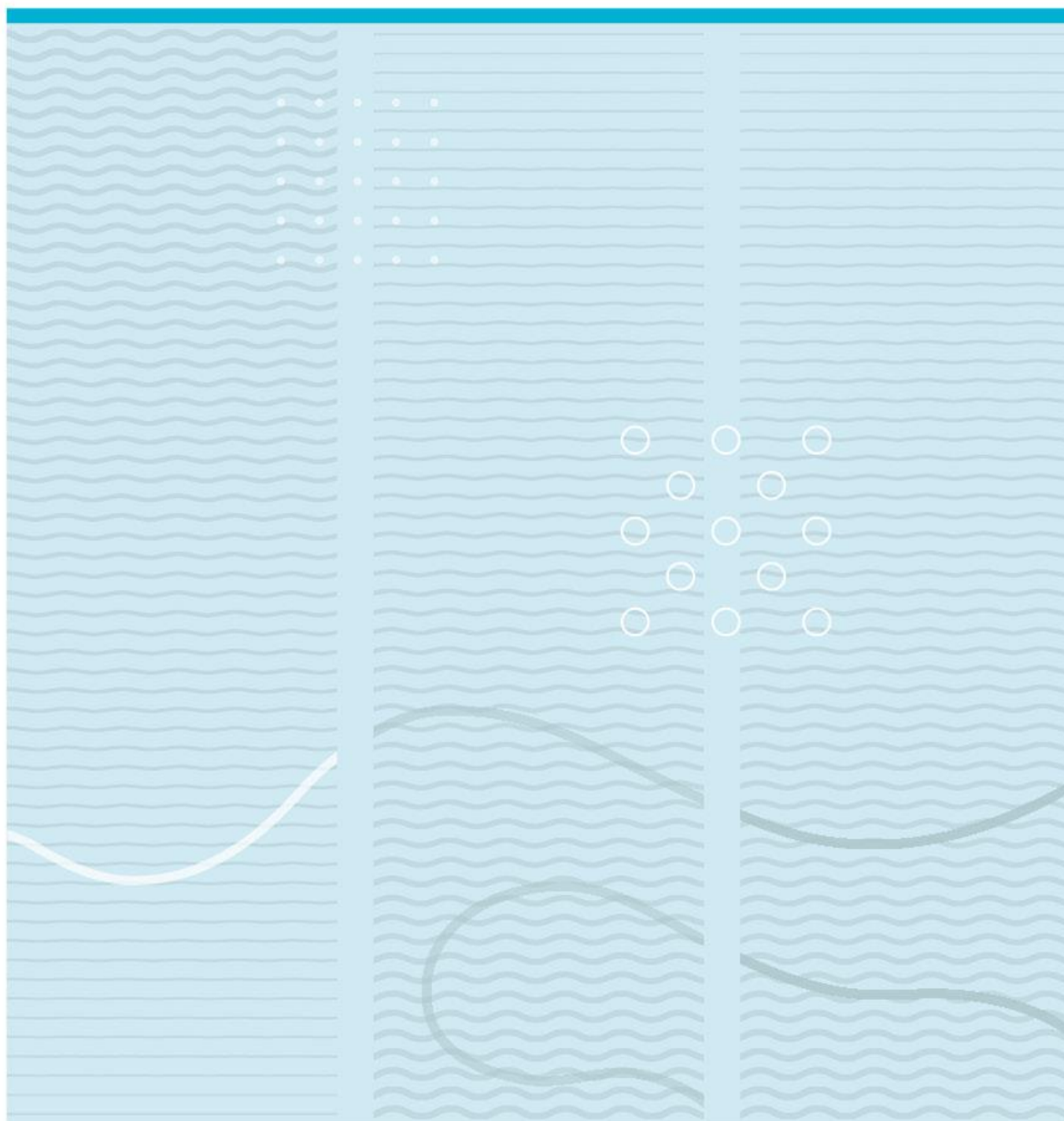Elias Kanga Erlandsen

Teaching Diversity, Identity and Love Through Stories

Using graphic novels about identity and diversity in the EFL Classroom

This thesis is worth 30 study points

Abstract

Diversity and inclusion are important topics for education. Students in Norwegian schools should be taught to appreciate difference and be engaged in a classroom that promotes diversity and inclusivity. This can be achieved by encouraging students to view topics from others' perspectives and engage in critical thinking. The students can encounter these perspectives through taking in the experiences of others. These experiences will allow them to gain greater awareness and understanding of complex social issues.

This study argues that the graphic novels *Heartstopper Volume 1* (2019), *Heartstopper Volume 2* (2019), and *New Kid* (2019) can be read to gain awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusivity. A textual analysis of the graphic novels highlights themes that can be used to engage students in these topics. Queer theory, critical race theory, and intersectional theory is used to inform and discuss the analysis. The discussion highlights classroom activities that facilitate for reflection, such as discussions and reflective writings as methods for implementing the graphic novels in the classroom. The study concludes that these graphic novels are rich in themes and subject matter that can be used in the EFL classroom for effectively teaching and engaging students in the topics of diversity and inclusion.

Contents

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1 Introduction

Identity and diversity are sensitive subjects that affect everyone in the world. They are subjects that have through globalization become more visible over the years and are social issues of massive complexity. The Norwegian core curriculum features values of education that need to be represented in all aspects of Norwegian school. It illustrates the need for acknowledgement and appreciation of differences, and the school must represent values needed for participation in a diverse society such as human dignity, identity, and cultural diversity (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, pp.4-6). This tasks teachers with the job to help develop students' values, however it does not give any clear guidelines for how this should be done. Developing these values will involve, to some degree, understanding complex social issues. It can be challenging to find an approach that engages students intellectually and emotionally. Reading graphic novels can be a suitable tool for implementing this in education. Barter-Storm and Wik (2020) make the point that educators have a plethora of literature to utilize in education revolving around pedagogical social justice frameworks, and graphic novels are an accessible option that engage students (p.2). Simply lecturing students about diversity, or just relaying knowledge about such complex issues is not enough to fulfil what the core curriculum demands. Students need to be able to reflect on and draw an emotional connection to the issues. This study is arguing how the graphic novel series *Heartstopper* (2019), and *New Kid* (2019) can be used as a tool for achieving transformative learning about diversity and inclusion in the classroom. These are both stories about fitting into society. This aim of the study is to examine how these stories can communicate meaning related the subject matter of diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, it will explore how these graphic novels can be used in the classroom to educate on these topics. The study will explore question: "How can the graphic novels Heartstopper Volume 1 & 2 by Alice Oseman, and New Kid by Jerry Craft, be read to gain awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusivity in the EFL classroom".

These topics are important to learn about as they are issues that are still prevalent in today's public discourse. EFL teachers have many resources at their disposal for tackling education about these topics, however the use of fiction can prove to be an exceptionally useful tool. The graphic novels that are highlighted in this text will through the qualitative approach of a textual analysis interpret how the stories convey themes of diversity and inclusion that are of value as an education tool. The study will discuss how their educational use can fit into the Norwegian EFL classroom in the future.

Heartstopper (2019) is a graphic novel series created by Alice Oseman. It was first serialized online in shorter chapters. It was not until later that the chapters were compiled into graphic novel volumes. The serialization is still on-going, and the story is not completed. In this study I have then chosen to limit scope of my analysis to *Heartstopper Volume 1* (2019) and *Heartstopper Volume 2* (2019) as this covers a suitable amount of the narrative to support my study. A simplification of the premise can describe the story as being a love story between two boys. It is also about fitting in as teenager in school when you feel that you are different from everybody else. This a story about being viewed as different, and it is about diversity, discrimination, and inclusion. Sexuality and identity are topics relevant to the society students are moving into, and this graphic novel covers aspects of the subject that will allow students to gain greater insight. As such the study will argue for how it can be used as a resource for teachers in the EFL classroom. *New Kid* (2019) is a graphic novel by Jerry Craft, and it is a single volume story about an African American kid trying to fit into a majority white school, and tackles the subject matter of race, identity, and diversity that this study will prove how can be useful for education. This study aims to argue that these graphic novels work as a tool for being able to see others' perspectives and deepen their understanding of the issues that come with diversity and identity among kids their age and in the wider society. The reason these two graphic novel properties were chosen was because their contents work well as counter-stories to the predominant white or heteronormative stories often found in media. There are many other graphic novels that could serve a similar purpose, however these are both recently published, as well as successful and popular among teens after their debut. Furthermore, the reason for choosing these graphic novels is that counter-storytelling is an important part of critical race theory (Cunningham, 2020, p.39). *New Kid* (2019) is a text created by an African American cartoonist, about the life of an African American kid. This makes it a suitable option to analyze for this study. Similarly, any aspect of comics can be explored through queer theory, both the culture surrounding the comics and the contents themselves (Zullo, 2020, pp.51-52). In this case, Heartstopper is primarily about queer characters and the study will highlight what and how related themes are conveyed and how the texts can be applied to the classroom.

The goal is for this study to contribute to understanding how graphic novels can be used to tackle complex social issues, and how they are able to convey the subject matter of queerness and race in a way that informs and allows for reflection. A study such as this could help to further bridge the connection between the comic studies, queer studies, and critical race theory as fields of research. Moreover, through analyzing the graphic novels presented it proves how these graphic novels specifically, and how the medium itself, can be used as valuable literature for the English

classroom. It should encourage teachers to take use of them in their curriculums, as they are able to serve as valuable tools in students' education through the facilitation of reflection about complex social issues through their application in the classroom or outside.

2 Background & Theory

2.1 Background

The study of literature is multidisciplinary field of research that has a long history of theory and previous research. Research in the field of pedagogy features various studies about introducing fiction into education. In relevance to this study, presenting research that illustrates the benefits of the implementation of fictional stories in the classroom serves as a foundation. Some benefits to reading fiction in school include that it has been shown to encourage critical reflection in students and that using it in education promotes transformative learning (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015, p.22). Fiction allows students to be exposed to perspectives and experiences they have yet to encounter themselves. The use of fiction in education creates an opportunity to explore a wider world than the one contained within the classroom itself.

To achieve the goal of gaining awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusivity in the EFL classroom it is necessary for the students to be exposed to a variety of experiences and have their preconceptions and values challenged and reflected upon. This is achieved through the education aiming to be a transformative experience. Transformative learning can be understood as having prior beliefs and assumptions challenged and revising perspectives through a meaningful encounter with new experiences (Kroth & Cranton, 2014, p.25). These experiences can come from both physical interactions with cultures, and through stories of experiences different from your own. If it is possible to derive meaning from the encounters, it has the potential to affect you in some way. Hoggan & Cranton (2015) illustrate that transformative learning through fiction happens through its ability to illicit emotional reactions in readers, where students' empathy is challenged when encountering experiences foreign to them (p.22). This allows for critical self-reflection of students' own values (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015, p.20). The classroom is filled with students with different backgrounds and life experiences, and while an encounter with other perspectives and experiences that are featured in fictional stories can help develop their values and perceptions. it may not influence everyone equally. This is one of the reasons it is important to expose students to a variety of experiences, not just through fictional stories but other means as well. Transformative learning may not happen through reading one book, but Hoggan & Cranton (2015) find that engaging with fictional stories result in critical reflection and critical reflection, setting up some of the processes

leading towards transformative learning (pp.11-22). Reading graphic novels come with the benefit of learning and understanding more about different perspectives, experiences, and cultures. Christine Jarvis (2020) in their study on fiction as feminist pedagogy argues that fiction can be used as an educational tool in students' learning processes within critical feminist frameworks, and that reading suitable fiction can elevate the education process of understanding the intricacies of social issues surrounding gender, power, and oppression (Jarvis, 2020).

