mind that others have different experiences which means that they might interpret the world around them differently. *Seeing from other perspectives or decentering* is the third component, and this component is concerned with being aware of how others' perspectives might be different or similar to one's own. When talking about decentering, the concept of empathy is crucial (Dyppedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). It is important to be able to see different perspectives because one sees the world in a way that is coloured by who one is and what one has been through. To learn about others and their ways of life and ways of thinking, it is necessary to

attempt to put oneself in the situations of others. This can also be related to the concept of a *sympathetic imagination* which is elaborated on later in this theory chapter when addressing the didactic benefits of using literature in the classroom. There are several other elements on the list of basic components of intercultural competence, but those explained above cover the basis of what is dealt with in this thesis, where respect and being able to see other perspectives than just one's own is essential.

### 2.3 Didactic benefits of literature

Teaching with literature is one of the main aspects of this thesis, which is why this subchapter looks at some of the didactic benefits of using literature in the English classroom and why teachers should choose to teach with YA literature.

There are several reasons as to why we read literature and why teachers should also encourage their students to read, and the didactic benefits of using literature in the EFL classroom is a widely studied field. Some psychologists argue that the joy that reading fiction provides is related to an everyday skill that has been developed over millennia, as we are in a constant process of interpreting the behaviour of others and coming up with assumptions about their motivations. How well a person does this decides to what degree they succeed with going about their daily business. This ability to shift mindsets is tested when one reads fiction (Carlsen, 2020, p. 209). Reading literature can therefore reinforce skills that we use in everyday life, which means that we can benefit from reading literature in that way.

The concept *sympathetic imagination* was introduced by Martha Nussbaum, and she believes that literature is one of the major contributors to developing this ability. The influential social critic argues that to become world citizens, it is not enough to just acquire a lot of knowledge,

“...we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for a sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 85).

What this means, is that if the goal is to become a world citizen, it is not enough to simply learn facts and acquire information, it is also a necessity to attempt to put oneself in the situations of others and focus on what unites us instead of having a mentality that emphasises “us versus them”. Nussbaum argues that the arts play a vital role in cultivating this sympathetic imagination and that literature, in particular, contributes a great deal to shaping



the way we understand the world around us (Nussbaum, 1997, pp. 85-86). Taking Nussbaum's argument about literature being essential to understanding the world around us into consideration, it is possible to make a connection between reading literature and the acquirement and development of intercultural competence (Carlsen, 2020, p. 210). It is shown in the previous subsection that intercultural competence is concerned with the capability of successful interaction with others, regardless of whether they have a different mindset or way of life than oneself. When our capacity to understand the people who are surrounding us is developed, it leads to a more nuanced way of understanding the society that we live in (Carlsen, 2020, p. 210). Reading literature is hence one way to develop intercultural competence, which is a necessity for achieving a high-functioning society when people with so many different identities are living side by side. Studying and teaching literature is indispensable for many teachers in EFL classrooms because the pupils are exposed to meaningful contexts full of descriptive language and interesting characters through literature (Van, 2009, p. 2). Teaching literature, in addition to being an aid in developing the language skills of students, is an appeal to their imagination as well as a part of developing cultural awareness. Also, critical thinking regarding the plot, themes, and characters is encouraged (Van, 2009, p. 2). This means that literature can provide exposure to contexts and situations that might be difficult to access otherwise. Literature is therefore a useful resource for the English classroom.

To engage a variety of readers with diverse interests, it is essential to supply them with a wide range of reading material. Books that are written especially for teenagers and young adults are usually appealing to pupils which can be helpful in motivating reluctant or inexperienced readers, and youth fiction has over the past decades become a vibrant and greatly commercialised market (Carlsen, 2020, p. 216). The term youth literature covers a variation of genres and formats, but the common feature in this type of literature is that it is written for young people and the main characters are also young people (Carlsen, 2020, p. 217). It is therefore a good idea to look to young adult literature when you are going to teach with literature to adolescents because this is literature that the pupils might be able to relate to as the characters are more likely to be in a similar life situation as the reader. It is also important to consider that young people are not one homogenous group, but that you are likely to have a group with a wide range of different identities. When one is choosing the variety of literature to supply to one's pupils, it is therefore important to consider this diversity. The chosen novel for this thesis does for example represent a transgender identity and can therefore contribute

to extending the number of pupils who are able to find a book with a character they can identify with.

Several arguments as to why we should use literature in teaching have been presented, but it is also useful to look at how pupils can benefit from it. One way to understand how pupils are benefiting from reading is by looking at models of comprehension. The model that is seen as most complete and that is closest to being fully developed is Kintsch's *Construction-Integration model*. Kintsch's model is similar to the *schema theory model*, which is a popular older model, in the sense that they both emphasise the importance of the prior knowledge of readers in the process of comprehension. The process in both models is driven by a virtuous cycle. This means that one enters the comprehension process with prior knowledge, which influences one's comprehension. Through the comprehension process, new information is obtained which changes the knowledge one possesses. Further, this is the knowledge that we bring with us for future comprehension processes (Duke et. al, 2011, p. 53). In short, this means that the more we read, the more knowledge we acquire. "In a very real sense, we literally read and learn our way into greater knowledge about the world and greater comprehension capacity" (Duke et. al., 2011, p. 53). This quote neatly sums up the *construction-integration model* and shows how applicable the model is to this thesis. One of the main ideas of this thesis is that the use of literature can be an aid in widening our understanding and knowledge of the world around us. The *Construction-Integration model* can therefore be used to explain how the pupils are gaining knowledge and understanding about the world through reading literature.

It has already been argued in this thesis that YA literature is a suitable choice when finding literature for one's pupils, but it is also relevant to look at what characterises YA literature other than the fact that it is written for young people and that it features young characters. What most books that are marketed to adolescents have in common, is that the plot includes the theme of *coming of age* in some way (Beach et. al., 2011, p. 26). YA literature is therefore most often concerned with a journey the character goes on from childhood into adulthood and the experiences they come across on the way. This coming-of-age theme is also apparent in *Felix Ever After*. Even though the plot itself takes place over a shorter period of time, we still get insight into Felix's journey from childhood to adolescence through flashbacks and reflections about his past. In addition to this, he is going through a journey of self-development and becoming confident in his own identity which can also be seen as fitting within the coming-of-age theme. This is further looked at later in the analysis and discussion.

Historically, there have been two opposing views on literature teaching. The first view is *Literature as Cultural Ideal*, which is a view that has not changed a lot over the past century. *Literature as Cultural Access*, however, which is the other perspective, has undergone several changes concerned with for example how the perspective sees the role of the reader (Beach et. al., 2011, p. 81). The first difference between the two approaches is the role of literature. From the perspective of literature as a cultural ideal, the role of literature is “promoting and preserving a cultural standard or ideal” (Beach et. al., 2011, p. 81). This view, therefore, sees literature as reinforcing a specific culture or ideas that are already in place. Literature as cultural access, on the other hand, sees the role of literature as “engaging students in developmentally appropriate reading practices, and promoting access to a broad array of texts and cultural perspectives” (Beach et. al., 2011, p. 81). The latter approach is therefore more concerned with the opportunities of using literature rather than looking at it as simply strengthening a pre-existing ideal. This is also reflected in the two opposing ways that the perspectives perceive texts. From the perspective of viewing literature as a cultural ideal, there is an emphasis on a fixed standard of classic literature, which is a representation of the peak of western culture (Beach et. al, 2011, p. 81). This is therefore a view that does not really promote or encourage diversity but is rather reinforcing a set ideal. Literature as cultural access, however, emphasises the potential literature has to develop the readers’ cognitive, social, political, and aesthetic capacities (Beach et. al, 2011, p. 81). When working with YA literature and choosing which YA literature to use in the classroom, it can therefore be necessary to consider which view of literature one wishes to promote. If the goal is to promote literature as cultural access, then one should aim to choose novels that will allow the pupils to develop the capacities mentioned above. The argument of this thesis is arguably in favour of the perspective of literature as cultural access, as the idea of the thesis is to challenge the traditional monotonous cultural ideal which traditionally has been present in the literature classroom. It is therefore appropriate to treat literature in the view of it being a source of cultural access if we want our pupils to think critically and get new insights rather than simply enforcing a set ideal. Literature as cultural access is therefore the view that will be enforced in this thesis.

This subchapter looks at the importance and advantages of using literature in the English classroom. It is clear that literature has a lot of benefits that are difficult to attain from other sources and is therefore a valuable resource for teachers, with YA literature being particularly valuable.

## 2.4 Transgender youth

*Felix Ever After* portrays many of the real-world struggles faced by transgender people today, in particular, transgender youth. For instance, trans youth are often told that they are too young to know who they are, and what their gender identities are. Furthermore, the novel brings to light a number of intersectional issues that further complicate transgender people, such as being a person of colour, being poor or working class, or being queer. There is a combination of struggles to be dealt with, with gender being only one aspect of this (Keo-Meier & Hicks, 2014, p. 446). This subsection addresses some of the issues that trans youth face in society today because these are issues that are also present in *Felix Ever After* which means that they will be looked at in both the analysis and the discussion of this thesis.

### 2.4.1 Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of starting to figure out who one is. There are significant social and biological changes that take place during this time on the way into adulthood. It is in these years that many begin to explore gender and sexual identities, and it is a time when many begin to recognise themselves as trans. There are already boundaries relating to the social and sexual behaviours set in place by authority figures like parents and teachers. When youth express their identities in a different way than what these authority figures assume, it might be difficult for them to know how to react. They might dismiss trans identities as confusion, rebellion, or “just a phase”, or invalidate their experiences in other ways (Keo-Meier & Hicks, 2014, p. 446). Adolescence is therefore a stage in life that might be challenging for all young people, regardless of their gender identity. However, this period can be additionally difficult for trans youth, as they might also have to deal with their identity being invalidated by the people around them. It is reasonable to draw the assumption that having one’s identity invalidated can have a negative impact on developing a strong and confident identity. As is briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the development of a strong and confident identity is an essential aspect of “health and life skills”, and this is also explored further in the upcoming chapter on the LK20 curriculum. It is therefore relevant to address the fact that for transgender youth, it can be difficult to develop a strong and confident identity if they are constantly being told that who they are is just a phase or an act of rebellion.

### 2.4.2 The change of name and pronouns

Changing your name and pronouns is something that transgender people deal with, and this can of course apply to both transgender youth and adults. Nevertheless, it is something that cisgender people do not have to deal with in the same way, even though there of course are people who change their names for a variety of other reasons. There are also transgender people who for example choose to only change their pronouns and not their name, with an example of this being actress Dylan Mulvaney who has gone through a very public transition on her TikTok account. Nevertheless, the change of name and pronouns is ultimately something that trans youth deal with.

The change of name or pronouns can be fun because it allows for defining oneself in a very literal way and reinventing oneself in a way that feels authentic. Even though choosing a new name or set of pronouns can be empowering, there is the issue that people who have known the person for a long time can have difficulty with changing the way they address them. Some people may have problems with consistently using new names and pronouns (Keo-Meier & Hicks, 2014, p. 446). The reason why the change of name or pronouns can be problematic is therefore because of how the person's family, friends, or other people in their life might react to this. This is a very relevant issue, and it is not rare to hear stories from transgender people about how their families or friends struggle with, or refuse, to use their new chosen name or pronouns. This is an issue that is continuously addressed throughout *Felix Ever After*, and the literary analysis looks at several examples that illustrate how hurtful it can be when those close to you do not respect your preferred pronouns or chosen name.

### 2.4.3 Coming out

“Coming out is a process of acknowledging to oneself or disclosing to others something that is not readily apparent or understood about who we are. For those of us who are trans or gender nonconforming, that something is our gender identity or expression”  
(Vanderburgh, 2014, p. 105).

Coming out is therefore about coming to terms with your own identity or disclosing this identity to others. It can be scary to come out because it is sadly not a matter of course that the people around one are accepting of one's identity, and it can even be risky to disclose one's gender identity. It is an unfortunate truth that coming out to your family can mean that you will lose them (Keo-Meier & Hicks, 2014, p. 453). This can be particularly vulnerable for

young people, who may be kicked out of their family's home and do not have any other place to go. Coming out is therefore something that should always be done on one's own terms, regarding both how and when it is happening. The literary analysis and discussion look at how *Felix Ever After* deals with the subject of coming out through Felix's experiences.

#### 2.4.4 Transphobia and bullying

Bullying is something that most people have some sort of relationship with, it being that they have been bullied themselves, that they have bullied others, or that they have observed bullying. Nevertheless, bullying is unfortunately something that happens everywhere. Bufdir (Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs) defines transphobia as "Transphobia is fear of trans people, which can be expressed in prejudice and aggression. Transphobia is used to describe negative actions and attitudes directed at trans people." (Bufdir, n.d). Bullying can therefore be a result of transphobia when transphobic people act out on their attitudes by performing negative actions towards trans people. *Felix Ever After* addresses the issue of transphobia and bullying, which is an issue that is prominent both in the novel and in the real world. In a Bufdir report on sexual orientation, gender diversity, and living conditions which presented the results of a 2020 survey, it was revealed that 46% of the transgender respondents had been harassed in the workplace in the last 12 months. Among the transgender college students who were part of the study, 44% answered that they had been harassed by teachers and 52% answered that they had been harassed by other students. There was a significant difference between these results and the results from the cisgender people who were part of the study (Anderssen et. al., 2021, p. 61). These findings show that transgender people are more likely than cisgender people to be harassed at work or university. This leaves it important to address the issue of transphobia and bullying in the classroom, as talking about what transphobia is might help prevent it in the future. *Felix Ever After* illustrates how transphobia can be manifested and shows some of the effects it can have on the person who is being harassed, which is exemplified in the literary analysis and further explored in the discussion chapter.

#### 2.4.5 Representation of trans youth in literature

One way to acquire more knowledge about the struggles that trans youth face, is through reading literature featuring transgender characters. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, LGBTQ+ YA literature has been around since 1969, and the number of publications

has only continued to increase since then. The first YA novel to feature a transgender character, however, did not come out until 2004 when Julie Anne Peters published her novel *Luna* (Jenkins & Cart, 2018, p. 162). This means that even though there has been a steady increase in the number of publications of LGBTQ+ YA novels in general, YA novels with transgender characters have only become more common in the past few years. In addition to more books being published, YA writers have become more mindful regarding the terminology they use about gender identity and transgender issues. For example, Ellen Wittlinger re-issued her 2007 novel *Parrotfish* in 2015, because it contained outdated terminology (Bittner et. al., 2016, p. 955). What this means, is that YA novels featuring transgender characters are more accessible today than they were for instance a decade ago. This offers an opportunity for teachers to take use of these novels and bring them into the classroom, for the purpose of both creating a more diverse representation in the classroom, as well as shedding light on societal issues. It is also an opportunity to make cisgender pupils aware of their privilege when it comes to not having to actively seek representation, as they have always been able to find literature or other types of art where they are represented, at least when it comes to their gender identity. There might, of course, be other factors that make pupils feel different and underrepresented within literature, such as having a disability, being a person of colour, having a mental illness, or being gay. As a teacher, these are all factors that one can take into account when choosing literature or films to work with in class. It is important to remember that it has not always been a matter of course that there are available sources of representation for everyone and that one now has the opportunity to embrace the different works that have been published in recent years.

## 2.5 First-Person Present Tense Narrative

The narrative that Callender uses in *Felix Ever After* is a *First-Person Present Tense* narrative, which makes it necessary to have some theoretical background on this particular type of narrative to look at how this affects the narration of the novel. It is pointed out by Monika Fludernik, Professor of English literature and culture, that “the use of the present tense has an interesting consequence for the reader’s “(re-)conceptualization of the natural storytelling frame, where a story has to have happened in the past in order to become tellable” (Hansen, 2008, p. 317). In other words, it is not really possible to tell a story that has not yet happened. The phenomenon is labelled *simultaneous narration* by literature scholar Dorrit Cohn, and because it does not create a spatial or temporal distance to the events that are being

narrated, it is difficult to ascribe it to our standard view of narrative as it lacks what we usually consider crucial in order to achieve a “natural” narrative situation (Hansen, 2008, pp. 317-318). One could claim that it is common sense that it is only possible to narrate events after they have happened, but this view is problematic to transfer to other genres such as sports commentary, and to cinematographic narratives, in which incidents are narrated while they are occurring. Something similar is also the case for FPPT, or *first person, present tense narration in written fiction*, and it can be claimed that the prevalent use of FPPT can be related to audio-visual media narration in the way that it creates a *here-and-now* style (Hansen, 2008, p. 318). This cannot however be generalised to all use of FPPT because of the involvement of feelings and thoughts in the narration. It is also possible to conceptualise FPPT as a form of a “historical present”, but with the historical present, there is narration with a covered past tense, where the narrative is told with knowledge gained through temporal distance in an attempt to recreate a past situation by telling it from the perspective of the incident, whereas FTTP actually is telling a story from within the incidents (Hansen, 2008, p. 318-319). One characteristic of FPPT is that it removes any detectable signs of any narrators beyond the first-person narrator (Hansen, 2008, p. 320). “...as we read any one moment of the narrative we must assume that the future is always—and radically—wide open: the narrator’s guess about what will happen next is really no better than our own” (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 1994, p. 223). The effect of using a present tense narrative can therefore provide a sense of following the story *while* it is happening, which means that the form of narrative is contributing to the meaning of the story. The reader can get the feeling about the narrator knowing as much about their future as the reader does, which means that the narrator’s language and thoughts are not coloured by future events like they could be if the story was being told in retrospect. The choice of using a first-person present tense narrative in a novel such as *Felix Ever After* is arguably suitable because the main character is on a journey of finding out who he is and how he wants to define himself. Using the present tense here makes the reader feel like they are following along this journey in real-time, which might be what the author is trying to accomplish, as the reader gains a sense that Felix tells his story without knowing its outcome, just as the reader does not know the outcome of their own story.

Intercultural competence, didactic benefits of teaching with literature, transgender youth, and the first-person present tense narrative form does as demonstrated make up the theoretical framework for this thesis. The following chapter deals with the LK20 curriculum which at several points is also informed by the theoretical framework.



### 3. LK20 curriculum

The LK20 subject curriculum was established in 2019 by the *Ministry of Education and Research*, hereafter abbreviated to UDIR, which is responsible for primary and secondary education in Norway. This section will look at how both the LK20 core curriculum and the LK20 English subject curriculum are relevant to different themes and ideas in this thesis. The first subsection deals with intercultural competence and what the curriculum says about acquiring it. Subsequently follows a subchapter on health and life skills which accounts for what the interdisciplinary topic covers and explains its relevance to this thesis. Finally, a subchapter on using literature in the classroom looks at a variety of aspects of the curriculum that are related to using literature in the English classroom.

#### 3.1 Intercultural competence

The teaching of intercultural competence is one of the things that this thesis is concerned with, and it is explained in the theory chapter what intercultural competence is and how it is relevant to this thesis. As will be demonstrated in this subchapter, there are also several aspects of the LK20 curriculum that are connected to intercultural competence. In the *core curriculum - values and principles for primary and secondary education and training*, one of the core values is *human dignity*. The main essence of this core value is that “all people are equal regardless of what makes us different” (UDIR, 2017, p. 4). It also says that because everyone might experience feelings of difference and standing out, differences should be acknowledged and appreciated (UDIR, 2017, p. 5). This core value says that everyone is equal regardless of how they identify and that they should also be treated as so. It has already been addressed in the theory chapter that this is not the case in our society, and that some people treat others differently because of who they are. Transgender people are one of the marginalised groups who experience negative behaviour from other because of who they are when prejudices are manifested as transphobia and hate crimes towards transgender people. “School must consider the diversity of pupils and facilitate for each pupil to experience belonging in school and society” (UDIR, 2017, p. 5). It is therefore the responsibility of the school to make sure that every pupil feels like they belong, regardless of their background. If this is to be achieved, the pupils also need to have respect for each other and treat each other with kindness despite their differences. Helping the pupils develop their intercultural competence is one way of facilitating for a school environment that is open and accepting.

One way of considering the pupils' diversity and making them feel like they belong, is to keep this in mind when choosing which literature to use in the classroom, which makes this core value directly relevant to this thesis.

In the section on *relevance and central values* in the English subject curriculum, it says that the English subject shall contribute to “develop an intercultural understanding of different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns” (UDIR, 2019, p. 2). In other words, the English subject is supposed to help the development of the pupils' intercultural competence. This can also be connected to Nussbaum's concept of a *sympathetic imagination* that is explored in the theory chapter in regard to the didactic benefits of using literature. If it is a goal that the pupils shall become world citizens, it is necessary to encourage the process of developing their empathy for others, by enabling them to look at the world from different perspectives and learn about different identities. Developing a sympathetic imagination is, therefore, an important part of acquiring intercultural competence, and therefore also an important aspect of the English subject.

Another core value in the core curriculum that can be connected to intercultural competence, is *identity and cultural diversity*. Here it says that “School shall support the development of each person's identity, make the pupils confident in who they are...” (UDIR, 2017, p. 6). Representation is important when a young person is in the process of developing and becoming confident in their identity. If they are never exposed to anyone with a similar identity, it can make them feel less valuable or even invalidated. This core value can therefore be connected to the aim of ensuring diverse representation in the classroom to make all pupils feel like they belong and that it is okay to be who they are, regardless of how they identify. This can also lead to that their fellow pupils gaining a greater understanding of their identity through being exposed to the relevant identity for example through literature. One could also say that this can be connected to the previously mentioned core value *human dignity*, because facilitating for equality and inclusion is part of allowing the pupils to develop their identities confidently and encouraging them to be who they are, or who they want to be. It can also be argued that the core value *identity and cultural diversity* has a similar goal as the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”, which underlines the relationship between health and life skills and the development of intercultural competence.

Several other aspects of the English subject curriculum can be connected to intercultural competence. The importance of English as a subject is related to several different areas, including cultural understanding, communication, and developing an identity, as well as it

being important in the concern of overall education. One of the elements that are to be provided to pupils through the English subject is the basis for communication with others, both in their own communities and other parts of the world, where cultural or linguistic background should not have a say. In addition, the English subject shall be an aid in developing an intercultural understanding of different ways of life, ways of thinking, and patterns of communication. (UDIR, 2019, p. 2). When one has knowledge of language, communication patterns, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and social conditions, as well as an exploratory approach to the mentioned points, one becomes more open to new perspectives on both oneself and the world. The subject shall also help the pupils understand that the way they view the world is culture-dependent. The effect of this can be the revelation of new ways to interpret the world, curiosity and engagement are promoted, and it can also lead to the prevention of prejudice (UDIR, 2019, p. 2). The central values of the English subject curriculum are therefore relevant to this thesis in the way that they are concerned with the ability to meet others and the world around one with an open mind and the prevention of prejudices. This is another place where it is relevant to refer to Nussbaum's concept of a *sympathetic imagination*. When developing an intercultural understanding, seeing the world through someone else's eyes allows for a greater understanding of different perspectives. In addition, one should aim to look at common problems and possibilities rather than alienating people that are different from oneself.

The core curriculum and the English subject curriculum are as demonstrated both highly concerned with the development of intercultural competence, which means that as teachers, it is something that needs to be promoted to the pupils and help them achieve. This is both for their personal growth and development and also for the purpose of creating an inclusive society where people can live side by side regardless of their differences.

### 3.2 Health and life skills

“Health and life skills” is one of the three interdisciplinary topics in the LK20 curriculum. The topic covers a variety of themes and issues that are supposed to help pupils make good life choices for themselves. The purpose of this interdisciplinary topic is to help pupils make responsible choices in their lives, in addition to providing competence that encourages good mental and physical health (UDIR, 2017, p. 15). “In the childhood and adolescent years, the development of a positive self-image and confident identity is particularly important” (UDIR, 2017, p. 15). Several areas that are relevant to this topic are listed, such as physical health,

mental health, lifestyle habits, and sexuality and gender (UDIR, 2017, p. 15). “Health and life skills” is one of the most relevant parts of the core curriculum in relation to this thesis, as it mentions several of the topics that are to be dealt with in this thesis such as identity and sexuality and gender. Trans youth and some of the struggles they face were addressed in the theory chapter of this thesis, which is exactly the sort of topic that can be included in the gender aspect of health and life skills. This is also relevant when working with identity and the development of a positive self-image.