The benefit of comics used in education has been a subject of research for many years (Yang, 2003). The most apparent difference between books and comics as texts is the emphasis on the multimodal storytelling found in comics. This means that readers approach these two forms of texts differently. The skills needed for reading a monomodal text can differ from the skills needed to read multimodal texts. Novels use primarily the written mode for communication, and students will need to apply the strategies they have built up in encounters with texts of that sort. Graphic novels involve visuals and require the ability to retrieve meaning from images and illustrations (Kress, 2010, p.59). Multimodal texts may feature other modes of communication such as gestures which needs to be interpreted in meaning making. Yang (2003) summarizes some of the benefits of using comics in education by arguing their motivational power and pointing to the strengths of learning through visuals. The amount of written text in monomodal literature can be intimidating to some readers. Visual storytelling and multimodal texts can engage readers differently. A study shows that students with lower language proficiency can better comprehend high-level text when presented multimodally. Simultaneously it points out that visuals that contain a lot of meaning could be cognitively challenging to students (Liu, 2004). This illustrates some implications to the use of graphic novels in education. Graphic novels often feature a decent amount of text paired with visuals communicating story at the same time. Students with lower language proficiency could comprehend meaning more efficiently when engaged with fiction that is presented multimodally. Graphic novels are often the first choice for reading material among teens and young adults, and it is mainly as a reaction to that we have begun to see more teachers adopt them into the classroom (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2018, p.18). The value of graphic novels as motivating reading material should highlight its benefit for use in the classroom. Graphic novels can be utilized for a variety of purposes depending on their contents. Barter-Storm and Wik (2020) argue for the use of graphic novels for education within social justice frameworks and illustrate that it can make complex social issues more accessible through reducing the cognitive load and engaging students through emotional connection (p.6). The reader-response theory is a highly influential theory on using reading as a tool in the classroom. The reader-response theory suggests that readers are active

participants that bring their background, believes, and attitudes into the reading process, therefore the reader is the meaning-maker, and as important as the text itself (Inan & Boldan, 2018, p.67). Activities that heavily involve the readers in interpreting and making meaning of texts can benefit the students. Inan & Boldan (2018) suggests that approaching the texts by allowing the students to engage in creative responses brings them more fulfillment and can help them draw connections between the text and their own life (p.73).

Over the last decade there has been pushback towards fiction that features queer characters or that can be perceived to stray against the norms (Dorr et al., 2018, pp.xvii-xviii). This pushback can be seen in attempts at trying to get books or graphic novels out of school libraries or far away from educational facilities. In 2021, New Kid (2019) was pulled from school libraries at a Texas school district due to concerns about it teaching critical race theory (Bellamy-Walker, 2022). It was later reinstated after it became a debated topic, however this points to how literature can be targeted for their contents. It both recognizes and fears the educational potential of fictional stories.

Critical race theory is a perspective that analyses the power structures that facilitates discrimination towards select races. The theoretical framework draws its attention towards how deeply racism and discrimination is built into the very structure of western society and analyzes the history of white supremacy leaves its imprint on modern society (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.5). Racial discrimination is not always straightforward, and it is a topic that is complex and might be difficult for many students to fully understand and relate to. Critical race theory seeks to create change in society through making it equal and is therefore committed to social justice and empowerment of the marginalized (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, pp.13-14). This facilitates the need for education to explore these topics to the best of their ability, as education is a large part of shaping society and future generations.

2.2 Theory

2.2.1 Queer Theory

Queer theory is a multidisciplinary field that questions and challenges assumptions and categorizations of gender and sexuality. It confronts power structures that marginalizes ones that do not fit within the normative roles in society (Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022, p.3). This involves

challenging binaries, essentialism, and highlights the difference between norms and the notion of a natural order to gender and sexuality. It explores how different social categories intersect and societal structures influence each other and are marginalized.

Heteronormativity is a term used within queer theory that refers to how societal structures places heterosexuality at the center top of the hierarchy, and that there is a cultural that reinforces conventional gender roles and sexuality as normal (Habarth, 2015, pp.166-167). Anything that deviates from these norms is met with marginalization. This can display itself in subtle ways. The notion that children retain their innocence of sexuality in schools and encounters with media relies upon perceiving only heterosexuality as innocent (Pugh, 2011, p.1). Children are exposed to sexuality frequently in their daily lives, but as heterosexuality is considered the natural order of society it retains a sense of "innocence" that should not apply to heterosexuality alone. This innocence to sexuality can seem to feature a double standard. Fiction that features relationships between men and women are looked upon as innocent and perfectly normal in children's entertainment. However, if stories feature queer characters, it can be viewed as something children should not be exposed to. This is an example of how the idea of heteronormativity shows itself when applied to literature. Heteronormativity is also one of the reasons publicly identifying with sexualities different from the perceived "normal" of heterosexuality can be very difficult. The notion of monosexism also displays how bisexuality is also affected by the power structures carried by what society considers the norm. Monosexism is the concept that only being attracted to one gender is what is considered the normal. (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p.214). Bisexuals can face discrimination from other queer groups that still consider monosexism as the norm of society. In many ways, discrimination largely affects those that stray from what is perceived as the normal.

"Coming out" is a concept that is strongly linked to the history of sexuality. Diana Fuss (1991) discusses how the binary application of heterosexuality and homosexuality as a matter of being inside or outside reinforces the hierarchy of heteronormativity in society. Homo in relation to hetero becomes akin to a supplement to what is considered the standard (Fuss, 1991, pp.3-4). Through this understanding, the phrase itself can be viewed as problematic. Although, the problematic nature of the phrasing is a product of the social issues that come from normativity in society. The power of what is considered "the normal" is immense. Homophobia, racism, sexism, and all forms of discrimination is often a matter of being different from what is considered normal. Normativity is decided by the systems of power that form the societal structures we live in. Being different from what is considered normal can put people in difficult positions. To fit in can be an especially

prevalent theme among teenagers. Fitting in is a topic that is important to teens. It is something that may be present in the minds of teenagers if they feel like they are different from what is considered the norm. Interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory is a theory about how acceptance and rejection from individuals in people's lives takes effect. It strongly founded in people's perceptions of parental acceptance or rejection, although it can be used for any set individual (Fuller, 2017, p.509). It draws a connection between how acceptance or rejection effects people. In their research findings on mental health of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, Guy Shilo and Riki Savaya (2012) highlight the importance of parental and social acceptance of queer youth in their mental wellbeing. This shows that the support network of family, and their acceptance in queer people identity can help product and reduce the risk of negative mental health as preventative measure for depression or suicide. Acceptance can assist in reaffirming and protecting their life satisfaction as well their self-esteem.

Performativity is a concept within queer theory that argues about the performative nature of gender identity and sexuality. Judith Butler (1990/2002) presents the theory that gender is a social construct and is a matter of social performances and stylized repetition of acts. Gender is something that is performed, it is something that a person does, not something that is inherently a matter of being (pp.179-180). In society these categories often find themselves thoughts of as binary such as male/female or straight/gay. Butler (1990/2002) discusses how to challenge what they refer to as the heterosexual matrix, the idea that a person's sex directly defines their gender, and that their gender is what in "normal" circumstances decides desire towards others. Considering gender as performative means that regardless of sex, gender is something that is fluid. The state of heteronormativity may result in thinking that sexuality and gender performance may be directly linked. Leading to the belief that if you are man and you desire other men then you are likely to be acting feminine. The relation between gender and sexuality are closely related and queer theory attempts to challenge both these generalizations and sexual essentialism.

Feeling as though you need to be a certain way to fit into society can be demanding. Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the repressive hypothesis illustrates that the historical perspective on sexuality over the last 400 years is that of silence and repression, and that societies began to impose strict rules, morals, and norms upon sexuality based on the procreative couple's experiences (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp.3-14). The idea that sexuality is something to be censored and hidden only further stigmatizes sexuality that is viewed as abnormal or that does not fit into a utilitarian perspective on sex. This helps furthering the marginalization of sexual minorities. While Foucault

recognizes that there was a history of shame and silence about sexuality, he criticizes the repressive hypothesis as a simplification of how sexuality is undermined through power (Foucault, 1976/1990, p.15). He argues that coinciding with the rise of capitalism, discourse surrounding sexuality increased, and that the sexual behavior of couples became a public issue (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp.15-25). In the increase of discourse surrounding sexuality, the topics of sex became, to a larger extent, a matter of politics. The landscape of power in modern society creates a stricter and more controlling atmosphere around sexuality. The legitimate heterosexual couple had the right to more discretion, while the sexuality of children and those who are queer were faced with further scrutiny and attention (Foucault, 1976/1990, p.36).

Foucault argues that in the last 250 years, pedagogy, medicine and economics became pillars that made sex become social issue that required society and its individuals to place themselves under surveillance (Foucault, 1976/1990, p.96). Foucault recontextualizes the idea of the Panopticon, a prison design that places inmates under constant surveillance, as a generalizable model of how power can be systematically used to make individuals in society monitor their own behaviors to adhere to the norms and rules (Foucault, 1975/1995, pp.201-205). Living in a society where power is structured in such a way makes people me more wary of their own appearance, behavior, and identity. Fearing judgement by the eyes that are constantly watching. In generalizing this model, it applies to schools and social media as well. The fear of judgment creates this culture where people need to present themselves as normal as possible. Sexuality and gender being highlighted in discourse makes it a prime target for critical observation, and people strictly police themselves to adhere to the society's definition of normal.

The power relationship between the individual and society is one of constraint. Foucault argues that the discourse on sex creates an obligation for individuals to confess knowledge about their sexuality. Confession becomes the means of liberation from constraints and is constructed through a power imbalance in which an authority figure demands and requires a confession (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp.51-52). This authority can be institutions that hold power in society, or the power of the discourse of sexuality itself. Confession in western society can be viewed through the lens of religion as an admission of sin. The concept of confession becomes a method of understanding this feeling of liberation as a way individuals acknowledge a fixed normality of sexuality, and the confession recognizes a state of abnormality.

Industrialization and capitalism made it so that more power was exerted upon individuals' bodies. The rapid increase in production made control over people's bodies a larger political issue, as the economy relied upon productivity more than ever. Foucault refers to this as bio-power, and he argues that this emphasis on bodies in the middle of public discourse made it so that our bodies were to be measured up a perceived normality (Foucault, 1976/1990, pp.109-125). It emphasized the idea of people's bodies having an ideal function. The normal body can be viewed as one most beneficial to an authority. It creates a culture in which people long to be categorized within the standards of what is considered normal. People start to closely pay attention to their own identity and behavior in hope of gaining acceptance within the confines of what bio-powers define as normal.

2.2.2 Colonialism, Race and Discrimination

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a growing field of study with many perspectives that aim to untangle a complex structure of discrimination and oppression in the world. A large part of CRT research is centered around the American society, but its theory applies on a worldwide scale as well. McCoy & Rodricks (2015) presents CRT through seven principles that cover some of the important aspects of the field of research. The two most relevant of these principles will be presented in this study.

The first principle regards the permanence of racism, which points to racism existing as a permanent aspect of living as People of Color (PoC) (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.6). Understanding how racism is entangled into every aspect of society, and more so understanding how People of Color experience this ever present aspect of discrimination is a difficult challenge. Students outside of America, and especially white students might feel like this is a foreign concept outside of their experience, however as the principle suggests it is a part of the society that every person participates in.