This thesis aims to explore the connection between the English subject and “health and life skills”. The English subject curriculum incorporates “health and life skills” in the way that the development of oral and writing skills in English is necessary for being able to express one’s thoughts, feelings, experiences, and opinions. This can also provide new viewpoints on different ways of thinking and can help the pupils look at the ways of life of both themselves and of others in a different light (UDIR, 2019, p. 3). It says in the definition of “health and life skills” in the core curriculum that the topic shall help pupils deal with both personal and practical challenges in the best way possible. Mentioned as relevant areas within the topic are among others mental health, lifestyle habits, and sexuality and gender (UDIR, 2017, p. 14). We live in a society with a range of different gender expressions and gender identities, which means that this needs to be considered in the classroom. It is necessary to challenge the cisnormativity and heteronormativity that exists in society, which can be done through “health and life skills” by addressing and embracing different sexualities and gender identities and expressions. This thesis focuses on how this can be done by teaching with a YA novel. Even though it is not explicitly mentioned within the section on the application of health and life skills in the English subject curriculum, the main essence of the interdisciplinary topic is to be able to make good choices, develop a confident identity, and find new ways to look at yourself and the world around you. It is therefore relevant to apply those aspects to the English subject on the same lines as other subjects.

### 3.3 Using literature in the classroom

Because this thesis is concerned with the use of literature in the classroom, it is useful to look at which parts of the curriculum relates to the matter. The three core elements of the English subject are communication, language learning, and working with English texts.

Communication indicates using language to create meaning and being able to use the language formally and informally (UDIR, 2019, p. 3). Language learning entails the

development of language awareness and having knowledge of English as a system and being able to use different strategies of language learning (UDIR, 2019, p. 3). Encountering texts in English is essential in English language learning. In the English subject curriculum, there is a broad definition of a text as a concept. A text can be both spoken or written, digital or printed, formal or informal, fictional or factual, as well as contemporary or historical. In other words, there are many different variations of what is considered an English text. Through working with texts in English, pupils are developing knowledge of the diversity of linguistics and culture, and they are also advancing their comprehension of ways of living and thinking. Knowledge of culture and society is acquired through the reflection and interpretation of English texts. A foundation for seeing others and own identity in a context that is multilingual and multicultural shall be built through the English subject (UDIR, 2019, p. 3). Language learning, communication, and working with English texts are all elements that are relevant when working with literature. Taking all this into consideration, teaching a novel with a main character who might have a different identity than the reader, allows for acquiring knowledge and understanding of other ways of life and other ways of thinking.

In addition, it might help prevent prejudice which is mentioned in the central values of the English subject. The pupils also get to work on their language skills through reading, and communication skills while expressing themselves about what they have read. Therefore, using literature in the English classroom allows for the development of the three core elements of the English subject. This can again be connected to the topic of intercultural competence because of the acquirement of knowledge about society and culture that occurs through working with texts in English. Being able to look at one's own and others' identity in a multilingual and multicultural context also relates to this, and it could therefore be argued that using literature in the English classroom appeals to both the core elements of the subjects as well as broader themes such as intercultural competence and health and life skills.

Working with literature also requires the use of the basic skills within the subject. The four basic skills within the English subject are oral skills, writing, reading, and digital skills. Reading is arguably the most applicable basic skill for this thesis, however, that does not mean that the others are not relevant as well. The meaning of reading in the English subject is the ability to understand and reflect on different types of texts' content. Reading should also contribute to reading pleasure and language acquisition (UDIR, 2019, p. 4). The basic skill of reading is closely linked to the core element "working with English texts", which is an essential aspect of this thesis. The "VG1 programme for general studies" competence aim that

is to be able to “read, analyse and interpret fictional texts in English” (UDIR, 2019, p. 12) is directly relevant to this thesis and the use of literature in the classroom.

The interpretation of the LK20 curriculum that is presented in this chapter is applied extensively to this thesis to ensure a didactic dimension of the ideas that are presented. It is drawn upon recurrently in both the analysis and discussion and functions as one of the backbones of this thesis, as the curriculum touches on all the topics that are addressed in this thesis.

## 4. Previous research

In this chapter, a variety of previous research related to the topics of LGBTQ+ representation in literature, the possibilities of using YA literature when teaching “health and life skills”, and the living conditions of LGBTQ+ people in Norway is presented. The first research that is presented looks at providing an alternative to the single story that has traditionally been used in the English literature classroom. Following is an account of a previous master’s thesis which also looks at the possibilities of using YA literature to implement health and life skills in the English classroom. The third subchapter looks at the 2020 Bufdir report on sexual orientation, gender diversity, and living conditions, which was briefly introduced on the subchapter on transphobia and bullying in the theory chapter. Subsequent follows an account of a critical content analysis that investigates transgender representation in picture books. Finally, a study on the critical diversity competence of teachers is presented. All this research is in various ways relevant for this thesis, as it deals with either LGBTQ+ representation in the literature classroom, transgender living conditions in Norway, or diversity.

### 4.1 Inclusive classrooms for LGBTQ Students - using linked text sets to challenge the hegemonic "single story"

In the article *Inclusive Classrooms for LGBTQ Students - Using linked text sets to challenge the hegemonic "single story"*, Dodge and Crutcher write about challenging the Single Story in English Language Arts. The danger of the Single Story was first described by author and social critic Chimamanda Adichie, and Dodge and Crutcher emphasise that “the single story is problematic for social justice because it marginalizes certain people by limiting their visibility and value” (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015, p. 95). The literature in ELA for students in secondary school includes texts which cover a variety of themes related to love. These texts include classics like *Romeo & Juliet*, *The Scarlett Letter*, and *The Great Gatsby* (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015, p. 98). In texts like these, “heterosexual love, sex, and marriage are centrally positioned” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 627). When adolescents are required to read texts like these where the focus is on a heterosexual couple and to identify with them, one option of an unchangeable binary is presented. “You are either Romeo or Juliet, a boy attracted to a girl or a girl attracted to a boy” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 627). Dodge and Crutcher suggest that there are texts in which the identities and experiences of LGBTQ youths are reflected, which can be combined with the canonical texts (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015, p. 98). Their

argument is therefore that along with using these classic texts, it is possible to offer a set of linked texts that include characters with different identities than those who traditionally have been the only visible ones. The essence of the article is that the Single Story and the heteronormativity within the literature that is traditionally used in the English classroom need to be confronted and challenged. Ensuring a more diverse representation in the literature classroom is one of the focus points of this thesis, which means that the arguments of Dodge and Crutcher's' article align with the idea that is being put forwards in this thesis. An important point to take from this is that Dodge and Crutcher suggest using linked texts, which means that one should not simply scrap all traditional books and replace them, but rather offer an alternative and make sure that there is variety. This can be linked to the view of literature as cultural access rather than literature as a cultural ideal, as the Single Story is essentially what the view of literature as a cultural ideal promotes.

#### 4.2 The possibilities of YA fantasy literature in upper secondary subject English when teaching the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills"

The possibilities of using YA literature in the English subject to teach the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" have already begun to be explored. In a 2020 master's thesis, the possibilities of using YA fantasy literature to teach various topics connected to "health and life skills" were looked at. These topics include identity, agency, diversity, disabilities, LGBTQ, and multiculturalism. To investigate these topics, the YA fantasy novel *Six of Crows* was analysed and discussed in light of didactic benefits. This master's thesis concluded that YA fantasy literature can be an educational genre when working with "health and life skills" while at the same time being entertaining and exciting (Sunde, 2020, p. 88) It is apparent that the aim of Sunde's thesis is similar to the aim of this thesis, but with a wider focus on more of the topics that "health and life skills" deals with. "Health and life skills" is a relatively new subject, which makes it beneficial that more research is being done on how the interdisciplinary topic can be implemented in the classroom. One of the limitations that Sunde mentions is that at the time she was writing her thesis, the new curriculum was not yet fully implemented in Norwegian schools, which means that there was not much research available on implementing the new curriculum. A result of this was also that there were no empirical studies available yet that could work as evidence for using YA, in this case YA fantasy literature, in relation to the new curriculum (Sunde, 2020, p. 12). This master's thesis supports the idea of using YA literature to teach the topics included in "health and life skills", which is



an encouragement to write this thesis to research further how the topics can be explored through literature.

### 4.3 Sexual orientation, gender diversity and living conditions

When addressing transphobia and bullying in the theory chapter, the Bufdir report on sexual orientation, gender diversity, and living conditions was briefly introduced. This report presents the results of the fourth national survey about living conditions for lesbian women, gay men, bisexual men and women, and for the first time, transgender people. The survey was conducted in the spring of 2020 and there were 2059 participants, and the researchers have chosen a broad approach to living conditions. Because this is the first survey in the series that also includes transgender people, it is not possible to compare the results to the previous reports as one can do with the other participant groups. One of the main findings of this research was that the transgender people who partook in the study clearly reported on living standard challenges and different forms of discrimination. 46% of the transgender respondents answered that they had experienced discrimination during job searching, compared to 5% of the cisgender respondents (Anderssen et. al., 2021, p. 124). When addressing transphobia in the theory chapter of this thesis, it is mentioned that about half of the transgender respondents in the study had been harassed in the workplace or in school at least once in the past year (Anderssen et. al., 2021, p. 124). The results of this study clearly illustrate that there is a need for improvement of attitudes towards transgender people, as there is an unacceptable high percentage of respondents in this study who experience harassment and discrimination. On the other hand, the transgender respondents also reported on pride and support, and a high degree of participation in organisational life, queer organisations, and friend networks (Anderssen et. al, 2021, p. 121). It is therefore also important to acknowledge and emphasise this pride and support and attempt to amplify that and decrease the harassment and discrimination. This research tells us about the need to make society more accepting and inclusive where everyone is equal, regardless of their gender identities, like it says in the core value human dignity in the core curriculum: “all people are equal regardless of what makes us different” (UDIR, 2017, p. 4). With the results of this study in mind, the goal has to be to make sure no one feels discriminated against or harassed because of their identity, and to strengthen that pride and support that the transgender respondents in the study also reported on. The aims of “health and life skills” regarding the development of a strong and confident identity, require that there is room for everyone to feel safe and included in that said identity. Looking at the numbers

from the study above, this is not yet the case for everyone. Because this thesis is concerned with the aims of “health and life skills” and looks at how one can make the classroom a safe and inclusive place, the research above is relevant to this thesis.

#### 4.4 Be Who You Are: Exploring Representations of Transgender Children in Picturebooks

Stephen Crawley did in 2017 conduct a critical content analysis in order to highlight transgender representation in picture books. What he found, was that among the transgender representation he found, there was limited diversity regarding race, social class, gender identity, and gender performance. In the nine texts he looked at, all of the transgender characters were depicted as white, and seven of the characters identified as female. In addition, eight out of nine characters live in supportive homes, and seven of them were described as middle class (Crawley, 2017, p. 37). This means that even though there has been an increase in the number of publications featuring transgender characters, there is a lack of diversity in other aspects. He also highlights that for many readers, it might be difficult to gain physical access to books with transgender representation because they are often published by small publishers or are self-published (Crawley, 2017, pp. 37-38). One way to make these books more accessible for readers is to make them available through school. This means that using books with transgender representation in the classroom may make these publications more accessible to pupils. Crawley also emphasises that:

“These texts serve a vital role in increasing the visibility of transgender individuals and creating opportunities for youth to read about and discuss such identities with peers and adults, which can in turn foster a more supportive, knowledgeable, and just society.”

(Crawley, 2017, p. 38).

This research shows that there is an increase in children’s literature with transgender representation and that one needs to make these books accessible to young readers. There is also a need for a more diverse representation of transgender characters because not everyone can identify with a white middle-class identity. *Felix Ever After* is an excellent example of a novel with transgender, black, queer, and low-income household representation. Another takeaway from this research is the importance of representation and that young people need to be given the opportunity to have a discussion about gender identity for the purpose of making society more just, supportive, and knowledgeable.

## 4.5 Critical diversity competence

Åse Røthing, professor of diversity studies, has written a book about diversity competence and critical thinking. In her book, she presents several concrete examples that she has obtained through classroom observations which illustrate why it is necessary for educators to have critical diversity competence. The first example Røthing puts forward is collected from a classroom observation in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade at a school in Oslo. The teacher in this example was a man in the middle of his thirties with a high level of professional competence. It was important for this teacher to emphasise towards both the pupils and Røthing as a researcher that he was both tolerant and non-religious, and that he politically belonged to the left. During the weeks that Røthing was observing at this school, she witnessed on several occasions that he and other teachers were concerned with problematising the pupils' generalisations about religion and ethnicity and that they confronted the pupils and challenged them to reconsider the basis of their statements. Røthing did, however, observe a situation where the teacher did not respond in the same manner, which is the first example that she discussed in her book, which is translated and presented below:

“Teacher: Are there different expectations... can boys and girls behave in the same way?”