The second principle is experiential knowledge, or counter storytelling, a concept which argues that engaging in People of Color's lived experiences is a legitimate need, and necessary for understanding and teaching about racism in education (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, pp.7-8). For students to be able to understand these concepts it is vital for them to be engaged in authentic experiences from the perspectives of the oppressed. Not just for the sake of obtaining knowledge, but also for the sake of encouraging critical thinking and form and emotional connection to others. This is a postcolonial thought of highlighting subaltern voices as a method of combating the

oppressive power dynamics of colonialism. Subaltern voices are the voices and perspectives of the marginalized, and the silencing of their voices reinforces colonial hierarchies. Counter storytelling are narratives and experiences from perspectives of the marginalized and is an important aspect of CRT. This demands that people can engage in literature that features these perspectives, whether it is biographical or fictional. Postcolonial theory provides a framework for understanding the history of systematic oppression and how it can be challenged. The enslavement of Africans in America is common knowledge, but this can also be viewed through the lens of colonialism. There exist parallels between the historical context of African slaves in America, and the European colonialism. Africans had their cultures erased and suppressed in America, and the power dynamics between colonizer and subject can be reflected in how white Americans held social power over the black people during history. The topics are not independent of each other, but instead reflect a larger issue of power dynamics and oppression. The impact of colonialism created a dominance of western European cultures. A study on critical pedagogy as decolonizing pedagogy points to empathy being a central tool as to how to achieve social transformation but argues that a mere understanding of how inequalities exist or came to be is not enough, and that empathy needs to be developed through reflecting on everyone's complicity in furthering colonialism (Zembylas, 2018, pp.416-417). Decolonizing pedagogy hopes to address colonialism through challenging the Eurocentric school curriculum. Not just by making students aware of discrimination, but by having students reflect on the actions which permeates the power structures created by colonialism.

Racism might not always be easily visible. Some may partake in racist acts without realizing the extent of the effect they might be having. Racism and discrimination is able to hide itself well, it is not something that most people would want to flaunt. Racial microaggressions is a term that accounts for these more subtle forms of racism, which might account for verbal, non-verbal and visual insults, or even the vocabulary used towards marginalized groups (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.73). Stereotypes can often be a part of the problem of microaggressions, as even positive stereotyping might also have negative connotations when applied to individuals. What makes microaggressions a bigger problem is that clear and obvious displays of racism might be frowned upon in public, but tiny jabs in daily conversation is often disregarded (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.73). An important aspect of critical race theory is to unearth the seemingly invisible forms of racism that are intrinsically weaved into society. Microaggressions can be found anywhere and might even come from the person one would least expect to partake in the behavior. The danger of racial microaggressions is that it is often a matter of emphasizing and sustaining the dominant social hierarchy through subtle means, and this means that people who commit microaggressions might

not even realize they are doing it (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.73). Students, teachers, and people of all races can commit microaggressions, and it does not have to be any big display. It just has to be enough to sustain whiteness as a norm in society, and enough to marginalize individuals by imposing a form of "otherness" upon them. How frequently microaggressions can happen will have an effect on People of Color, to the point where they might not even realize it has happened. It is a method the power structures manage to reaffirm their power through how closely racism has seeped its way into people's daily lives.

2.2.3 Intersectionality and Power Structures

Perspectives within queer theory and critical race theory helps us understand that social issues such as these cannot be viewed in a vacuum. The social hierarchies and power dynamics in society do not target oppressed minorities individually, but there is a relation between the systematic oppression of oppressed groups and individuals. Viewing social inequalities through this theoretic framework is referred to as intersectionality. The idea of intersectionality within research is based on the assumption that different categories of oppressed groups, whether gender, race, sexuality or ability, among others, are oppressed through intersecting systems of power rather than viewed individually (Collins, 2015, p.14). The theory suggests that these different oppressed groups have shared experiences, and their opportunities are shaped based on the same system of oppression. Understanding the experiences of these individuals is what helps recognizing the systems of power that oppress them. There are multiple dimensions to this type of oppression, and by ignoring one group's oppression when concentrating on another's in the context of this understanding does not capture the intricacies of how the marginalization is executed. Queer people may be persecuted for their sexuality; however, a black queer person may be marginalized from multiple directions, thus creating intersectionality in the marginalization. There are many black queer women with experiences of oppression that do not just stop at gender discrimination. The reason why understanding social issues plaguing oppressed groups through this lens can be useful is because it offers a broad collection of perspectives and experiences of oppression and inequality. A straight white woman might be affected by oppression because of her gender, but a black woman might both be facing oppression due to her race and gender. Targeting gender inequality in isolation might not be capturing how the complexities of oppression as it affects the broader spectrum of oppressed groups. This does not imply that breakthroughs isolated within specific social groups is without value, however intersectionality means it is not enough for true change. Intersectionality which had its origins within post-structural feminism, has been able to make feminism more inclusive by

incorporating ways in which all types of women's experiences (Collins, 2019, p.104-106). Feminism alone can be viewed as a movement that fights for the rights of all women. However, the idea of feminism was, in the rise of a black feminist movement, criticized for only factoring in white women's experiences (Collins, 2019, p.104). Similarly, feminists have for a time criticized Islamic culture for misogyny, however this does not necessarily factor in the experiences of all Muslim women (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2016). In an ideal version of feminism everyone would be fighting against a singular form of oppression, however the different experiences individuals have with being marginalized does not make that easy of a task. Collins (2019) also highlights the ability that intersectionality has to help explain the "matrix" of intersecting power dynamics that allows for several forms oppression and reinforce each other in a way that might be very different from depending on the country you live in (p.239). What may combat oppression in Norway, might not the oppression in the US in the same way, as these may be different although similar matrixes of domination, even if they share origin in a similar history.

Intersectionality, similarly to CRT and Queer theory acknowledges and emphasizes that a large part of oppression is systematic. The oppression shows itself in the foundation of law, in school systems, and in the prison system. It closely ties together the idea of white supremacy and heteronormativity (Collins, 2019, 257-258). To fully understand how these things intersect it is necessary to grasp the historical contexts of how these structures of power came to be. Colonialism had a large effect in establishing global systems of power (Collins, 2019, pp.109-116). These things add up and eventually the matrix of domination will have effected systems such as schools worldwide. These systems of oppression could target marginalized groups through erasure in media and in school curriculums. Textbooks only focusing on white people's victories. Fiction that frames white people in a position of glory, while stories about black people or queer people is either extremely one note or erased entirely. A black girl could be the target of both racism and sexism, and schools could be assisting the reproduction of social inequality through not allocating resources towards marginalized low-income communities often consisting of many people of color (Lewis, 2019, p.154-187). The intersectional nature of how oppression occurs makes it necessary that if we want people to not just be tolerant, but also hopefully participate in making change, it is necessary to learn more about different individuals' experiences with oppression and see how and where they intersect.

2.2.4 Comic Theory

Scott McCloud (1993) states that pictures are received information, while writing is perceived information. When pictures become more abstract, as in the case of a comic, it requires a greater level of perception (p.49). When reading a narrative that is communicated through the medium of a comic, it mixes multiple modes of communication. When engaging with a visual medium there are many cognitive processes going on that the reader may be unaware of. When observing parts or elements, but automatically perceiving the whole picture is called closure (McCloud, 1993, p.63). Comics can be viewed as pieces lined up to tell a larger story. You only see parts and elements but end up perceiving a whole picture. McCloud (1993) points to that while the presentation of comics is usually done through panels, it is within the gutters of those panels that a lot of the meaning is formed. That is where large amount of the meaning is formed, and the reader's imagination transforms the images and words they receive into a unified idea. Past experience and readers' perceptions is what combines visual iconography to help form meaning in comics. This is achieved through the concept of closure, which is what leads the reader to form meaning out of pieces of iconography and writing (pp.66-68). What is drawn, and what is not, may strongly affect to what extent meaning can be interpreted from comic pages.

2.2.5 Narratology and Semiotics in Comics

In regard to narratology as a theory from studying comics, Kukkonen (2013) describes the story as the "what" of storytelling, while discourse is the "how" (p.35). The method of which stories are told can affect how people receive it and how they are able to reflect on it. For the sake a textual analysis, the "what" and "how" becomes the data from which to tie into the social elements of discourse they represent. When it comes to telling a graphic novel story, the author/artist is the one that attempts to convey to the reader. However, the method in which it is conveyed is through a narrator, which could either be an insert of the author, or it is done through a character. In literature the narrator may tell the story based on their perspective, or focalization. Kukkonen (2013) explains that comics the narrative's focalization is not always as clear cut, because with comics the character who is the focalizer is often displayed in the third person. Although what the author draws is not always the perspective of the character who serves the purpose of focalization in the narrative. The narrator and the focalizer in a narrative may be different, and in relevance to comics, focalization might simply serve the point of limiting the knowledge about the world to select characters (p.45).

Within the theory of semiotics, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996/2006) illustrates the concept of how the signifier and the signified, or rather form and meaning, are independent of each other until the sign-making occurs. (p.8). The theory presented here recognizes that the meaning-making is social, and depends both on social circumstances, culture and the history of the meaning-maker. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006). Given that the reader is involved as the interpreter of meaning they are not always aware of how they manage to receive the meaning they did from the signs. You would not be aware of the pre-conscious cognitive processes involved in reading comics, even though they are the foundation of your meaning-making (Kukkonen, 2013, p.8). When trying to identify meaning or in applying semiotics to an analysis the interpreter cannot always accurately describe the exact processes take place leading to their interpretation, as the meaning-maker, or the interpreter relies on both their cognitive and social history in making sense of the meaning. An analysis needs to take into account as many different processes involved in meaning-making out of the elements on a comic page (Kukkonen, 2013, p.24). As it is the interpreter who recognizes what meaning is being conveyed, the reader needs to rely upon a framework of theory that helps in recognizing what the comic elements and symbols are being utilized.

3 Methods

There are many methods of producing and conveying meaning. The narrative told through the graphic novels *Heartstopper* (2019), and *New Kid* (2019) can be viewed through the lens of both narratology and semiotics. A qualitative approach in the form of a textual analysis will be used in this study to examine the graphic novels and investigate the research question. There are several approaches that could be utilized to analyzing and examining comics. In search of what meaning is conveyed through the graphic novels, a textual analysis best serves the purpose of this study. This study aims to acquire a better understanding of what meaning the graphic novels can convey, as well as how the graphic novels are able to do so. Achieving this will allow for arguing how the graphic novels can be used in the classroom to gain an understanding of inclusivity and diversity. The study will be utilizing a thematic-centered textual analysis process for the graphic novels that makes apparent what relevant the thematic that come to surface through their narratives. Theory about narratology and semiotics in multimodal texts will be used in analyzing how the themes of the graphic novels come into view, and the analysis will be informed through how it connects to queer theory and critical race theory. This will help create an understanding of how meaning is achieved and will facilitate for a discussion about how education and reflection can take place in engagement with the graphic novels. The choice to utilize narratology and semiotics in the textual analysis shows itself through the nature of graphic novels as a medium of storytelling. Approaching the graphic novels through critical theory allows the study to highlight the meaning in encounters with the narrative and its characters and explore the graphic novels' relationship to structures of power in society (McAllister & Cruz, 2020, pp.7-8). The method section will first establish the foundational theory and concepts for how the textual analysis was approached.

3.1.1 Textual Analysis & Methodological Approach

This study has the goal of interpreting what meaning is conveyed through these graphic novels and investigating how one can learn through the interaction with these fictional stories. A qualitative approach was chosen for the study, as it is best suited for working on interpreting experiential data and the consequences of their meaning (Tjora, 2021, p.27). A textual analysis aims to interpret meaning from fiction. Text, as understood here, is not restricted to written material, but also art and images (Krippendorff, 2019, pp.2-3). Textual analysis is a rather broad term for a methodological approach and encompasses a wide range of sub-categories. The process of research most suitable for this study is a sort of thematic content analysis. The thematic content analysis as used in this

study can be viewed as a sort of hybrid between a content analysis and a narrative analysis. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2015) explain that a thematic content analysis investigates the content of the experiences in the narrative by searching for themes in the narrative data (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015, pp.99). Textual analysis was chosen as how to refer to the methodology in this research as it also relies upon narratology and semiotics in its interpretations of the graphic novels. In a thematic content analysis, the purpose for grouping the data into themes is for further interpretation and discussion (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015, pp.99-100). Furthermore, content analysis should start with a research question for efficiency and empirical grounding, as it allows the researcher to approach a text with a purpose not restricted by what an author may lead one to think (Krippendorff, 2019, p.20). The core of research question for this study was decided before analysis began, and it was approached on the assumption that there would be themes of inclusion and diversity to be analyzed in the data. In a thematic content analysis one can do the categorization of themes both through an inductive or deductive approach. An inductive approach means that the themes are born from the data itself, while in a deductive approach the themes are decided by the analytic interest of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp.83-84). The themes which are split into sub-sections in this analysis are both pre-determined by the interest of the research question the foundational theory, but adjusted based on what elements were discovered in the graphic novels. Krippendorff (2019) argues that the inferences made through content analysis are abductive in nature (pp.24-26).

The design for the textual analysis follows a process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The research begins by reading and re-reading the data, coding interesting features of the data, then gathering all the data by categorizing them into themes that are used analysis and discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp.87-93). In this study the data was categorized into themes related to the theory relevant to the research question. Themes that reflect identity, inclusion, and diversity. Each theme is discussed with compelling examples from the graphic novels, and in the discussion, it is related back to the research question and literature. As graphic novels are presented both through written and visual means, the data presented will both features quotes, paraphrasing, as well as descriptions of how semiotic meaning is conveyed. These elements will be interpreted in the analysis then investigated more thoroughly connected to theory in the discussion. Using this analysis as a foundation the discussion will investigate how textual evidence and imagery is used to highlight and challenge how social issues such as being different, heteronormativity, microaggressions, discrimination and power structures are at play in society.

3.1.2 Ethics and Challenges

This study does not involve any informants and the fictional works are the empirical foundation. This means that many of the ethical considerations come down to what decisions were made for approaching the texts, and why these approaches were made. The trustworthiness of the research comes down to several factors of which reliability, validity and generalizability are central. For a qualitative research method such as a textual analysis many of these can be more difficult to apply than in quantitative research and other genres of qualitative research. The main goal of producing quality research remains the same regardless.

Reliability in qualitative research is about it being presented in a repeatable and consistent way that allows for the research being verified and replicated by others (Tjora, 2021, p.263). In a textual analysis such as this a lot of weight is put into interpretation, and process of analysis does not involve a selection of informants outside of the choice of text to analyze. Even if the same texts were chosen for a thematic content analysis in another study, the inferences made and themes that are highlighted might not show the same results. However, the study should present the process so that if approaching the texts given the same context and purpose the results can find direct overlap. In conducting this research, it is necessary to highlight that in using a textual analysis the texts are read through the lens of a specific context and for a specific purpose. The context in which *Heartstopper Volume 1* (2019a), *Heartstopper Volume 2* (2019b), and *New Kid* (2019) are analyzed from is that of pedagogical research about diversity and inclusion. This is important because interpretations that are presented in the analysis can be understood differently without access to that context. Researchers need to make the context explicit for the readers so that the results can gain validity (Krippendorff, 2019, p.23). As without establishing the context in which interpretations are made, other readers and researchers would not be able to gain proper insight into the results. Another researcher interpreting the same data may have findings that are born from the specific context and purpose they approached the text. The results of the analysis in this study are interpretations of samples that fit the context and purpose of the research question.

The validity of the research is about how accurate and suitable the research is in investigating the objective and phenomena that is being studied. Validity serves the purpose of examining how the research manages to answer the questions that are being asked (Tjora, 2021, p.260). Krippendorff (2019) argues that the results of a content analysis should be "validatable in principle", as the validity of the results are made in the absence of direct observational evidence (Krippendorff, 2019, p.28). As an analysis is often a matter of the researcher's own interpretations it means it can be

difficult to judge the validity of the research. The question being examined may be answered, but the interpretive nature of analysis makes it inherently subjective. Objectivity is not achievable, and the results may only seem valid within the research's own isolation. However, what is argued here means that what the analysis aims to prove should ideally be something that can be applied validity to through further research, and not just an attempt to prove whether the results in this specific interpretation is valid in isolation. Krippendorff (2019) separates between content analysis that infers what people can learn from a text, and analysis that only insist that a text simply has certain contents in it. In validating the findings of the former, a survey or interviews could help to either validate or invalidate the inference, while with the latter it could only indicate whether the original analysis was reliable (p.29). What contents and meaning are in a text is something only left up to the researcher to argue. The goal of this research is not just to claim what contents is within the graphic novels, but rather identifying what content is within it and inferring what readers can learn from it.

The usefulness of a study may be reliant on how broadly applicable it is to different situations. Conceptual generalizability can be defined as measuring to what extent a study develops concepts or theories that can be applicable and relevant to other specific cases than the one that is studied (Tjora, 2021, p.268). In the case of this study the findings are strongly linked to a specific interpretation of graphic novels, however interpretations are valuable because they are made from different perspectives. The objective of this study could be explained as trying to apply the themes interpreted to other scenarios such as students reading in a classroom. The students may interpret the texts differently, but that does not devalue the worth of working with the graphic novels because it only adds different perspectives. What a researcher needs to be careful of when approaching a study is to avoid falsification and fabrication. Avoiding this is achieved through avoiding to misrepresent data or making up data that does not exist (Nygaard, 2017, p.36).

4 Analysis

4.1 Heartstopper

The story of *Heartstopper* (2019) volume 1 & 2 is about the love between a boy named Charlie and a boy named Nicholas. The graphic novel begins with showing Charlie meeting up with a boy named Ben, and depicts the two of them kissing (Oseman, 2019a, p.1-3). Through this, the story immediately establishes Charlie's attraction to other boys, immediately setting up the foundation of the narrative. The story continues as Charlie encounters Nick and their story begins moving. The two main characters are depicted differently. There are contrasts in their character designs. Charlie is skinny with dark hair, while Nick is a bigger guy with lighter shaded hair. Nick is a very approachable friendly guy and plays on the rugby team. The narrative structure of the graphic novel follows Nick and Charlie's love story. The first volume covering their encounter and ending after their first kiss, while the second volume features the two of them entering a relationship. However, the volumes are also heavily centered around Nick's character arc of discovering his sexuality, featuring a climactic moment at the end of volume 2 with him coming out to his mother. Since Heartstopper is still currently being serialized as this paper is being written it does not follow a complete story, but instead these two volumes were chosen because it tells a comprehensive story of their early relationship and a character arc for Nick. Featuring a school setting, the story also features supporting characters within their age range. The main characters Charlie and Nick have the most focus in the story, but supporting characters such as Ben, Harry and Tara have smaller roles that highlight themes relevant to this study. Ben is a character that does not frequently appear in the two volumes but is introduced early as a queer character that has some sexual interactions with Charlie. The character serves more as an example of a person who is unsure about his sexuality but does not reciprocate the romance that Charlie is looking for. Harry serves the role of an antagonist in the story, while he does not take up a central role in the narrative, he serves to represent the discriminatory behavior that many queer people are prone to encounter. Tara is a lesbian girl that Nick develops a friendship with, and becomes someone Nick can confide in. The two volumes of Heartstopper tells a story rich in themes of inclusion and diversity and allows the reader to view the life experiences of queer characters throughout their school life.

4.1.1 Heteronormativity and Discrimination

A medium shot perspective of Charlie is presented in a panel after his crush on Nick was brought up to him in conversation. This allows his facial expression and body language can be viewed clearly as he is pictured with a sweat drop on the side of his face and lines indicating a blush (Oseman, 2019a, p.24). The hunched over body positioning of Charlie and the sweat drop on the side of his face utilized as a symbol for embarrassment or stress illustrates the nervousness of being confronted about having a crush. Zooming out to a long shot, the sequence is followed by a speech bubble from Charlie saying "He's probably straight anyway…" (Oseman, 2019a, p.25). The assumption that a person is straight by default is a topic near to the concept of heteronormativity. Such assumptions may be reinforced by the attributes of sexuality and gender roles associated with masculinity and sports. Nick is a rugby player and has the appearance of a tough guy with a wide frame typical to what is expected of a rugby athlete. Dialogue further cements this reaction from the teenagers at their school as exemplified through lines such as "Does he even like sports? Everyone knows he's gay – "(Oseman, 2019a, p.46). This reflects themes about both gender identity and sexuality through associating homosexuality with a lack of masculinity, as well as presuming masculinity to be requirement for liking sports. This is again referred to later addressing that Charlie's sexuality should not have anything to do with his talent at sports (Oseman, 2019a, p.62).

Charlie confides in his sister, telling her, "I fell for a straight boy… haha…" (Oseman, 2019a, p.161). Charlie's assumption that Nick is straight is evident throughout the graphic novel so far. The assumptions about Nick can be viewed as contrasts to students' assumptions about Charlie. Nick is perceived as a typical masculine rugby jock. While in Charlie's case his interest in boys made people assume he would not be good at sports, then Nick being good similarly creates the assumption that he is straight. At the same time Nick also has not fully realized his identity and sexuality.

In response to talking about the possibility that Nick might have a crush on Charlie, preconceptions the teenagers around Nick have about homosexuality are shown. The teenagers say, "He doesn't look gay." (Oseman, 2019a, p.203-204). Through this dialogue, as well as the character design given for Nick, Oseman challenges the idea of an essential or fixed identity to being gay. The teenagers also do not even consider bisexuality as a possibility, further reinforcing the idea of a binary. Oseman also challenges the same discourse through the dialogue that immediately follows from a teacher explaining to the teenagers that someone's looks do not determine their sexuality, pointing out that sexuality is more than a binary, and that it isn't wise to speculate on people's

sexuality (Oseman, 2019a, p.204). Nick is also beginning to discover that there are sexualities outside of the normative binary (Oseman, 2019b, p.320).

Charlie gets his fair share of microaggressions, as Oseman manages to display through the character Harry. His comments such as, "Do you like musicals?" (Oseman, 2019b, p.481) or "I mean, you SOUND sort of gay, but that's it!" (Oseman, 2019b, p.481) convey the sort of microaggression, often born of stereotyping, that queer people may encounter. This is also highlighted through Oseman underlining the words that emphasizes it as a microaggression. Queer people are not the only ones that are subject to generalizations, as Nick's lesbian friend utters, "...why are straight people like this" (Oseman, 2019b, p.433). This type of categorization and generalization the fundamentals of queer theory is against.