Pupils: No. If Fredrik showed up to school with makeup, that would be weird.

Teacher: Yes, then he would be called gay, like Khalid said earlier. You use that as a slur. But if boys showed up in skirts, that would be strange.

Pupil: I heard about a man who used to be a woman ten years ago and was now pregnant.

Teacher: Yes, but it is crazy that it is possible to be in between like that. That is totally crazy!”

(Røthing, 2020 p. 34).

In this interaction, from a fair question about whether girls and boys can do the same things, the pupils' associations went forward to gender norms, sexual orientation, and gender identity. To these pupils, these things were obviously connected to each other, and it would be useful for them to get more knowledge about this and be challenged to think critically about notions of gender. Røthing argues that she is certain that this teacher would refrain from harassment

of transgender people and that he would be positive toward the fight for transgender rights if he were to be asked about this in a different setting. He did however not stop and problematise generalisations in this dialogue but contributed to confirm set stereotypes and prejudices. Instead of challenging the pupils he himself draws boundaries for what is supposed to be seen as normal or possible. Røthing argues that if there was a pupil in this class who was curious about their gender identity and wished for more knowledge or a positive visibility of gender diversity, this teacher did not contribute to this. She also emphasises that if a pupil in this class had a secret tied to the transgender topic, this secret would now be even more secret and scary after this conversation (Røthing, 2020, p. 34). What this research shows, is that teachers need to be considerate of how they word themselves when talking about topics such as this one. Even though the teacher from the example considered themselves to be a tolerant person, they failed in this conversation about gender and transgender people. The reason why this research is relevant for this thesis is that it shows how important it is that teachers create a safe and inclusive environment in their classroom so that every pupil feels welcome regardless of their identity. Normalising transgender identities in the classroom is necessary if that classroom is to be a completely safe and inclusive space, and one way to do this is to make sure there is more transgender representation, for example by using literature featuring transgender characters. This is both so that those pupils who identify with these characters feel more seen and validated, but also so that other pupils can expand their intercultural competence so that they are able to treat everyone with respect, regardless of their identity.

The previous research presented in this chapter is drawn upon several times throughout this thesis, to point out how their ideas align with this thesis or how this thesis builds upon their arguments.

## 5. Literary analysis of *Felix Ever After*

In this section, I analyse *Felix Ever After* by focusing on themes that are relevant in relation to the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills” in addition to other aspects of the LK20 curriculum. The first thing I do in the analysis is to give a brief overview of the setting and characters of the novel in order to establish a context for the analysis, in addition to looking at the form of narrative that is used in the novel. The themes I focus on in the analysis are transgender youth, transphobia and bullying, identity, intersectionality, and coming of age. The analysis shows that *Felix Ever After* touches on a variety of themes and issues that are relevant in regards to the LK20 curriculum, and that these can be used to teach intercultural competence through the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”, in addition to offering a representation of several minority identities.

### 5.1 Setting, characters, and narrative

*Felix Ever After* is set in New York City during the summer, where Felix and his friends are attending a summer programme at the prestigious art school St. Catherines. They are in the process of deciding on and doing a thesis that they will use as a portfolio for college applications. A major part of the plot is set at the school. The main character of the story is Felix Love, who lives with his dad as his mom abandoned them when he was younger. Throughout the novel, we follow Felix as he is trying to figure out his identity, with a specific emphasis on his gender identity, while at the same time navigating friendships, love, transphobia, and bullying. Ezra Patel is Felix’s best friend, and Felix alternates between staying with him in his apartment in the city, which is closer to school, and staying with his dad. Declan Keane is Felix’s “enemy” in school, and Felix suspects him of being behind the anonymous bullying and transphobia that Felix experiences in the novel. Among the other students who attend St. Catherine, there are several of them who represent different LGBTQ+ identities. This means that having an identity that is part of the LGBTQ+ community is not really a “big deal” in the community that the novel is set in, at least not in school. Nevertheless, as the analysis shows, there will in most cases still be someone who has a problem with those who are different from themselves.

*Felix Ever After* is written in a first-person present tense narrative. The effect of using a first-person narrative allows for an insight into the narrator’s thoughts and feelings. As established in the theory chapter, following a first-person present tense narrative gives the impression that

the future is wide open – neither the narrator nor the reader knows what is going to happen. As pointed out by Phelan and Rabinowitz (1994), when reading a story with first-person present tense, the narrator’s guess about what is going to happen is really no better than that of the reader. Using a first-person present tense narrative in *Felix Ever After* therefore gives the reader a feeling of following Felix’s journey while it is happening. As pointed out by Keo-Meier and Hicks (2014), adolescence is a period in life where one has a lot to figure out, which can be challenging. The choice of narrative is arguably suitable for this novel because the main character is in the process of finding out who he is, and the present tense illustrates how it is a work in progress. The use of the first-person present tense narrative in this novel creates a layer of suspension as the narrator is just as surprised about the events that are happening to him as the reader, which also brings the reader closer to the experiences of the protagonist. It is also pointed out in the analysis when there are specific textual examples that highlight the significance of the first-person present tense narrative form.

## 5.2 Transgender youth

As this thesis is concerned with transgender representation in YA literature, it is necessary to look at some of the things that transgender youth deal with. Some of these issues are addressed in the theory chapter, and these issues are also apparent in the novel, which is what this subsection focuses on.

The change of name and pronouns is one of the challenges that transgender youth face, and this issue is brought up several times in the novel. Changing one’s name and pronouns is in itself not necessarily an issue or a challenge, but the reactions from the world and the people around one can be challenging. As previously established in the theory chapter by Keo-Meier and Hicks (2014), the change of names and pronouns can be fun and empowering, while at the same time, it can be a sensitive topic because family and friends might refuse to use one’s chosen name and pronouns or may have a difficult time adjusting. In the novel, one of the people who seems to have a difficult time comprehending Felix’s name and pronouns is his dad. The novel offers several examples of incidents where it is expressed that Felix’s dad has a hard time using his correct name and pronouns. “‘Hey kid’, he says, since he still has a hard time saying my name” (Callender, 2021, p. 20). This is one example that illustrates how his dad struggles with using his correct name or pronouns. In this particular interaction, he chooses to avoid the use of name or pronouns altogether and chooses to address Felix as “kid” instead. A few pages later, in the same conversation, the dad calls Felix by his deadname.

“...says my name to get my attention – but not my real name. He says my old name. The one I was born with, the one he and my mom gave me.” (Callender, 2021, p. 22). The paragraph then continues with Felix’s thoughts about how the deadnaming makes him feel. “The name itself I don’t mind that much, I guess – but hearing it said out loud, directed at me, always sends a stabbing pain through my chest, this sinking feeling in my guts”. (Callender, 2021, p. 22). Felix pretends he did not hear it, and then his dad realises his mistake and gives a quick apology. The section continues with an insight into their relationship: they never talk about the dad’s slipups with wrong pronouns without correcting himself or how he gets after too much whiskey, where he says that Felix will “always be his daughter, his little girl” (Callender, 2021, p. 22). This is not the only occasion where something similar happens with Felix’s dad in the novel, because later in the book he says that “It isn’t easy to just suddenly switch my idea of who you are in my head. For twelve years, you were my baby g—” (Callender, 2021, p. 68). Scenes like these illustrate how hurtful using the wrong name or pronouns can be. As Felix’s dad may not be trying to be hurtful on purpose, that is ultimately what he is. The fact that there are so many examples to choose from when talking about this issue illustrates how extensive the issue is, and one can assume that the depiction of this issue is not downplayed contra how it is in the real world.

Another aspect of transgender youth that is mentioned by Keo-Meier & Hicks (2014) above and Vanderburgh (2014) is the process of coming out. This is something that can be difficult or scary, and one should always be able to do it on one’s own premises. Felix came out as transgender to his parents when he was 12 years old. He sat his dad down in the living room, while he was really nervous and feeling like he had to throw up the whole time, and the only words he could get out were “Dad, I have something to tell you” and “I’m trans” (Callender, 2021, p. 24). His dad had a confused expression and only said “Okay”, before he went to bed and Felix could tell that it was not really okay to him. The next day, he came out to his mom in an email, since she had already left Felix and his dad and started a new family, but she never even replied to the email. Neither his mom nor his dad did therefore have a positive or supportive reaction to Felix coming out. Unlike his mom, Felix’s dad was at least still in his life, and he even helped Felix get started on hormones after almost a year, in addition to helping him get top surgery. This is very confusing for Felix, because “Why would he pay for my hormones, my surgery, my doctor’s visits, everything – but refuse to say my real name?” (Callender, 2021, p. 25). Even though Felix did not get the reaction that he maybe had hoped for when coming out, it could also have gone a lot worse. His dad is in some way supportive

by helping Felix physically transition, but at the same time he is having a difficult time using his new names and pronouns. Nevertheless, Felix got to come out on his own terms to his parents. The passage in the novel where Felix comes out to his dad illustrates how complex a situation like that can be, in addition to showing how important it is to be supportive when someone shares their identity like that.

### 5.3 Transphobia and bullying

Transphobia and bullying are recurring themes throughout the novel, and a major part of the plot revolves around an incident where someone hacks into Felix's Instagram account to access archived images of him pre-transitioning. The same person also prints out these old pictures and hangs them up in a gallery in the school hallway, along with Felix's deadname.

“There's a gallery on the lobby walls...Long hair. Dresses. Pictures of me with these forced smiles. Expressions showing just how uncomfortable I always felt. The physical pain is strained across my face in those photos. That discomfort is nothing compared to now. I can't fucking breathe”. (Callender, 2021, p. 31).

The above extract shows us how hurtful this incident is for Felix, and he cannot understand who would do this to him and why they would do it. This is also an example of a scene that highlights the significance of the first-person present tense narrative, as the reader gets to experience what Felix feels in this moment, after an incident that comes out of the blue to both the reader and the protagonist. It is possible that the reader has experienced something that felt like a punch to the gut and can therefore relate to what Felix feels in that exact moment he realises what has happened, and the form of narrative contributes to the conveyance of those feelings.

In addition to putting up the gallery, this same person starts sending Felix messages through an anonymous Instagram account called *grandequeen69*, while Felix is trying to figure out who is doing this to him. The first message that he receives from his bully through this account is “did you like the gallery?” (Callender, 2021, p. 57). This message shows that the gallery was put up by someone who was deliberately trying to hurt Felix. Though, something like this could not really have been done by accident, but this message shows that whoever is bullying him is trying to rub it in and get some sort of reaction from Felix. “Why're you pretending to be a boy?” (Callender, 2021, p. 168) is another example of a message Felix receives from *grandequeen69*. This person is trying to invalidate Felix's identity, and he does



so by sending transphobic messages while hiding behind an anonymous account. Cyber bullying is something that has rocketed along with the increased use of social media, and it allows for people to bully others without having to show their face. *Felix Ever After* therefore portrays bullying in several forms, as you have a physical aspect with the gallery being put up and a digital one with the messages that Felix receives. What it all has in common is that it is completely anonymous.

After Felix pulls himself together a bit, he starts to think that maybe Declan Keane is the one who is behind the gallery and the anonymous Instagram account that is sending him messages. This makes Felix want to get revenge on him, and his response to this is to create his own anonymous Instagram account, which he calls *luckyliquid95* as a reference to the meaning of his name. He then uses this account to message Declan in order to find out his secrets and also to find evidence that he is the one behind the gallery. The two of them begin talking, and then the conversation only continues to flourish. Felix eventually becomes confused about how he feels about Declan as he is learning more about him. The fact that Felix himself creates an anonymous Instagram for the purpose of revealing someone's secrets, gives thoughts for reflection. You could argue that Felix is in a way now sinking to his bully's level because he is doing the same thing to someone else that is being done to him. What Felix is doing to Declan could also be seen as a type of cyber bullying, as he is pretending to be someone else to get close to someone for the purpose of using their secrets against them. *Felix Ever After* therefore portrays how transphobia can lead to bullying, and also how bullying can manifest in different ways. In addition, it is looked at how being bullied might result in becoming a bully yourself.