4.1.2 "Coming Out"

As Nick describes how to play rugby, he explains how to go about tackling, as two boys are shown grabbing onto each other below their shoulders. The author takes advantage of semiotics to communicate Charlie's discomfort or shyness to physical contact with other boys through the depiction of a sweat drop, blushing and what could be interpreted as an awkward smile (Oseman, 2019a, p.56). Charlie and Nick texting each other in by their beds, both blushing and avoiding eye contact with their messaging devices and the camera (Oseman, 2019a, pp.114-115). The author frequently uses blushing and other visual cues throughout the graphic novel as a tool for communicating characters' emotions. Blushing as a symbol in comics often represents embarrassment or shyness. It serves as visual cues and nonverbal communication telling the reader how Charlie is feeling. As Heartstopper is illustrated in grayscale, the blushing is shown through a couple lines drawn vertically on characters' cheeks. The author uses various semiotic tools to convey both the emotional state of characters, but also to evoke a response in readers. Other than the commonly seen blushing, Oseman also uses gestures and body language to convey the story. After the two make close body contact practicing tackling, the author depicts Charlie quickly retreating away from Nick, showed through the use of motion lines. Charlie is depicted blushing, and with hunched-over body language (Oseman, 2019a, p.59). Through the character of Charlie, the reader is able to get acquire an understanding of the awkwardness of having a crush. An emotion many teens may find relatable no matter their sexuality. However, with the additional context of this being same-sex love there is an additional subtext to Charlie's hesitance and behavior. Standing out from what is considered the norm adds an additional layer of difficulty to interactions with your

crush. The first time Charlie and Nick kiss each other, the panel borders are seen to disintegrate into flower petals (Oseman, 2019a, pp.253-254). Having the fluttering objects integrate with the panel composition helps to illustrate the passion of the moment. Having the separate panel feel interconnected through the gutters of the page layout. Tree leaves fluttering in between pages and panels throughout the graphic novel has helped to build up to this moment of the flowers' direct integration into the panel construction. This helps to communicate the emotions the two are feeling. The idea of blooming is a symbol for joy or pleasure. Flowers as symbol are also commonly associated with love and romance.

To convey the details surrounding Charlie's coming out, the story flashes back to the circumstances around the school first finding out about Charlie's sexuality, 10 months before the current story setting. It is being spread around as rumors in the school, and the readers get a glimpse of the negative reaction he was initially faced with. The mood of situation is further emphasized through darkly shaded panels, and students around Charlie being depicted as smiling figures without eyes, with only their mouths open, followed by negatively loaded words towards Charlie in following panels (Oseman, 2019a, p.97-98).

Ben is a closeted boy who had an intimate relationship with Charlie, although it was not romantic, as Ben has a girlfriend. In an argument with Ben, Charlie says that Ben fears getting caught in being gay. Ben in response argues that he does not want to come out yet (Oseman, 2019a, p.76). Ben is interested in boys but does not want others to realize he is gay. From Charlie's point of view Ben is simply using him because Charlie is openly gay (Oseman, 2019a, pp.110-111). He wants the benefit of exploring his sexuality without the negative consequences that may follow from carrying around the identity of being gay. While coming out of the closet may be liberating for some, for others it may be scary situation of little personal comfort. There is no implication that Ben is wrong for not coming out publicly. Through Ben, Oseman is able to show a different side to the experience of navigating your own sexual identity, in contrast to how Nick ends up confronting the issue.

"I was just so confused…" (Oseman, 2019b, pp.297-298), Nick says explaining why he ran away after sharing his first kiss with Charlie. This expressing the difficulty of understanding your own identity or sexuality. As Nick is beginning to question and explore his identity and sexuality, the graphic novel depicts him walking alone in the dark, panning out to an isolated panel featuring a long shot of Nick stopping in the street (Oseman, 2019a, pp.186-187). Several pages of Nick browsing the internet searching for answers about his sexuality. Links to "Am I Gay" quizzes and all sorts of examples of the internet trying to answer identity and sexuality questions (Oseman, 2019a, pp.190-195). Nick is seen Googling queries like, "how to tell if you're gay" (Oseman,

2019a, p.192) and "i like girls but now i like a boy????" (Oseman, 2019a, p.193). Oseman is here able to convey that the internet is serving as a guide for exploring his own sexuality and the questions he has about himself. Nick continues searching for his identity throughout the narrative, pictured watching videos about bisexuality (Oseman, 2019b, p.347). The internet is as vehicle and resource to help queer people better understand or discover their internet is common phenomena (Harper et al., 2016). Nick expresses that the idea of coming out is challenging to him. As he is not even sure about his identity or sexuality himself yet, nor is he ready to face the societal pressures of being queer (Oseman, 2019b, pp.331-332). After searching for answers for a while and learning about bisexuality, Nick says to Charlie, "… I think that might be me but I'm still not sure" (Oseman, 2019b, p.362), which Charlie responds to with saying, "That's okay! You don't have to be sure!" (Oseman, 2019b, p.363). Here Oseman advocates for the importance of acceptance, and that it is okay not to be certain about your sexuality.

Still struggling with the idea of coming out and Charlie is shown trying keep his secret (Oseman, 2019b, pp.386-387). The only person Nick has been able to open up to about his sexuality is Charlie. Although not soon after, Nick finds out his friend Tara is lesbian and manages to tell her about how he has been discovering his sexuality (Oseman, 2019b, pp.424-428). Oseman conveys that there is a safety in confiding with people who meet shared experiences of oppression. Queer people might find an interest in sharing their experiences with other queer people, as often seen online where there also can be a veil of anonymity (Harper et al., 2016). In the process of coming out, queer people might also find comfort in acceptance from their friends. Tao is concerned about Charlie's wellbeing and remembers back to when Charlie was terrified to come to school (Oseman, 2019b, p.391). Nick and Charlie are walked in on by Charlie's sister as they are being intimate, which makes Nick panic since he does not feel ready to come out to more people (Oseman, 2019b, pp.451-452). As reciprocated earlier to Nick, "don't feel like you need to come out to anyone until you feel ready." (Oseman, 2019b, p.435).

The climactic moment of Nick's character plot line comes to a head in the last section of the two volumes' narrative. Coming out to your parents is scary due to a fear of rejection. Therefore, the build-up to this moment has been a big part of Nick's character arc. Revealing to his mother that Charlie is his boyfriend, Oseman dedicates a whole page to the moment, and draws flowers scattering out of the panel (Oseman, 2019b, p.548). This emphasizes the importance of the moment and conveys the significance of parental acceptance among queer individuals. His mother replies with, "I'm sorry I ever made you feel like you couldn't tell me that." (Oseman, 2019b, pp.556-557).

Followed by a big smile, and a hug where Oseman again chooses to illustrate flowers flying out of the panel.

4.2 New Kid

New Kid (2019) is a story about an African American boy named Jordan Banks who is starting a new school life at a prestigious school. Jordan is 12 years old, loves art and really wants to draw a graphic novel. The plot follows his struggles with fitting in at his new school, which is not very diverse. Jordan reflects on the difficulties of being different, and through his eyes, words and art the reader gets a glimpse of his experiences. The graphic novel features a variety of characters who stand out from the crowd and must find their way through school life while encountering various struggles. His classmate and guide starting the new school is Liam, a rich white boy who Jordan ends up getting along with. Jordan also befriends another African American boy named Drew who is in the same class as him, and they go through a lot of the same struggles fitting in to the school. Maury is another African American kid appearing in the story, who Jordan finds out does not really have much in common with him. Through Maury the reader can see how Jordan observes another kid in a similar position to him struggling with being different. There are also characters that serve the purpose of displaying how people can contribute to making others feel like they are less worth or different from the rest. Andy is a character who Jordan, Drew and Liam finds to be unlikable due to his constant microaggressions and bullying. Some of the teachers at the school makes Jordan feel like he is different from everyone else, like Mr. Roche who constantly needs to confirm what he said was not racist, or Ms. Rawle who both treats the non-white students differently and mixes up their names. The graphic novel utilizes its narrative to show the experiences of Jordan and the characters around him in a setting that highlight examples of non-inclusivity and microaggressions.

4.2.1 "Being different"

Knowing what educational path and school that could be the best choice for you is will not always be the easiest decision. Jordan and his parents are not quite on the same wavelength about what education will be the best for him. His mom wants him to go to prestigious school, but his dad is really worried about whether the school is diverse enough (Craft, 2019, p.3). The worry about going to a school where you will stand out as different can be a struggle. Craft conveys through Jordan's

narration during his first day in school how being the new kid in a school where he felt different gave him the feeling of being lost and alone (Craft, 2019, p.35). After walking into the cafeteria, Craft depicts Jordan as a miniature among students walking by. Jordan is positioned in the middle of the panel, looking up at giants that looks different than him (Craft, 2019, p.38). This helps to communicate how Jordan feels like he is different and does not fit into the school he has just started.

The graphic novel occasionally gives us a peek at Jordan's sketch book, showing his graphic novel style reflections about his life. The sketch book entry named "Jordan's Tips for Taking the Bus" shows Jordan explaining how he puts on different masks to not stand out on the bus. Around his local area where there is a more diverse crowd he tries to look tough, with a hoodie and sunglasses on (Craft, 2019, p.56). As he approaches the whiter and richer neighborhoods on the bus, he tries to look less and less tough at each stop, taking off his hoodie, then removing his sunglasses, and lastly trying to seem as "non-threatening" as possible (Craft, 2019, pp.56-57). People have preconceptions about people with darker skin, and Jordan in an awareness of this purposely tries to appear as non-threatening as he can when in the richer suburban neighborhood. Jordan needs to put in an extra effort to seem like a "good" teenager. Craft shows that, Jordan illustrates what he considers to be a successful following of his bus ride tips with a white mom and police officer's frown turning into a smile in the next panel, as Jordan has successfully lowered his threat level (Craft, 2019, p.57).

As the narrative develops, Craft manages to display many of Jordan's difficulties with fitting in. Such as, other students asking Jordan who he lives with, and assuming he only lives with his mom (Craft, 2019, p.67). Microaggressions such as these ride upon the coattails of stereotypes of black families. Jordan's soccer coach keeps having to reassure Jordan that he is not trying to be racist every time he says something that can be perceived as such (Craft, 2019, p.77). Jordan's classmates also start discussing how annoying they find it when their teachers ask where they went on vacation, "Yeah, then we won't have to hear about all of the vacations that we didn't get to go on" (Craft, 2019, p.171). This points to the danger of teachers not being aware of the risk of alienating students based on their family situation and might leave the less fortunate students feeling left out.

These everyday encounters with race and identity being in focus gets tiring. Jordan connects with his black classmate Drew, and they discuss how they often get stared at whenever anything related to black history gets brought up. They find things in common about their struggles of fitting in and begin connecting over the things they have in common (Craft, 2019, pp.88-89). The stares and the frequent microaggressions they notice on the daily is tiring for the both of them. Jordan is at home later talking with his parents, as Jordan's mother explains that, "the point is, in order to be

successful in corporate America, you have to know how to play the game" (Craft, 2019, p.96). "The game" in this context is the game of fitting into a white dominated society. The extra hurdles that black kids need to overcome to feel like they are fitting in, or in order to be successful is an example of the white domineering power structures that are in play in American society. Institutionalized racism and discrimination makes it so that Jordan's struggles to fit in is something that does not stop for him in school, but also awaits him in the world of adults.

Jordan struggles to fit in both among African Americans in his neighborhood and with the whiter suburban prestigious school he attends. As Jordan is playing basketball with a group of black friends in his neighborhood, he ends up correcting their grammar. The group of kids look at him weird, and Craft changes Jordan's appearance to be wearing a golf outfit (Craft, 2019, p.162). The golf outfit is meant to symbolize Jordan as prim and proper. He does not entirely fit in with these kids, and similarly is shown of his experiences at his old school. There his skin tone was often pointed out to be lighter than many of the others (Craft, 2019, p.169).

4.2.2 Microaggressions

Andy asserts that Jordan is going to like Mr. Garner but does not specify his exact reasoning for asserting so (Craft, 2019, p.28). His reasoning becomes clear whenever the reader realizes that Mr. Garner is black. Andy presumes that they will like each other just because they have the same skin color. A young black kid named Maury has been given the name Maury-O, as it rhymes with Oreo, a cookie that's black on the outside, but white on the inside (Craft, 2019, p.26). Craft presents this by depicting Maury with an Oreo cookie as his head filling up a larger part of the page layout covering a majority of the lower page. The reader can tell Maury is uncomfortable with this nickname as his facial expression depicts his eyebrows in a sad frown and him sulking with his lower lip out. The reason for his perceived "whiteness" is because Maury has interests that people do not stereotypically associate with black teens. Assuming someone's interests or behaviors due to their looks, and then subtly expressing it is a form of microaggression. Black kids are often forced upon them a degree of whiteness or blackness based on their interests or behavior. "Acting white" or "acting black" are preconceptions people have and are rooted in a history of racism. Andy often keeps mentioning Mexican dishes around Ramon, as he assumes Ramon is from Mexico, although he is from Nicaragua (Craft, 2019, p.42). A difference that seems not to exist in Andy's mind. The assumption that Ramon likes tacos because of his Central American heritage comes across as a microaggression that Ramon is clearly depicted to feel uncomfortable about. Later in the narrative,

Andy continues to bring up Mexican foods, and questions Ramon unprovoked about Taco Bell, until Drew later calls him out on his microaggressions (Craft, 2019, p.198).

As the teacher Ms. Rawle explains about school trips to the class, she makes sure to remind the students about the fee for the trip, specifically bringing it up to let the students that are on financial aid know the school will cover parts of it. "Financial aid" is written in massive letters on the page and is immediately followed by an illustration of the frowning faces of the two black students in the class, with eyeballs floating in a circle around them pointed in their direction (Craft, 2019, p.59). The author manages to highlight the words financial aid by making them massive in a speech bubble in the center of the page. What the author manages to convey through this is how the words seem to be pointed towards them in particular, no matter if they are actually on financial aid or not. Making them stand out as different even more. "Just remember that there is an extra fee for these trips… for those of you on… financial aid… the school will pick up a portion of the cost".

During class, Ms. Rawle accidentally calls Drew by a wrong name. "I'm sorry, Drew. Deandre is one of my former students. He was a real handful." (Craft, 2019, p.60). Slipping up on names is natural for anyone, especially for teachers meeting new students constantly. However, the subtext here is that the teacher, in this case a white woman, is shown to mix up the names of black students. Following this event, Craft draws an encounter in the graphic novel, of a black teacher named Mr. Garner questioning how Jordan is fitting in at the school. Trying to assure Jordan that the name mix-up is likely just because he is new. However, in the following panels, another teacher walks by mixing up Mr. Garner's name with the black coach Rick, even though Mr. Garner has worked there for 14 years (Craft, 2019, pp.61-62). This further emphasizes the casual way in which Jordan and other black students and teachers encounter microaggressions daily. After witnessing this, and parting with Mr. Garner, Jordan speaks to himself, "Poor guy is having a hard time fitting in." (Craft, 2019, p.62). Recognizing that even adult teachers at the school might find themselves in similar positions. Jordan discusses and internalizes why the name mix up is so problematic to him in his sketchbook comic with the name "Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones But at LEAST Get My Name Right!" (Craft, 2019, p.216). Jordan says that he does not mind being insulted or given nicknames as much, as this is common. However, he hates being called someone else's name as that makes him feel insignificant (Craft, 2019, p.216-217). It is difficult enough to be struggling to fit in because you are different. The point he illustrates is that being called by another black kid's name makes it feel like you are not even acknowledging their existence. In last act of the graphic novel, Jordan vents to Ms. Rawle about being tired of all the microaggression, she responds by saying that being different is what makes you special, but Jordan says he is tired of being special

(Craft, 2019, p.220). Jordan did not sign up for being treated like he is special just because of his skin color.

The class goes to the schoolwide book fair, and as Jordan notices a lot of books with black people on the covers about escaping from poverty, slavery, prison or gang life (Craft, 2019, p.128). As they continue down the book fair, an adult approaches a black student unprovoked, pushing African American literature about growing up in poverty without a father on the student assuming they'll identify with it (Craft, 2019, p.129). Assuming the circumstances of the student and how they will be able to relate to it just based on how they look. Craft shows that Jordan reflects on this through his sketchbook comic, "Judging Kids by the Covers of Their Books" (Craft, 2019, p.130). Craft utilizes the sketchbook pages to draw example books he invented, displaying the differences between mainstream book covers and African American book covers, doing a comparison between the cover and heroes in two mainstream books and two African American books (Craft, 2019, p.131). Here Craft manages to convey a point about how mainstream book covers are hopeful and full of color, while African American book covers are depressing photographs depicting struggle, and the book heroes are often from broken homes and feature a lot of grit.

Encountering microaggressions daily can make it difficult to differentiate between what is supposed to be genuine and what is a result of prejudice and preconceptions. Craft depicts a scene of Drew venting to Jordan about how the secret santa gifts he had received, namely basketball cookies, a gift card for KFC and a chocolate santa might be born out of preconceptions about what he likes because he is black (Craft, 2019, p.135). Although they end up realizing it was most likely just a coincidence, and a genuine observation of what he likes, the worry is still always present for them to constantly second guess.

Jordan at a certain point becomes fed up with all the constant struggle of having to fit in and ignoring the constant microaggression and bullying he witnesses every day. Craft expresses this through a row of monologues from Jordan, thinking "Too much of kids like me trying to fit in. Too much of kids who should fit in trying hard not to. Too much of good kids being blamed for being bad!" (Craft, 2019, p.203). Side by side with these lines, Jordan is depicted falling into a dark void on the right half of the page (Craft, 2019, p.203). This creates an impression of Jordan falling deeper and deeper into his thoughts. At a certain point a person can only take so much discrimination before needing to speak out about it. Which is what the third act of the graphic novel ends up telling in its story.

5 Discussion

Schools can offer additional benefits of reading graphic novels by facilitating for opportunities of an increased amount of reflection by letting students discuss their own thoughts or by being posed questions about the contents. The themes found in graphic novels can also be investigated through incorporating the fiction into a broader context through teacher intervention. The graphic novels *Heartstopper: Volume 1* (2019a), *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2019b), henceforth referred to collectively as Heartstopper (2019), and *New Kid* (2019) tell a story about the difficulties of growing up being different. Both in diverse and non-diverse classrooms there will always be struggles for students feeling they are different or are discovering their own identities. Although students are supposed to be taught tolerance and understanding of those that differ from themselves, the tools for which to achieve that are not as clear cut. Through analyzing the meaning the authors conveyed in their graphic novels there are several themes that can serve method for which students and student teachers can increase their understandings of these themes and diversity related social issues.

5.1 Conveying the Feeling of Difference

The two lead characters of Heartstopper (2019) both go through different albeit similar struggles in both ascertaining their identities and sexualities. Charlie is openly gay, and his sexuality has been known to the school for nearly a year prior to the beginning of the story. He might be well liked in the school and many of his struggles of fitting in have been experienced prior to the beginning of the graphic novel, however he encounters new struggles when faced with an unfamiliar crowd of teenagers. He is faced with various microaggressions and stereotyping after developing a crush on Nick and beginning to socialize with his friends and sports team. They assume that because he is gay, he would not be interested in sports. This draws upon preconceptions about sexuality and gender identity as seen in the theory of the performativity of gender (Butler, 1990/2002). If gender is a social construct and is viewed based upon the performative acts individuals perform. There is drawn a connection between the act of displaying an interest in men and femininity. As many sports, especially rugby is viewed as an expression of masculinity, Charlie as a gay man may be perceived as someone that does not fit into that category people have created for him. Even Charlie leads with the assumption that Nick is straight based on that being heterosexual is considered the normal. Nick is a masculine guy, and his friends even say that "He doesn't look gay." (Oseman, 2019a, pp.203-204). Charlie is confident that he fell for straight boy, and he struggles with how to

confront that. Similarly, in *New Kid* (2019) many of the microaggressions Jordan and his classmates are met with are born out of preconceptions based on their perceived identities. Other students and teachers assume what Jordan, Drew or Maury are interested in because they are black. Maury gained the nickname Maury-O because his interests were commonly associated with "white people" (Craft, 2019, p.26). In his reflections about black popular culture, Mark Anthony Neal (2002) claims that the cultural expression of African Americans in popular culture is diverse and influential, but hip-hop culture has a history of being associated with hypermasculinity, homophobia and misogyny (pp.103-104). This impression of hip-hop culture, and also as a reflection of African American culture, may create preconceptions about how black people should behave or present themselves. The preconceptions and stereotypes that affect all of these characters are born from the same need to label and categorize people according to their identities. Binaries such as straight/gay, man/woman or black/white are at the root of many of these issues. Often the initial assumption would be to think one is either straight or gay. Nick struggled with understanding his own sexuality because he knew he liked girls, but also liked a boy. Nick became more aware of his own sexuality by learning more about sexualities outside of just the binary straight or gay. Once Nick learned about bisexuality, he thought that that this is where he fits.

Through framing these graphic narratives through the perspective of their characters learning and discovering more about themselves, and learning how and where they fit in, the reader is able to learn along with them. The authors manage to convey the characters' struggles and emotions through easily recognizable symbols and gestures such as frowning or blushing. These graphic novels are also fairly easy to read, as if you do not grasp what they are trying to tell you through subtext and visual cues, they are prone to spell it out for you in dialogue or monologue. Sometimes subtlety can be a benefit, other times if you want to be confident about getting a point across in graphic novels, if you are not able to communicate it only through visual cues, you also have the option of text. If the reader is struggling to pick up on Charlie being uncomfortable with all the gay questions based on his facial expressions and body gestures, then they would likely pick it up as Oseman spells it for them through Nick saying, "You made him so uncomfortable with all your gay questions." (Oseman, 2019b, p.492). The graphic novels conveying meaning both through written text and symbols allow it to be an effective approach of reaching the reader. Many of the symbols and metaphors used in Craft's approach to depicting the school life should be easy to grasp for teenagers. Such as the depiction of Maury as an Oreo, or his visual rendition of Jordan as a miniature among giants. The introspective deep dive into Jordan's emotions through his art and monologue provides great opportunities of reflection for the reader. Through his sketchbook we are

allowed to see Jordan's own reflection about his struggles of fitting in, and the challenges he encounters in his daily life. A difference between how the two graphic novels present themselves is color. Heartstopper (2019) is illustrated in black and white and is so presented in a mixture between line art and shading. While *New Kid* (2019) is presented with colors, something which works to its benefit given the theme of skin color and standing out. It allows the author to convey their message about differences naturally, and it allows for communication about its subtext in a way easy to comprehend for anyone that views it. Oseman (2019) manages to convey meaning through darker shading in backgrounds help elicit emotion felt in the emotional state characters are in. Oseman (2019) also applies the use of creative paneling to create meaning in the graphic novels. To create a gentle and intimate flow of time, the paneling uses a column of panels with close-up shots, where not too much is changed in their body positioning, so it gives the impression of slower intimate moment where not much happens between the gutter (Oseman, 2019b, 323). Similar techniques can be used when attempting to show a slower more intimate struggle a character goes through. Different techniques as such can be utilized to depict meaning intended by the author, and it can play into being able to participate in the discourse through the characters' emotions and perspectives. Nick starting to contemplate and the feeling of being alone is communicated through zooming out to a long shot to see him stand alone, with darker shaded environment around him (Oseman, 2019a, p.186-187).