#### 5.4 Identity

As it has already been established in this thesis, one of the major concerns of the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" is the development of a confident identity. Identity is one of the major themes in *Felix Ever After*, and the novel covers a range of identity-related issues. Felix is struggling with many of the same issues as his peers, such as applying for college, falling in love, growing up, and trying to fit in. These are universal experiences, but while Felix is struggling with all this, he is also struggling with defining himself in terms of gender. He is questioning his gender identity and even though he knows that he is *not* a girl, he does not always entirely feel like a boy either. The novel deals with Felix's thoughts and feelings about his own identity while on a journey of self-development

and trying to become confident in who he is. This part of the analysis will look at a range of textual evidence from the novel that deals with the theme of identity.

While reading the novel, it becomes apparent that it is important for Felix to find a term that precisely describes how he sees his gender identity. Even though he knows that he is transgender, he is still questioning whether there is a term that he feels describes him even more accurately. One example where this issue is addressed in the novel is when Felix one morning goes to Callen-Lorde, which is one of the few clinics and pharmacies that are specifically for LGBTQ+ people in New York. He is there that morning to get his testosterone injection, or t-shot as Felix refers to it as. After getting his shot he asks a question to his nurse Sophia. The question is “Do you ever have any patients who know that they’re trans, but are – I don’t know, still questioning their identity?” (Callender, 2021, p. 148). Sophia says that she thinks it is fine for Felix to keep questioning his identity, and that he does not owe anyone any answers (Callender, 2021, p. 149). This conversation between Felix and Sophia illustrates that even though a person has an idea or image of what their identity is, there is still room for reflection and rethinking about how one wants to define oneself. As Sophia points out, it is important to remember that one does not owe an answer or explanation to anyone else about how one chooses to define oneself. Developing a strong and confident identity should be done on one’s own premises, and in an ideal world, this idea should also be emphasised and supported by those youth are surrounded by in everyday life, such as teachers and health workers, in addition to parents or guardians.

The novel has a prominent focus on identity in terms of self-image. As mentioned, Felix attends a prestigious art school, and he studies fine art. He wants to be a painter, but he struggles with creating his thesis for his portfolio for college applications. In a conversation with one of his art teachers, Felix is told that he is clearly talented, but that his paintings are always “just fine” (Callender, 2021, p. 170). The teacher further suggests that he should “apply himself” in his work and asks why he never paints himself. After receiving this feedback, Felix begins a thought process about why that is, and he reflects upon how his dysphoria is one of the main reasons why he does not like taking selfies or catching a glance of himself in the mirror (Callender, 2021, p. 172). Jill, the teacher, then goes on to explain how self-portraits are empowering, because they “force you to see yourself in a way that’s different than just looking in the mirror or snapping a picture on your phone” (Callender, 2021, p. 172). Eventually, painting self-portraits becomes Felix’s thesis project. The process

of creating these self-portraits functions as an illustration of the journey that Felix is going on through the novel, which is looked at further later in this analysis.

Another way that identity is explored in the novel is when one's identity is invalidated or criticised by others. For a brief period, Felix dated a girl in his class named Marisol. On their third date, she explains why she decided that she is not interested in him after all. "In the end, I just don't think I can date a misogynist" (Callender, 2021, p. 30). She argues that the fact that Felix decided to be a boy instead of a girl "feels inherently misogynistic" (Callender, 2021, p. 30). She continues to say that "you can't be a feminist and decide you don't want to be a woman anymore" (Callender, 2021, p. 30). This interaction shows how other people might have misconceptions about one's identity. What Marisol is saying here is ignorant and incorrect, and her utterances are quite hurtful to Felix. He has recurring thoughts about this incident, and it takes a long time before he chooses to confront her about this and reveal her transphobic views to the others in their friend group. This whole situation underlines how demeaning it is when someone invalidates or criticises your identity, and the importance of having a confident identity, because as a reader you get to experience how this negatively impacts Felix. This example could also have been put in the subchapter about transphobia and bullying, but a choice was made to address it here in order to illustrate how bullying and transphobia also are connected to and can have an impact on identity.

In the subsection on trans youth issues, the topic of changing your name and pronouns is addressed. It has also been mentioned in this thesis that choosing a new name can be empowering, and it is also appropriate to address this here when talking about identity. When Felix chose the name Felix, he was considering the etymology of the name.

““Felix means lucky, right?” “Yeah, in Latin.” Its meaning is why I chose it to be my new name in the first place. When I figured out that I'm not a girl, and I started making all the necessary changes, I knew I'd lucked out” (Callender, 2021, p. 50).

Felix's name, therefore, reflects his identity in the way that he chose it because its meaning mirrors the way he considers himself. When he realised that he in fact was not a girl, he was overcome with a feeling of being lucky and wanted this to be reflected in his name. At the very end of the novel, Ezra says to Felix that "... I remember you told me that *Felix* means "lucky" in Latin – but apparently, it also means "happy.”” (Callender, 2021, p. 354). As Felix is in fact at this point "pretty freaking happy too" (Callender, 2021, p. 354), this adds another dimension to how his name reflects his identity. Of course, it is difficult to say that "being

happy” is a part of one’s identity as happiness is a mood, you could look at it in the way that he is happy with his identity and his life. The title of the novel can also be seen as a homage to the happiness that Felix experiences at the end of the novel, as it plays with the fairy-tale expression of living “happily ever after”.

The novel looks at how empowering it can be when one comes to terms with and fully accept one’s own identity. At the end of the summer programme that Felix attends, there is every year one student’s work that is chosen by the school to be displayed in the hallway. This year, Felix is unanimously chosen and is also expected to hold a speech to his fellow students. This speech ends up being quite powerful as he talks about the incident at the beginning of the summer where a gallery with old photos of him was put up without his permission. The fact that *he* is now in charge of the images of him that are hanging up in the hallway symbolises the journey he has been on throughout the novel. “It was...empowering to put up these paintings I created, of who I know I am, instead of what someone else sees me as. I am Felix. No one else gets to define who I am. Only me.” (Callender, 2021, p. 350). This parallel between the two galleries shows the importance of being in control of one’s own identity and how it is being presented to the world around one. One of the self-portraits that Felix paints for this project, which is also his favourite, is actually the cover of the novel. This visual representation of an image that is described in the novel can even bring the reader closer to the story, as they do not only have to imagine what the portrait looks like.

Towards the end of the novel, Felix finally uncovers it is a guy named Austin who was behind the gallery and *grandequen*<sup>69</sup>. Felix is trying to get out of him why he did it, and one of the things Austin says is that “It’s not like it’s easy to be gay, even if we are in Brooklyn, even if this is New York City, and now we have to deal with people like you taking our identity, taking our space” (Callender, 2021, p. 321). He then continues to say that:

“And it’s annoying, too... seeing you – I don’t know, pushing it in our face that you are transgender. Not everyone can be as open. Not everyone gets to be out. I don’t get to be out. My parents wouldn’t accept me. But you’re just flaunting it every change you get” (Callender, 2021, p. 321).

It, therefore, seems that there is some kind of jealousy behind Austin’s actions. He is jealous because Felix gets to be open about his identity, while he himself cannot come out as gay because his parents would not accept it. He also feels that by being transgender, Felix is taking the space and identity of Austin and other gay people. Even though Felix and Austin

are both part of the LGBTQ+ community, Austin is transphobic and bullies Felix because of his identity. As a response to Austin's utterance, Felix says:

"I'm not flaunting anything. I'm just existing. This is me. I can't hide myself. I can't disappear. And even if I could, I don't fucking want to. I have the same right to be here. I have the same right to exist" (Callender, 2021, p. 321).

This illustrates how no one should have to hide who they are, and that every identity is just as valid as the next one. What this situation also shows is that even people who belong to a minority identity might have problems with or prejudices against other minority identities. *Felix Ever After* portrays how complex the theme of identity can be.

## 5.5 Intersectionality

I have now looked at how the novel deals with the theme of identity, but as it is mentioned in the theory chapter, the novel also covers intersectional issues also related to Felix's identity. Felix is transgender, while he at the same time is black, queer, and lives in a low-income single-parent household. These factors all contribute to complicating Felix's life and along with them come issues that Felix has to deal with.

"The fact that I'm black, the fact that I'm queer, the fact that I'm trans. It's like every identity I have...the more different I am from everyone else...the less interested people are. The less...loveable I feel, I guess. The love interests in books, or in movies, or TV shows, are always white, cis, straight, blond hair, blue eyes. Chris Evans, Jennifer Lawrence. It becomes a little hard, I guess, to convince myself I deserve the kind of love you see on movie screens" (Callender, 2021, p. 219).

The above quote sums up quite well how all the different aspects of Felix's identity implicate his life, and how different it makes him feel. One thing he also mentions is the lack of representation of his identity in books, movies, or tv shows, which is exactly what this thesis is all about. Even though it might be possible to find literature with black, queer, or transgender representation, the chances are slimmer of finding a character who is a part of all these identities. Kacen Callender, the author of *Felix Ever After*, is black, queer, and transgender themselves, which means that they probably to some degree wrote the novel to offer a source of representation that they did not have themselves when they were young. In the *Author's note* at the end of the novel, Callender writes that they hope Felix can do for even just one reader, what the first transgender character they encountered themselves did for

them, which is to learn more about themselves and their identity, and that it is a possibility to become who you truly are (Callender, 2021). This intersectionality is what Crawley (2017) highlights as lacking in his research on transgender representation in picture books. As Jenkins and Cart (2018) highlight, the first publication of a YA novel featuring a transgender character did not come out until 2004 even though LGBTQ+ YA literature had been around since 1969. *Felix Ever After* does not only offer transgender representation, but several other identities that have previously been invisible in the literature used in the English classroom are also represented. This novel, therefore, depicts the complexity of belonging to several marginalised identities.

Even if all pupils in a class cannot identify with Felix in every aspect of his identity, chances are that they can relate to something about him, exactly because his identity is so intersectional. In addition to that, a lot of the experiences that Felix goes through are universal experiences that adolescents undergo such as dealing with college applications, love and dating, and trying to find his place in the world. *Felix Ever After* does as mentioned provide representation for several minority identities, but being young and in the process of finding out who you are is something all youth can relate to, which will be delved further into in the following subchapter on coming of age.

## 5.6 Coming of age

It was established in the theory chapter by Beach et al. (2011) that YA literature usually involves some kind of coming-of-age theme. Even though the plot of *Felix Ever After* may not extend over many years or follow a character through the years of childhood and into adolescence and adulthood, one could still argue that the coming-of-age theme is apparent in the novel. On several occasions, Felix reflects on his childhood and things that have happened in his past. One of the aspects of the plot is that Felix is writing emails to his estranged mother who abandoned him when he was ten years old, only to leave the emails in his drafts folder. In these emails, Felix writes about his thoughts and feeling about his life, his identity, and about the fact that he and his dad was abandoned by his mother so that she could start a new family. Through these emails and the flashbacks that Felix has about his childhood, we do get to take part in the experiences that have shaped Felix while he was growing up and has made him who is today, even though the plot of the novel does not take place in his childhood. The fact that his mother left him, which is an important event of his childhood, is also one of the main reasons why Felix fears that he is unlovable. Towards the end of the novel, Felix comes

to the realisation that he actually is worthy of love, and one could therefore argue that *Felix Ever After* fits within the coming-of-age aspect of YA literature because the novel portrays a development rooted in something that happened in his childhood.

The personal development that Felix goes through in the duration of the summer in which the novel takes place could also be seen as fitting within the coming-of-age topic, as he progresses from feeling unlovable and thinking that what makes him different also makes him worthless, to feeling empowered and in control of his own identity. It is he, and no one else that gets to define who he is, and coming to that realisation can be regarded as him coming of age.

Carlsen (2020) argues that novels written especially for teenage readers can be particularly appealing for pupils, and this coming-of-age theme is something that young readers can relate to. Using YA literature in general is a good choice when teaching literature to pupils as young people are more likely to relate to the characters as they are in a similar life situation, which also makes *Felix Ever After* an appropriate choice of literature for the English classroom.