Nick goes through a process of discovering his sexual identity throughout the narrative. As he contemplates his crush on Charlie, he asks to himself, "What is happening to me?" (Oseman, 2019a, p.187). The theme of idenity is conveyed through Nick's search for understanding himself. The effort he puts into searching the internet to discover feelings and understandings that best fit him as person is conveyed through several pages. As he searches the internet for answers, Oseman shows how time is passing by drawing several clocks on the page, with the hands moving chunk by chunk, as each panel gets darker as the sun starts going down (Oseman, 2019a, p.192). The reader gets to see the struggles Nick goes through to discover himself, as the sequence ends with the panels shaded dark in Nick's room with the lights turned off, crying to himself in bed, muttering "help me…" (Oseman, 2019a, p.195). With Nick and Charlie's first kiss the panel borders start bursting out into flowers symbolizing a feeling of something blossoming within the characters, so much that the panels themselves can not hold it in. These feelings are something Nick was shown to have a difficult time internalizing, as he expressed his confusion about it all. Nick discovering his sexuality and the process of discovering your identity is a thematic that continues in the narrative, as Nick has accepted and begun to understand his feeling for Charlie, and they start dating. However, Nick is

not ready to come out, both because he would not really be sure what exactly he is coming out as, and due to knowing how it may affect people's perception of him. As Nick continues to understand himself, the internet becomes a sort of constant companion in trying to learn more about what kind of sexuality he feels he can identify with. The Internet plays a vital role in modern teenage sexual orientation identity development, as it allows them to explore a variety of websites and forums for learning about themselves. It provides gay and bisexual youth with a place to explore the sexual orientation and gain self-acceptance and share their experiences with others (Harper et al., 2016, pp.369-370). This comes across in the graphic novel with the continual reliance of the internet a platform to facilitate Nick's identification process. In Nick's journey of learning his identity as bisexual, it comes to a point where he knows he is queer but has not been able to share that detail with anyone except Charlie. Nick finds a friend to confide in with Tara, who had gone through a similar process of coming out as a lesbian. As the both of them are of marginalized groups they managed to bond, and Nick was told the advice that he doesn't need to come out until he is ready (Oseman, 2019b, p.435). The idea that queer people feel the necessity of having to "come out" reinforces the theory of heteronormativity. As being heterosexual is looked upon as the normal, there becomes a need of having to differentiate yourself as not being normal. In order for people to be able to see Nick for who he is, there is a pressure of needing to let people know as they default to assuming his heterosexuality. Being closeted is also a struggle, as Oseman conveys through Nick panic about people finding out about their relationship (Oseman, 2019b, p.452). One of the more difficult parts of coming out is when the time comes to confront your parents. Parental acceptance has clear psychological effect on queer adolescents (Bebes et al., 2015). The relationship between parent and child has its implications, as a higher level of perceived parental psychological control is shown have the effect of more symptoms in teens psychology (Bebes et al., 2015, p.887). Nick is shown to have a pretty good relationship with this mother and is searching for acceptance with his parent. Coming out to his mother resulted in his mother displaying an acceptance of Nick's identity (Oseman, 2019b, pp.556-557). This is conveyed to elicit happiness in Nick and shows the importance of parental acceptance for queer teenagers as previous research claims is vital (Shilo & Savaya, 2012). For readers of the graphic novel, seeing someone going through an identification process and getting to see the struggles and emotions felt in queer teens' lives can let readers get a better awareness and understanding the topics.

New Kid (2019) manages to convey Jordan's struggles with fitting into a school where he feels different than the other students. He is neither rich or white, nor is tall and great at sports. The preconceptions he meets about himself, and the expectations people have of him, makes it difficult

for him to be who he is. He is in need of having to change his behavior to make sure he does not stand out, as well as refrain from "acting too white" or "acting too black". Craft manages to express his struggles with being perceived as "too white" when he is hanging out with kids from his diverse neighborhood. Jordan studies a bunch and ends up correcting their grammar. The idea that black kids can not be smart is a stereotype that perpetuated by systems of oppression that view whiteness as an intellectual superiority (Collins, 2019, p.257). Being good at school is not something that is determined by your race outside of the methods in which the systems of power disadvantages Black students and limit their opportunities for success. It is not inherently related to being black or being white. Jordan struggles to fit in as a Black kid, but he also is not a white kid. This makes being different all the more difficult.

5.2 Intersectionality and Power

In Heartstopper (2019) the characters were able to find people to confide in that had gone through similar struggles as them. Nick was able come out for the first time to a lesbian friend and could share his sexuality with someone other than his nearest confidant for the first time. The climactic moment of the story covered in the analysis was also on the theme of coming out and Nick sharing sexuality with his mother. This reflects Foucault's theory on confession. The need for coming out and confessing about sexuality is a struggle that Nick goes through in the graphic novel. Confession becomes a demand that society places upon Nick, furthermore it becomes something he feels the need to admit. The need for a confession becomes more integral when it relates to his mother as an authority figure in Nick's life. Oseman challenges this need of confession through Tara reassuring Nick that he never needs to feel like his sexuality is something he needs to tell everyone (Oseman, 2019b, p.435). Nick struggles constantly throughout the graphic novels realizing that he is different from his preconceived notion of a normal identity. Oseman spends several pages highlighting this struggle and shows Nick coming to terms with and exploring what makes him different. Nick questions, "what is happening to me?" (Oseman, 2019a, p.187). Fuss argues that the idea that the necessity of needing to "come out" reinforces heterosexuality as the norm. It becomes a matter of someone needing to expose themselves or others as an outsider among the insiders (Fuss, 1991, p.4). This supports Foucault's idea that this culture of confession maintains power dynamics. Nick comments that it feels good to have told someone about his sexuality (Oseman, 2019b, p.427). The confession becomes a pressure, and it is conveyed as a feeling of liberation for Nick to tell people about his sexuality. The commentary and observations that are made about both Charlie and Nick becomes a representation of the constant monitoring of

sexual behavior as described by Foucault. Nick's actions and behavior can seem to contradict the feminine associations the other students have of homosexuality. Nick and Charlie participating in activities that are perceived as masculine is met with watchful eyes and scrutiny through Oseman's depiction of students watching them. As mentioned, they point out how Nick does not behave gay, while Charlie is gay, so they have assumptions about his interest in masculine actions. Oseman conveys this through involving other parties in the discourse surrounding sexuality. It conveys how sexuality is always in scrutiny, especially as it differs from the norm. Charlie is careful about how they might be perceived when the two of them interact, trying to be aware of his own behavior. Oseman addresses this worry through point out that the way they are presenting themselves has not changed much since before they kissed (Oseman, 2019b, p.358). Charlie becoming especially aware of his behavior and how they present themselves can be viewed as reflection of how he perceives their way of being as not normal. In the sense that their behavior under constant surveillance as Foucault (1975/1995) argues encourages them to adhere to accepted social norms.

In *New Kid* (2019), Jordan was able to bond with Drew through their shared struggle of being different. People that are different from the norm can often find an ally in those who are facing similar struggles. These struggles are born from an oppression that does not just affect each minority group individually, but also a part of a larger beast that works to systematically oppress those outside of the normative majority. The graphic novels manage to convey themes of dominating power structures through displaying themes of marginalization, microaggression, normativity, and discrimination. The authors utilize side characters who serve as constant reminder to the leads that they are different. In *New Kid* (2019), Andy is a character that is repeatedly utilized as a white kid who is always pointing to stereotypes. Craft repeatedly has him say lines of dialogue that are clear microaggressions, such as assuming someone will get along just because they are black, or assuming that the kid with a Central American heritage loves tacos and Mexican food. These are the types of microaggressions that the diverse students must deal with constantly. Negative stereotypes as microaggressions a theme throughout the graphic novel. The black students are always reminded that they are different. Ms. Rawle emphasizes financial aid ending up calling out the less fortunate students. This is added when all the students start staring in their direction, assuming they are the ones who may need it because they are black. Comments from other students assuming they are being raised by a single mom. Adults trying to make the black students read stories about African American "hood life", making presumptions about both their interests and how they will be able to relate to it. This constant reminder of being black and being different is a

trend that repeats throughout the narrative. The repetition adds up into reflecting the thematic of the permanence of racism (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.6).

The reflections Jordan makes in his notebook is a clever way for Craft to convey how Jordan is internalizing the discrimination he encounters every day. The sketchbook entry where Jordan explains how much he feels like he needs to think about in order to not stand out on the bus is an effective communication of the discourse surrounding racism. When Jordan takes the bus in his local neighborhood he needs to behave like a "cool black kid", so he does not stand out. However, when the bus moves to a white neighborhood, he needs to have the appearance of a "good black kid", so police officers or white mothers do not find him suspicious or threatening. The idea of a "good" black person is rooted in the history of oppression against African Americans in the US. It reinforces how there is only a narrow way of being a "good" black kid, although a person's identity is so much more than the color of their skin, when faced with this sort of oppression it makes them feel like that's all they are. This image of a black person as someone that is poor, dangerous and from the hood is reinforced in Jordan's visit to the schoolwide book fair, where all the books featuring African Americans were about prison, slavery, gangs, or poverty. Jordan is constantly self-monitoring his own behavior and presentation. Craft (2019) conveys through Jordan's sketchbook that kids in his position may police their own behavior and feel force to adapt to social norms. The generalizable model of a self-monitoring society that Foucault (1975/1995) presents through his description of the panopticon can be applied to how Jordan deals with a society that holds power over him. Jordan perceives himself as always under scrutiny and rationalizes how he should behave to fit in and not stand out on the bus. Not just through racial discrimination in the white districts the bus passes through, but he is also displaying his awareness of how he can be perceived as normal in the black culture neighborhood.

Jordan's parents start arguing about how it is necessary for African Americans to "play the game" in order to be successful in corporate America. The idea that Jordan needs to be a specific type of way in order to live successfully is hammered into him throughout his time at the school. Jordan's mom is a black woman who fought hard to get a great a job. Intersectional theory would point to that as a black woman, she has been under marginalization both as a woman and as a black woman. Jordan being prepared and able to fight through the systems of oppression is important to her, while his dad is more concerned about how Jordan is currently fitting into the not so diverse school. Learning to "play the game" is a matter of learning how to fit in as an adult, or rather how to be perceived as "white" as possible, so that you can get a job (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017 p.89-90). It

requires that you need to be someone else in order to be successful. Growing up training for that is difficult when you are still developing your own identity. Jordan and Drew find each other mainly because they are able to vent their frustrations together, having shared experiences of oppression. Jordan and Drew are often both called by the wrong name. In the formation of identity, acknowledgement is an important factor (Hammack, 2015, p.20). Having their names confused with the names of other black students makes them feel like they do not matter. Even the black teachers at the school face similar issues, and when he was mistaken for another black teacher despite having worked there for 14 years, Craft illustrated him as visibly upset.

Heartstopper (2019) is filled with frequent dialogue and repeated thematic of people being oppressed for being themselves. Charlie is said to be popular, however to many of them he is just "the gay guy". People make up preconceptions about you based on how you look and how identify. The constant reminder of knowing you are different from the majority is something that is communicated as a core thematic of both graphic novels. Dealing with constant microaggressions and labeling, while also trying to figure out who you are and what your place is can be overwhelming for teenagers. As form of counter-storytelling these graphic novels can serve the purpose of letting teenagers engage in literature that otherwise often feature the mainstream normative experiences. Allowing them the chance to explore experiences that feature queer and non-white narratives of marginalization and discrimination will benefit the students path towards transformative learning. It gives the students a chance to see new perspectives that can open them up to personal change. Narratives like these often feature characters who feel a sense of loneliness. There are students that might are likely to also feel like they can relate to characters such as Charlie, Nick or Jordan. The narratives that are present in these graphic novels present characters that for different reasons are put in positions of marginalization. Students reading these narratives will have the chance to challenge their preconceptions and biases, and it could make for a more inclusive environment. Teachers and teacher-students could also learn from reading these graphic novels, as they tell the experiences of teenagers that they are likely to encounter in some way throughout their work. The authors manage to convey themes and experiences that can facilitate for reflection for both kids and adults.