The coming-of-age theme can also be connected to the first-person present tense narrative that is used in the novel. As previously addressed, the first-person present tense narrative gives a sense that the narrator does not know what is going to happen next. The same thing applies to the story, or lives, of the pupils who are reading the story, who are also in the process of coming-of-age. In that way, the novel symbolises that the future is open, and one can decide what to do with it. Felix is at the beginning of the novel at a place in his life where he has a lot to figure out and he is uncertain about the future. Chances are, this is something that young readers can identify with. The form of narrative does therefore contribute to the coming-of-age theme by illustrating that it is okay to figure things out as one goes, for instance in the process of finding out who you are and developing a strong and confident identity – which is one of the primary points of this thesis.

It is shown through this analysis that *Felix Ever After* deals with several topics that are relevant to the LK20 curriculum for instance through the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”. These topics are illustrated through a range of specific extracts from the novel.

## 6. Discussion – didactic benefits of teaching with *Felix Ever After*

In this chapter, the above analysis will be discussed in light of the LK20 curriculum, theory on intercultural competence, the use of literature in the classroom, and transgender youth. The discussion will show how the themes that have been looked at in the analysis can all be connected to the LK20 curriculum and in view of that, the didactic benefits of teaching with the novel will be assessed.

### 6.1 Transgender youth

The first theme that the analysis covers is transgender youth, and several examples are presented where Felix deals with the transgender youth issues that are established in the theory chapter as presented by Keo-Meier and Hicks (2014) and Vanderburgh (2014) in the theory chapter. One of these issues that is really prominent in the novel is the wrongful use of pronouns and deadnaming. As the analysis shows, this is especially an issue for Felix's dad. Raising awareness about this issue can function as an eye-opener for many pupils. "School must consider the diversity of pupils and facilitate for each pupil to experience belonging in school and society" (UDIR, 2017, p. 5). One aspect of achieving this is making sure that everyone in the classroom is being addressed with the name and pronouns of their choice. Those pupils who may not have any friends or acquaintances who are transgender or do not have experience or familiarity with people who prefer to be addressed with a different name or different pronouns than those they were assigned at birth, might not be aware of how hurtful it can be when someone addresses you with the wrong names or pronouns. By shedding light on this issue, one can therefore contribute to making a more inclusive and considerate classroom, which again can be linked up to creating a more inclusive and considerate society. This is also related to intercultural competence considering the definition of it that is "the ability to relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one's own" (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 19). Even if one does not really mind how one is addressed by other people, it is important to be aware and considerate of that for others, it can be an important principle.

This can also be connected to *seeing from other perspectives or decentering* which is one of the basic components of intercultural competence (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). As mentioned, empathy is an important aspect of this component, and being able to feel empathy is crucial when attempting to understand how it might feel to be addressed with the wrong



pronouns or be deadnamed. *Felix Ever After* covers themes that can be used to promote the importance of being respectful and relating constructively to someone who has a different mindset than you, which are important aspects of acquiring intercultural competence. The core value *human dignity* of the core curriculum is also relevant to bring in here, because the notion that “all people are equal regardless of what makes us different” (UDIR, 2017, p. 4) means that no one should have to experience disrespect and bullying, regardless of their gender identity, or any other aspects of their identity for that matter, and this includes that no one should have to experience deadnaming or being disrespected by being addressed with the wrong pronouns. Byram’s first savoir *attitudes* which covers “the ability to relativize oneself and value others” (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20), is about being openminded in interactions with others, in addition to respecting the beliefs and opinions of others. This is an important skill to have, and addressing others with their preferred pronouns or name does arguably fit within this savoir. *Respect* is also one of the basic components of intercultural competence as established by UNESCO (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21), which further underlines the importance of being respectful when learning about other identities and how to successfully interact with those who are different from us.

The analysis looks at how the process of coming out is portrayed in the novel, and we know that it can be difficult, scary, or even dangerous to come out. Having knowledge about the process of coming out might make the pupils more prepared as to how to react if someone they know comes out to them. You could say that this knowledge is a form of intercultural competence, as it promotes the ability to interact with someone who has a different identity than yourself in a respectful and openminded manner. Looking at transgender youth issues and how these issues are portrayed in *Felix Ever After* can therefore contribute to the acquirement of intercultural competence and the promotion of the core values of the curriculum such as *human dignity*, which was also mentioned when talking about the change of names and pronouns. The overall takeaway from this is that one should promote to pupils the notion that you should always treat people with respect, regardless of their identity. This can also be connected to Byram’s second savoir *knowledge* which covers the knowledge “of self, of others, and of interaction processes” (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20), as you can use the knowledge you have acquired about other identities to successfully interact for instance in a situation where a person is coming out to you.

The overall take-away from looking at the theme of transgender youth in this novel is that the reader through following Felix gets insight into how it is to be transgender youth with all its

accompanying challenges. The next subchapter which looks at the theme of transphobia and bullying further explores issues that are related to being transgender, but that also can be connected to more universal issues.

## 6.2 Transphobia and bullying

The analysis shows that transphobia and bullying are major themes in *Felix Ever After*. These issues are as already known, also a big problem in the real world. Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people are better today than they were 15 years ago. At the same time, there are more people who have negative attitudes towards trans people, than towards lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (Bufdir, 2023). Even though society as a whole has become more accepting towards LGBTQ+ people, there are still those who are negatively disposed toward them, and especially towards transgender people. This is, therefore, a topic that is important to deal with in school in order to prevent transphobic and prejudice attitudes and make pupils aware that it is *people*, just like themselves, we are talking about. In The Education Act, it says that “The school must have zero tolerance for violations such as bullying, violence, discrimination, and harassment. The school must work continuously and systematically to promote the pupils' health, environment and safety...” (The Education Act, 1998, § 9 A-3). Zero tolerance means that there is no place for any kind of bullying or harassment in school, including transphobia. It is therefore necessary to talk with the pupils about transphobia, what it is, and how it can affect people’s lives. Working with *Felix Ever After* is one way to put transphobia on the agenda in the classroom by showing the pupils a concrete example of how it can be manifested and how hurtful it is. The use of the first-person present tense narrative in this novel might make the reader get an ever deeper understanding of how transphobia can affect someone, as the reader is brought closer to the main character’s experiences through this narrative technique. In the subsection of this discussion which concerns this thesis’ importance, it is further delved into why it is so critical to talk about transphobia in an attempt to overcome it.

As emphasised by Carlsen (2020), the joy of reading is connected to an everyday skill concerned with constantly interpreting the behaviour of others and making assumptions about their motivations. Reading about the transphobia and bullying that is happening in *Felix Ever After* is a way of testing this ability to shift mindsets by interpreting the behaviour of the characters. Also, Van (2009) argues that literature exposes pupils in the EFL classroom to meaningful contexts that are filled with descriptive language and interesting characters. Van

also underlines how literature encourages critical thinking regarding plot, themes, and characters (Van, 2009, p. 2). *Felix Ever After* offers exposure to themes such as transphobia and bullying, in a meaningful context with descriptive language just like Van mentions. There is also arguably authenticity to the text because the author shares several identity traits with the main character, which means that the author probably knows how it feels to go through these things that the protagonist experiences. Anyhow, *Felix Ever After* can be connected to the joy of reading and show how literature can expose pupils in an EFL classroom to meaningful context and descriptive language, as well as encourage critical thinking.

When addressing transphobia, it is relevant to refer back to Røthing (2020) and her research on critical diversity competence. Even though the teacher in the presented example probably did not consider themselves transphobic, the way they worded themselves did ultimately come off as transphobic and contributed to enforcing transphobic attitudes within the classroom. Working with the topic of transphobia is, therefore, a way to address generalisations and prejudices the pupils might have, where the teacher can encourage the pupils to challenge these prejudices and create a more inclusive environment. As seen in the chapter on the LK20 curriculum, one of the purposes of the English subject is to help the pupils develop an intercultural understanding of different ways of life, ways of thinking, and patterns of communication (UDIR, 2019, p. 2). Having this understanding makes the pupils more open to new perspectives and new ways to look at the world, in addition to understanding that they have a culture-dependent view of the world, which can help prevent prejudices and generalisations. In this way, dealing with transphobia can also be connected to the aims of the English subject.

It has in this subchapter been looked at the prevalence of transphobia and bullying, and why one should work to strive towards a classroom environment that is free of both. The overarching idea of this thesis about creating a safe and including space for everyone is again emphasised. The subsequent subchapter digs into the topic of identity, which is arguably one of the most prominent themes in this thesis, and how the findings from the analysis on the topic can be interpreted and seen in the light of the theoretical framework and the curriculum.

### 6.3 Identity

As it has been shown through the analysis, identity is one of the main themes of *Felix Ever After*. “Health and life skills” in the LK20 curriculum is explicitly concerned with the development of a strong and confident identity, and identity is also mentioned several other

places in the curriculum. This, therefore, means that identity development is an important aspect of the pupils' education, and it is hence worth spending time working with the theme. In *Felix Ever After* we get to follow Felix as he goes from being insecure about his identity and feeling unlovable because of who he is, to reclaiming his identity and presenting himself in the way that he wants to be seen, which is quite empowering. This sends a message to the reader that one should be proud of who one is and not let anyone else decide how one should feel about oneself. The novel can therefore work as a source of inspiration to the pupils who are reading it in order to develop the strong and confident that health and life skills is so concerned with.

*Felix Ever After* does also offer a representation of several different identities which traditionally have been less visible in the English literature classroom. Felix is transgender, and he is also black, queer, and lives in a low-income single-parent household, which provides the intersectionality that for instance Crawley (2017) pointed out as missing when he looked at transgender representation in picture books. *Felix Ever After* is therefore a novel that offers representation for several pupils who might have struggled with finding representation within the literature traditionally used in the English classroom. The intersectionality in the novel also widens the opportunity of acquiring intercultural competence, as the reader is exposed to several aspects of identity that they might not be too familiar with from before. In addition, the intersectionality also challenges the pupils to develop the ability to have a sympathetic imagination, which Nussbaum (1997) sees as necessary for becoming world citizens. As the reader attempts to put themselves in Felix's situation, there are several aspects of his identity and life that they need to familiarise themselves with. The intersectionality of the novel and Felix's identity does therefore allow pupils to develop their intercultural competence and their sympathetic imagination.

Because this thesis aims to connect health and life skills to the literature classroom, *Felix Ever After* is arguably a suitable choice of YA literature for this purpose, because of its coverage of the topic of identity. The novel promotes being confident in who you are, which is what is promoted in health and life skills and in the curriculum in general, which is reflected in for example the core value *identity and cultural diversity*. It is also highlighted in the novel how one's identity can be threatened and compromised by the people around one, and this is something that the pupils can learn from. Byram's fifth savoir *critical cultural awareness* concerns the ability to evaluate the behaviour of both oneself and of others (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). Being able to see how one's behaviour can negatively impact a person's

identity development, can be an aid to help the pupils make good choices that promote the development of a strong and confident identity, both for themselves and for others.

As this subchapter has shown, identity is a theme that permeates the LK20 curriculum, as its relevance is found in several aspects of it. The development of a strong and confident identity is an essential aspect of “health and life skills”, and the significance of feeling content with who one is becomes clear when reading *Felix Ever After*. The next subchapter looks at how the findings of the analysis can be connected to the process of creating a more inclusive classroom for all pupils.

#### 6.4 An inclusive classroom

Dodge and Crutcher (2015) emphasise the importance of challenging and confronting the Single Story and the heteronormativity that exists within the literature in the English classroom. Doing this allows for a more inclusive classroom where everyone can feel represented. The results of the 2020 Bufdir study on sexual orientation, gender diversity, and living conditions (Anderssen et. al, 2021) illustrate the importance of making our society and our classrooms a safe space where everyone is treated with respect, regardless of their identity. The number of transgender people who experience harassment in school or in the workplace is alarmingly high, and something needs to be done with the attitudes that cause this behaviour. “School must consider the diversity of pupils and facilitate for each pupil to experience belonging in school and society” (UDIR, 2017, p. 5). One way of approaching this aspect of the central values in the core curriculum is to actively challenge heteronormativity and the single story when choosing literature for the English classroom. Teaching with *Felix Ever After* offers a counterpart to the Single Story and is one possible option while striving for a broader diversity of representation in the classroom. The point is not that the English literature classroom is going to end transphobia all by itself, but the essence is that all teachers should strive to make their classroom an inclusive and safe arena, and ensuring diverse representation in the literature one chooses is one way of contributing to this.

When discussing the opportunity to use literature to make the classroom more inclusive, it is appropriate to emphasise the view of *Literature as Cultural Access* as introduced by Beach et al (2011) in the theory chapter, a perspective in which the purpose of literature is “engaging students in developmentally appropriate reading practices, and promoting access to a broad array of texts and cultural perspectives” (Beach et. al., 2011, p. 81). This is the counterpart to the view of *Literature as Cultural Ideal* where enforcing existing ideals is important rather

than trying to achieve a diverse variety of culture within the texts used in the literature classroom. The Single Story that Dodge and Crutcher (2015) warn about is fundamentally the essence of literature as a cultural ideal, and one of the aims of this thesis is to look at how one can move away from teaching the Single Story in the English literature classroom. Teaching with *Felix Ever After* corresponds with the view of Literature as Cultural Access, as the novel promotes and depicts other cultural expressions and identity expressions than what one can find in the traditional literature for the English classroom. Working with literature as a way to access culture can also be related to the basic component of intercultural competence *self-awareness*, as this component is concerned with awareness about how the way one views the world is coloured by the lens that one sees it through (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). Bringing attention to that one is actively using literature to seek knowledge about different cultures and also how literature has traditionally been used to promote one ideal culture, can contribute to developing this self-awareness that the way one views the world is tinted by one's own identity, culture, and experiences.

As this subchapter shows, there is a need to make our classrooms safer and more inclusive spaces, where differences are celebrated instead of frowned upon. The purpose of using literature in the classroom must be to take advantage of its opportunities to engage pupils and expose them to a variety of cultural perspectives and identities. The next subchapter discusses the coming-of-age theme which is a recurring theme in YA literature and nonetheless in *Felix Ever After*.

## 6.5 Coming of age

Coming of age is one of the themes that the analysis covers, and it is apparent that the theme is evident in several aspects of the novel. Carlsen (2020) highlights how books written especially for teenagers or young adults are usually appealing to pupils. He also stresses how this can be an aid in helping reluctant or inexperienced readers find motivation to read, because the characters they read about in YA literature are also young people (Carlsen, 2020, p. 217). Beach et al (2011) also underline that what most YA novels have in common is that the coming-of-age theme is included in the plot in some way. In *Felix Ever After*, the reader gets to follow Felix as he goes on a journey from being insecure and feeling unlovable, to finding confidence and taking control over his life and identity. The reader also sees how Felix overcomes what has happened to him in his childhood, such as being abandoned by his mother and having a father who struggles with using his preferred name and pronouns. Felix

shows that even though he has encountered several challenges throughout his life, he manages to come out stronger on the other side. In “health and life skills” it says that “in the childhood and adolescent years, the development of a positive self-image and confident identity is particularly important” (UDIR, 2017, p. 15). Reading about and getting close to a character who has managed to develop a positive self-image and confident identity can therefore work as a source of inspiration for young readers. It might seem impossible for many pupils to achieve a state of having a positive self-image and a confident identity, but Felix shows that this is indeed possible no matter how insecure or unlovable one might feel right now. The use of the first-person present tense narrative also contributes to successfully sending this message, as in the moment we first meet Felix he is doubting himself and his identity, and the reader get to come along on this journey and see exactly how the process of changing that goes down in Felix’s case.

It is argued in this subsection that reading YA literature is fitting for pupils because it appeals to them as they can often relate to the life situations of the characters, and that reading YA literature can help promote the aims of for instance “health and life skills”. This is also supported by the conclusion of Sunde’s (2020) thesis, where she argued that YA literature, in that case, YA fantasy literature, is suitable for teaching “health and life skills” aims.

## 6.6 Importance

This section will underline the importance of the ideas presented in this thesis. Even though the curriculum states that “all people are equal regardless of what makes us different” (UDIR, 2017, p. 4), far from everyone shares this ideology. In an ideal world, no one should have to fear for their safety for just being who they are. Unfortunately, we know that this is not the case in the world today, which has already been emphasised several times in this thesis.

It is not necessary to look far to see how fatal the consequences of extremist attitudes towards minority identities can be, even here in Norway. Last year’s act of terrorism, in the form of a bar shooting in Oslo, is still fresh in mind. This act of terrorism was aimed at London Pub which is one of the most popular bars for LGBTQ+ people in Oslo, and the attack happened prior to the Oslo Pride celebration. When NRK Supernytt, who provides news adapted towards children, posted about the event of the mass shooting on their TikTok account, they had to delete 1700 comments because the comment section was filled with hate speech and people who declared their support to the terrorist and his actions. Even though many of the accounts that commented were anonymous, there was an indication that many of the users

were Norwegian children and youth based on the way that they expressed themselves (Buset, 2022). Even though many of these comments can be imagined to be posted by young people who are simply trying to act tough and cause a reaction, it is alarming to see how easy it apparently is to utter hateful statements, especially when one can hide anonymously behind a screen. It is unachievable to change the hateful attitudes of every single person in a society, but the tendencies that are apparent in NRK Supernytt's comment section demonstrate that it is necessary to attempt to start somewhere. It will certainly not help to avoid talking about the matter, which is one of the reasons why it is important that one takes the implementation of "health and life skills" in school seriously and actually take one's time to address the topics that are included in the interdisciplinary topic, as "health and life skills" is supposed to help pupils make responsible life choices, in addition to the development of a strong and confident identity (UDIR, 2017, p. 15) that is emphasised in this thesis. Posting anonymous hate messages online is not considered a responsible life choice. When addressing the topic of for instance sexuality and gender, one could also bring up the topic "media use", which is another topic within health and life skills. This provides the possibility to discuss for example the case of NRK Supernytt having to delete all those hate comments on their TikTok account. It is also possible to draw a connection between these anonymous hate messages and the person behind the anonymous Instagram account who harassed Felix in *Felix Ever After*. This could for instance lead to reflection on whether it is more acceptable to post anonymous hate comments on the internet for everyone to see than to bully someone by sending hate comments through direct messages. The message does anyhow remain the same in the end – some people have a need to express that they do not accept people who are different from themselves. Working with the topics of "health and life skills" can guide the pupils to make good choices that benefit not just themselves but also the people around them.

An example of a current event that illustrates the negativity that exists towards transgender people is the reactions that followed after Bud Light did a collaboration with influencer Dylan Mulvaney. Mulvaney has almost eleven million followers on TikTok, and after she posted a video where she did a collaboration with the brand, conservative celebrities and commentators called for a boycott of the brand. This resulted in a decline in the sale of Bud Light (Holpuch, 2023). This illustrates just how little it takes to set off those who have transphobic attitudes, as the video Mulvaney posted was less than one minute long and was mostly concerned with a fifteen-million-dollar giveaway that the company sponsored (Holpuch, 2023). The fact that a brand doing a collaboration with *one* transgender influencer in addition to all their other



cisgender ambassadors could create that much discontent, highlights the importance of working towards the decrease of prejudices and hateful attitudes, which is one of the aspects that this thesis is concerned with. It also highlights the importance to normalise transgender representation. As said in the introduction of this thesis, representation is not a pie, and more representation for others does not mean less representation for you. This thesis is concerned with striving to make sure there is representation for everyone and that seeing and learning about other identities should be considered as broadening one's intercultural competence, instead of being a breeding ground for hate.

Another point is that people often are afraid of what they do not have adequate knowledge about, or of what they are wrongly informed about. There is for example a lot of misinformation, or what is sometimes referred to as fake news, circulating regarding transgender people, and there is probably a correlation between people's attitudes towards transgender people and where they get their information from. "When misinformation is created with the intent to cause harm or to stir up hatred against a person or group, this is called disinformation" (Stop Hate UK, n.d). In addition to the spread of misinformation or disinformation about transgender people, laws are being put in place that curtail the rights of transgender people. While working with *Felix Ever After*, it can be useful to talk about what is happening in the world regarding transgender rights, and perhaps also look at the history of transgender rights. One could for example look at how Felix is fortunate enough to have access to a medical clinic that is intended for LGBTQ + people, as this is far from the case for everyone. In the United States, for instance, there are several states that have banned health care for transgender people. In Norway, the clinics that specialise in transgender health care are centralised, which means that those who don't live in the big cities have to travel far to get the treatment they need. In addition to laws regarding medical care, there are also other laws that are restraining transgender rights. You could say that Felix is lucky to live in a city where he has access to the necessary healthcare, but as it is mentioned in the analysis, he goes to one of the few clinics in New York City that are especially for LGBTQ+ people. Right now, one of the strictest anti-trans bills in America has become law in Kentucky. The law includes the following restrictions:

1. "Prohibits conversations around sexual orientation or gender identity in school for students of all grades".
2. "Requires school districts to forbid trans students from using the bathroom tied to their gender identities".

3. “Allows teachers to refuse to use a student’s preferred pronouns”.
4. “Bans all gender-affirming medical care for trans youth.”
5. “Requires doctors to de-transition minors in their care if they’re using any of the restricted treatment options”.

(Krauth, 2023)

It is horrendous to read about this inhumane treatment of transgender people, and this is just one example of anti-transgender politics in our society today. The analysis of *Felix Ever After* covers how hurtful the wrong use of pronouns and names is, and the law presented above does among other things encourage teachers to use the wrong pronouns to address their transgender pupils. Even though this is happening in America and not in Norway at the moment, there is a need to be proactive and don’t be naïve and think that something similar cannot happen here, because it has been shown in this thesis that the same attitudes and tendencies exist here as well. There is a need to work on attitudes and prejudices, starting in school. When it is evident that conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation in school are being prohibited in other places in the world, it becomes even more important to use our voices and bring the conversation into the classroom because we still can. Kintsch’s construction-integration model emphasises the importance of prior knowledge of readers in the process of comprehension (Duke et. al, 2011, p. 53). Establishing what the pupils know about the topic before reading *Felix Ever After* can therefore be beneficial, for example by looking at what they have grasped about what is happening in the world regarding transgender rights. Alternatively, reading about current events after reading the novel could also be a way of widening the pupils’ knowledge about the world. Then they can take the knowledge they have acquired from reading the novel into the comprehension process when reading about what is happening in the world.

The purpose of this subchapter has been to highlight the importance of ensuring transgender representation in the classroom, for instance in light of current events that are targeting transgender rights and essentially targeting transgender people’s right to exist at all. It is always important to encourage a diverse representation and work towards equality, but the events that are discussed in this subchapter show just how important it is to make sure that transgender youth feel safe, acknowledged, and represented in school.

## 6.7 Limitations

As with all theses, it is important to acknowledge and account for the limitations of one's work. First of all, this thesis is theoretical, and no empirical research has been conducted when writing this thesis. Its basis is therefore merely on a theoretical framework and previous research. Because this thesis is concerned with hypothetically implementing a novel in the English classroom, it is difficult to anticipate exactly how the pupils will respond to working with this novel. Working with this novel might be a good fit for one group of pupils but may not work too well with a different group. This is however something that applies to all teaching, as every group of pupils is different and works in different ways.

It is important to keep in mind that some pupils might have strongly negative opinions or prejudices which can create a hostile classroom environment when working with a novel such as *Felix Ever After*, because as it has been established in this thesis, transphobia is a prominent issue in our society. It can therefore be useful to consider beforehand how one as a teacher will deal with such a situation. As demonstrated in the previous research on critical diversity competence done by Røthing (2020), how one deals with generalisations or prejudiced statements the pupils might utter is crucial to the development of a safe and inclusive class environment.

In addition, the extent of the learning outcome from working with his novel is also depending on several different factors. This can for example be the pupils' attitudes towards reading, as it might be difficult to engage a class to work with literature if there are a lot of inexperienced or reluctant readers in the group. The pupils' attitudes towards the subject, in general, can also play into how well working with a novel might go, as well as the pupils' attitudes towards school in general. This again leads back to the limitation that different things work well for different groups of pupils.

## 6.8 Concluding remarks on the discussion

This chapter has sought to discuss the content of the literary analysis of *Felix Ever After* in light of the theoretical framework of this thesis, relevant aspects of the LK20 curriculum, and relevant previous research in the field, in order to assert the findings of this thesis. The discussion has dealt with several themes that are relevant in regards to "health and life skills" as well as other aspects of the curriculum; themes that are evident in *Felix Ever After* which have been illustrated through a range of concrete examples from the novel in the analysis. The

discussion has built on the analysis to argue for the potential didactic benefits of using the novel in the English classroom. The development of the pupils' intercultural competence, as well as the development of a strong and confident identity as an aspect of the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills", stand out as the most prominent justification for using the novel *Felix Ever After* in the English classroom.

The main essence of this discussion is arguably that there should be room for everyone regardless of their identity. No one should have to feel that who they are makes them any less worthy or loveable, or experience being treated differently because of how they identify. Pupils should be encouraged to treat everyone with respect no matter their differences. I know that eradicating all forms of bullying, prejudices, and stereotypes is an unattainable goal and I am not saying that a single novel can cure the world of injustice. If one were to take one point away from this thesis, it is rather that everyone should strive to make the world just a little bit better and meet others with a curious and open mind.

## 7. Suggestions for implementing *Felix Ever After* in the classroom

Up until this point in this thesis, a hypothetical possibility of teaching with *Felix Ever After* is presented based on a theoretical framework, the LK20 curriculum, and previous research. This chapter presents a possible suggestion for implementing the novel in the classroom, which can be taken away from this paper and be put into practice in the English classroom. In the process of working with a novel in the English subject, it is usually beneficial to include both pre-reading activities, reading activities, as well as post-reading activities. This is to increase the chances of the pupils getting a deeper understanding of the topics they are working with and promote active engagement with the novel that they are reading. Therefore, I come up with ideas for working with *Felix Ever After* both pre-reading, while reading, and post-reading below.

### 7.1 Pre-reading activities

A possible way to start the process of working with *Felix Ever After* before reading the novel is to introduce the author of the novel. The pupils could then have a look at the author's background, which could lead to a discussion about how their background might have influenced the novel. By looking at the cover, title, and synopsis on the back of the book, the pupils can brainstorm which themes they think are covered in the novel. The next step could be to have the pupils think about what they already know about these themes and write these thoughts down. One of the aspects that this thesis is concerned with is the development of the pupils' intercultural competence, and two different models of intercultural competence are accounted for in the theory chapter of this thesis. The first of these models is Byram's model of intercultural competence which includes five savoir. The first of these savoirs is *attitudes* (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). This savoir becomes relevant in the pre-reading stage of working with *Felix Ever After*, as it is concerned with keeping an open mind and being able to respect other beliefs. When the pupils are brainstorming which themes that they think the book covers and what knowledge they already possess on the topics, it is useful to encourage the pupils to do this with an open mind and prepare them for encountering views that might differ from their own. A justification for working with these pre-reading activities is Kintsch's construction-integration model, as this model is concerned with how previous knowledge influences our comprehension processes, which makes it useful to assess what our previous knowledge is. When working with the post-reading activities, the pupils can look back at the

notes they made before reading the novel and reflect upon how they match with what they have read.

## 7.2 Reading activities

While the pupils are reading the novel, it is a good idea to check in regularly to make sure that they are comprehending what they are reading. The novel can be read individually, but you can also make the pupils read the novel in groups if you for example have a class with reluctant readers, and they can encourage and help each other get through the novel. It is also a good idea to encourage the pupils to make notes along the way as they read. This can be keywords about the themes, characters, or the plot, or any questions that might arise while they are reading. This can for example be done through making a map of the characters and the relationships they have to each other, which can help them keep track of the story.

While reading *Felix Ever After*, Byram's third savoir *skills of interpreting and relating* is very relevant, because it has to do with the interpretation of behaviour, experiences, and beliefs from different identities and cultures, and being able to relate these to your own culture and identity (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). Consciously interpreting what they are reading and making connections to their own life might give a deeper understanding of what they are reading. While the pre-reading activities are related to the pupil's prior knowledge of the themes, the reading activities are related to the new information that they obtain. This means that the knowledge they had initially when brainstorming about what they think the novel will cover, might change with the new information they acquire, which is what Kintsch's Construction-Integration model is all about.

This thesis has demonstrated the significance of the first-person present tense narrative technique, and it can also be worth encouraging the pupils to make some reflections on the form of narrative while they are reading the novel and make them think about how it affects the storytelling and the meaning of the story. They can also be encouraged to look out for any other literary techniques or devices that they recognise while reading the novel, in addition to paying close attention to the plot and themes.

## 7.3 Post-reading activities

When the pupils are done reading the novel, it can be useful for them to first discuss what they have read in smaller groups. Here they can make use of the notes they made while

reading, and they get to hear other pupils' thoughts about the novel. Anyhow, it is important to allow the pupils to reflect on what they have read. This can be done in the group discussions but can also be accomplished through writing activities. These writing activities can be creative, such as writing a letter from one character to another to further put oneself in a different mindset. Byram's fifth savoir is *critical cultural awareness*, which includes political education (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). It could therefore here be appropriate to have the pupils research current events related to transgender rights, as the political arena in for example The United States is filled with issues concerning the lives of transgender people. Several examples of relevant current events have been presented in this thesis, and it is possible to use those to look at what is happening in the world regarding transgender rights and the lives of transgender people. *Critical cultural awareness* is also concerned with the ability to evaluate one's own and other people's behaviour critically (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 20). One concrete example from the novel that the pupils could work with, is how Austin bullies Felix despite being part of a minority identity himself. In addition, to evaluate the behaviour the pupils encounter within the novel, this is also an opportunity to evaluate their own and others' behaviour, for instance regarding how they behave towards people with a different identity than themselves. This can also be linked to the basic component of intercultural competence *self-awareness* in the UNESCO publication *Intercultural competence*, which includes the "... awareness of one's own identity and understanding the lens through which the world is interpreted" (Dypedahl & Lund, 2020, p. 21). It is necessary for the pupils to understand that how they view the world is dependent on their identity and their experiences and that this is also the case for others. Another possibility is to get creative and let the pupils create self-portraits like the ones Felix paints in the novel. The argument for doing this could be to explore how the pupils see themselves, which is related to the process of developing a strong, confident identity and a positive self-image.

#### 7.4 Assessment

In addition to working with pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities in relation to the novel, one could also create an assessment to see what the pupils have gained from reading the novel, which could be connected to several aspects of the curriculum as well. "Read, analyse and interpret fictional texts in English" (UDIR, 2019, p. 12) is one of the competence aims from the English subject curriculum for the "VG1 programme for general studies". By creating a task where the pupils must explain and account for what they have read through an

analysis and discussion, it is possible to assess this competence aim. This is also relevant in regard to the three core elements of the English subject which are communication, language learning, and working with English texts. Communication is about using language to create meaning and being able to use the language formally and informally (UDIR, 2019, p. 3). A written task could therefore be given to the pupils to give them the opportunity to use the language for the purpose of a literary analysis and discussion, which is also connected to language awareness as the pupils need to consider the nature of the language they are using for this specific task. This task is also a part of the core element of working with English texts, as it is a part of the process of reading a novel. The assessment is also a part of developing three of the pupils' basic skills within the subject which are writing, reading, and digital skills, where the latter applies if the assignment is done on a computer. One option is to give the pupils several tasks to choose from, where different genres could be applied to the different tasks. This would however require previous teaching of different textual genres, which could be connected to the competence aim "write different types of formal and informal texts, including multimedia texts with structure and coherence that describe, discuss, reason and reflect adapted to the purpose, recipient and situation" (UDIR, 2019, p. 12).



## 8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to look at possible ways to connect the English subject and the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”. This has been explored through the research questions “How can using YA literature with LGBTQ+ representation in the classroom cultivate intercultural competence?” and “How can the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills” be implemented in the English classroom through the use of YA literature?”. The novel *Felix Ever After* has in this thesis been used to explore the possibilities of implementing topics from “health and life skills” in the English literature classroom, for the purpose of ensuring representation and developing intercultural competence. The chosen topics from “health and life skills” are identity and sexuality and gender, where the latter has been explored by looking at transgender youth and the novel’s intersectionality. A theoretical framework on intercultural competence, didactic benefits of literature, transgender youth, and the first-person present tense narrative technique has been provided for the purpose of ensuring an academic depth to the analysis and discussion of this thesis. The theoretical framework establishes that there are several advantages of using literature in teaching, with YA literature being especially suitable for young readers as pupils are. An interpretation of areas of the LK20 curriculum that are relevant to this thesis has also been given, which provides a didactic dimension to the research conducted in this thesis. In addition, relevant previous research within the field has been presented to provide a brief overview of what has already been explored. The presented research questions have been attempted to answer by doing a close reading and literary analysis of *Felix Ever After* with a focus on topics from “health and life skills”. Subsequently, the analysis is discussed in light of the theoretical framework and the LK20 curriculum.

### 8.1 Findings

It is shown through the analysis that *Felix Ever After* covers several themes that can be connected to the interdisciplinary topic “health and life skills”, the English subject curriculum, and the core curriculum.

The topic of transgender youth is prominent in *Felix Ever After*, and several other LGBTQ+ identities are represented as well. This is directly connected to the topic of sexuality and gender which is a part of “health and life skills”, and the analysis and discussion show that there are several issues that are depicted in the novel that are highly relevant in the real world.

The discussion also draws connections from this topic to intercultural competence and the core value *human dignity* in the core curriculum. The second topic that is covered is transphobia and bullying, which is partly connected to the previous topic. In the discussion, this topic is connected to the education act, the didactic benefits of teaching with literature, and Røthing's (2020) research on critical diversity competence. Identity stands out as one of the most prominent topics in *Felix Ever After* and is explored to a great extent in the novel. The development of a strong and confident identity is the main essence of "health and life skills" which draws strong connections between the novel and the interdisciplinary topic. The topic of identity is also connected to the core values *human dignity* and *identity and cultural diversity* in the core curriculum, which again are connected to the development of intercultural competence. The novel's intersectionality is also explored through the intersectionality of Felix Love's identity, which is also relevant in regard to "health and life skills" and intercultural competence. The subchapter of the discussion about the thesis' importance links the topics that are explored in this thesis to current events. Working with the themes that are covered in *Felix Ever After* can help the development of the pupil's intercultural competence and sympathetic imagination, which is an important aspect of the LK20 curriculum. Working with this novel means that the pupils get to explore a different identity or finally recognise an identity in which they can see themselves. A possible answer to the research question "How can using YA literature with LGBTQ+ representation in the classroom cultivate intercultural competence?" has therefore been provided. The second research question that is explored in this thesis is "How can the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" be implemented in the English classroom through the use of YA literature?". An answer to this question has been provided through establish the didactic benefits of using literature and showing how the themes in a YA novel can align with the topics of "health and life skills". The argument of this thesis is therefore that the use of YA literature in the English classroom is ideal for implementing the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" and its focal areas such as identity and sexuality and gender, while at the same time developing the pupils' intercultural competence.

## 8.2 Suggestions for further research

Though it has been established in this thesis that YA literature can be used to implement the interdisciplinary topic "health and life skills" in the English classroom and to develop intercultural competence, there is always room for new ideas and more input on the themes

that are explored in this thesis. The immediate first suggestion for further research springing from this thesis is to bring *Felix Ever After* into the classroom as this thesis lacks that empirical aspect, which is also something I would like to be able to do myself in the future. This could be done either with the suggestion for implementing *Felix Ever After* in the classroom that is provided in this thesis, or with a different approach with new ideas about how to use the novel in the classroom. It is also a possibility to research other novels that might be relevant in regards to implementing “health and life skills” in the English literature classroom, to function as a resource for teachers looking for literature to use in teaching.

Another aspect that would be interesting to look at is to research to what degree English teachers consider diversity and representation when choosing literature for their pupils if that is something they consider at all. This could for instance be done through an online survey, or through interviews to get more insights into why or why not this is something that teachers pay attention to. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to see research on teachers’ attitudes towards diversity and representation in the English classroom and how they are working with it.

There is also an exciting opportunity to research what experienced teachers have with implementing “health and life skills” in the English subject. The interdisciplinary topic is still relatively new, so it could be useful to discover what teachers have done so far. This could also be expanded to include the other interdisciplinary topics “democracy and citizenship” and “sustainable development”.

Another angle to research within this field is pupils’ attitudes towards, and experience with, working with literature. This can for example include attitudes towards reading in general or attitudes towards using literature to work with specific themes such as those included in the interdisciplinary topics of the LK20 curriculum. It could also be interesting to see what attitudes pupils have toward the interdisciplinary topics in general and how they think they are relevant to them.

As suggested above, there are a range of possibilities to do further research related to the ideas that have been presented in this thesis, and it would be exciting to read any research that may come out of it if, for instance, any aspiring master’s thesis writers want to pick up the thread.

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