The power of what is considered normal is immense. Homophobia, racism, sexism, and all forms of discrimination can be viewed as being rooted in being different from what is considered normal. The majority is often what decides what is to be considered normal, but foundation of what is normal may already be deeply ingrained in the culture. Education in Norway is supposed to be

teaching kids to accept and be tolerant of differences. Although, the sentiment is good, the fact that they need to be targeted out as different is a problem itself. There is no magical switch that can suddenly remove normativity from existence, however it should be a process and a goal to strive for. Normativity is born from the systems of power that form the societal structures we live in. Being different from what is considered normal can put people in difficult positions. To fit in can be an especially prevalent theme among teenagers. Fitting in is a topic that is important to teens. It is something that may always be present in the minds of teenagers, especially if they feel like they are different from what is considered the norm. Through reading the experiences of Jordan, Charlie, Nick, and many of the other characters features in the different graphic novels, students will be able to enhance understanding of and develop empathy of diversity-related issues.

5.3 Heartstopper and New Kid in the Classroom

The analysis and discussion found that these graphic novels are rich in experiences and themes, and to facilitate for learning about diversity and inclusion the texts can be applied as tools in the classroom. Heartstopper (2019) and *New Kid* (2019) both convey the experiences of marginalized voices. Intersectional theory on challenging power structures suggests pedagogy that relies upon lived experiences both fictional and non-fictional (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Jarvis, 2020). Decolonizing pedagogy and critical pedagogy argue that empathy towards the marginalized and understanding how everyone contributes to marginalization is necessary for actual transformative education (Zembylas, 2018, pp.416-417). This indicates that only reading the graphic novels is not as valuable on its own, if it does not lead to reflection on the experiences and themes conveyed. To be able to cause transformative learning in the classroom, the teacher should facilitate for opportunities to reflect and engage in the graphic novels. The activities chosen to promote inclusivity and diversity in the classroom should facilitate opportunities of reflection. Engaging the students in reflection requires that the tasks give students a chance to explore the texts independently and a chance to examine in depth afterwards. A teacher can choose a variety of activities that facilitates for these opportunities.

5.3.1 Discussion Activities

Discussion is a classroom tool that can lead students towards deeper engagement with topics and material they have worked with. Discussion as an activity in the classroom facilitates for reflection and transformative learning. Furthermore, using fiction as a starting point can be less threatening

than a direct discussion of the topics (Jarvis, 2006, p.76). Through discussion students can explore the meaning they derive from the content they engage with, as well as allowing them to relate it to their own experiences or societal issues they are familiar with. Critical reflection and self-reflection are keys to gaining a deeper understanding of yourself and the world around you, and as such, activities that facilitate this should be the approaches teachers utilize in guiding their students towards transformative learning.

An example of an activity for facilitating discussion is a form of book talk examining the contents and themes of the graphic novels. This could take the shape of a teacher-student conversation, or a group discussion about the graphic novels with several students. A teacher-student discussion would involve a one-to-one discussion about the graphic novels or the themes and discourses the graphic novels convey. The students should write notes while reading and prepare for a casual conversation with the teacher afterwards. The conversation should be centered around what the students have reflected upon, but the teacher can pose questions or make comments that open the door for students to engage deeper in the discussion of the material. In early 2022, I had the opportunity to have a class of tenth graders read Heartstopper, then we conducted a teacher-student conversation as a form of assessment of their English language skills. This was a positive experience for my students and helped inform the decision to examine the benefits of using the graphic novel series in the EFL classroom. Doing a discussion for the sake of reflection and learning may have different implications than a discussion for assessment of oral language skills, but an assessment form such as this can make strides towards both at the same time. The limited time of the school year might not make practical to utilize graphic novels in the classroom without having it lead towards an assessment, thus this is an activity that can be performed both as an assessment and as an activity for learning in the classroom.

An alternative to performing a teacher-student discussion about the graphic novels would be a literature circle, where students are put in a larger group and discuss the graphic novels with the teacher present. This can be performed through having students talk about the story and characters, as well as addressing the subject matter of diversity and inclusion. A smaller group may offer the students a chance to go deeper into their reflections, allowing more students to engage more thoroughly in the texts in the group discussion. However, a larger group or an open classroom discussion could benefit from offering a larger variety of views and perspectives on the subject. Students may interpret different things from the graphic novels as they serve as meaning makers in their engagement with the graphic novels, therefore they can stand to benefit from sharing their

thoughts and interpretations. The same goes for sharing their insight into the topic of queer and race related issues. Some may have a grander insight into the social complexities than others and could therefore help other students reflect on the texts through different perspectives, and not only through their own engagement. Group discussions serve to the benefit of sharing experiences and reflections with each other.

The teacher's role in engaging with these activities will be to assist in encouraging reflection, as well as moderating the discussion making sure everyone gets to talk. In facilitating a discussion about the graphic novels and subject matter it will be necessary to make sure the discussion stays respectful and to encourage tolerance and open-mindedness. This is an especial necessity in a group setting, as these subject matters are sensitive topics. Outside of moderation, in the goal of encouraging reflection the teacher should be there to address misconceptions, as well as ask questions that open the floor for the conversation to keep going.

Identifying themes and subject matter conveyed through the graphic novels will prove useful for discussing and creating an understanding of the difficulties of fitting in. A discussion can explore how a non-inclusive culture creates issues for marginalized people, basing it off the experiences conveyed through the graphic novels. In addressing the theme of "coming out" as conveyed through Heartstopper (2019), the students will be able to explore the struggles that Nick went through in the story. The features a school setting and a variety of characters that allow for students to engage in the topic from various perspectives. Oseman shows a lot of Nick's moments of discovering his own sexuality, as well as the helplessness he feels in being confused about his love for Charlie. A discussion surrounding this topic and Nick's character will also help to challenge stereotypes, biases, and a non-inclusive environment. The characters that voice assumptions about Nick based on the way he acts and behaves can work to dispel binary understanding of sexuality and gender. Knowing the struggle that Nick goes through the students get the chance to discuss how masculinity and femininity do not necessarily have any correlation to sexuality. It also allows an exploration of how non-inclusive environment can make it difficult for other people to be themselves. The students can reflect on microaggressions. The students can also question if they have ever encountered microaggressions, and they can reflect over whether they have used microaggressions themselves. Microaggressions is a suitable topic for discussion as it is something that most people play a part in, however it might be difficult to understand your own role. A discussion allows for multiple perspectives and people from different backgrounds can contribute to the conversation with unique experiences.

5.3.2 Reflective Writing

The students can also be tasked with writing a reflective text about the graphic novels and their subject matters. This can be organized through utilizing open writing prompts that are inquisitive of their personal connections to issues and themes that are conveyed through the graphic novels. The prompts should be open-ended questions allowing students to address the stories and characters in a way that encourages exploration of their own perspectives and beliefs about inclusion and diversity. To use this activity for transformative learning it needs to encourage and facilitate for a critically reflective process where the students can draw connections between personal and imaginative experiences (Jarvis, 2006, p.76). These writing prompts should be well thought out to not be too limiting of the student's opportunity to reflect and engage with the text on an individual level. The questions should be structured in a way that both allows for critical self-reflection as well as critical reflection on the graphic novels and their subject matter. In initiating a task such as this, the teacher should first guide the students towards identifying what the graphic novels explored, then examine and reflect on what personally resonated or did not resonate with their experiences and values. Afterwards, students can reflect on the themes of inclusion and diversity, building upon how the students can interpret these themes from the graphic novels. To close out a reflective writing project, the students may also be tasked with writing reflections about how the text influenced their personal growth and affected their views and values. A writing prompt can be used to encourage the students reflect on their emotional responses to what they read. This can be achieved through questioning how the texts made them feel, and what emotional responses they were met with in engaging with the graphic novels. The ability of fiction to arouse strong emotional responses is a benefit of using it as tool for promoting transformative learning (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015, p.22). A reflective writing task as described here facilitates for students to explore these emotional responses and becoming more aware of the benefits of reading the graphic novels.

The students can reflect on in what ways they self-monitor themselves and what it is that drives them to do so. *New Kid* (2019) shows Jordan struggling to be himself while having to constantly battle with stereotypes and presumptions. There are instances where he reflects on how he polices his own behavior and appearance to fit in as normal. Writing prompts can be used to have the students reflect on what thoughts they put into how they present themselves, their behavior, and

appearances. Reflections such as these will allow the students to gain a better understanding of social power dynamics and how their own lives play a part of it.

5.3.3 Analyzing the Graphic Novels

Analysis of the graphic novels can also be utilized as a classroom activity for working with the texts to gain awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusivity. There are multiple methods in which graphic novel analysis could be conducted in the classroom. Examples of this include analyzing visual representation or a character analysis.

Analyzing visual representation as an activity would consist of having students observe and examine the visual elements of an excerpt, describe details about what they see on the page or in a panel. Interpreting and analyzing this visual representation would include reflecting on how the visual elements contribute to meaning-making and conveying emotion. Having analyzed this, the students would be tasked with discussing the themes of diversity and inclusivity in visual elements. Using analysis as an activity can allow for a deeper dive into how these themes are conveyed through the graphic novel. This allows students to understand what individual elements lead them to an interpretation. This also works as practice in visual literacy for the students as they engage with interpreting visuals and understanding how they convey meaning.

Another approach for a classroom activity is a character analysis. The students are made to select an important character from the graphic novel which serves the purpose of addressing issues of inclusivity or diversity. The students will then examine the character's role in the story, as well as how exactly the graphic novel utilizes the character's experiences to convey perspectives and understandings of inclusivity and diversity. Encouraging reflection about how they themselves related to, empathized with, or learned from the character's experiences can be beneficial as a part of the analysis activity itself.

Through using analysis methods such as these, the students can be more engaged with graphic novels as medium of expression, and it emphasizes its focus on the textual and visual communication of themes and experiences than other activities that do not utilize a targeted analysis. It can prove beneficial to limit the material for analysis to specific excerpts from the graphic novels. The analysis can be centered around Nick opening to his mom about his sexuality in Heartstopper, or an excerpt of Jordan's notebook entries detailing his lived experiences and

reflections. If the students are not yet experienced with analysis of a graphic novel as a classroom activity, the teacher would need to be prepare the students with the tools and experience needed to work with Heartstopper and New Kid.

5.3.4 Creative Writing

Another alternative to writing reflections is having students develop their own creative response to what they have read in the graphic novels. An example could involve writing or drawing an alternative ending to Nick's coming out story. This could be a sensitive topic, but it could also allow for students to draw deeper connection to the perspective of the characters and lead the further empathy for them. Reader-response theory suggests that the reader holds power over a text to a similar degree to the author. Their perspectives on how the characters may react or what choices they may make could broaden their understanding of the social pressures that are in play.

Students could also do a writing or drawing task based on their readings of *New Kid* (2019). The students will be tasked to draw their own sketchbook comic where they reflect on or talk about difficult life experiences they have encountered. Like Jordan, this could be about experiences they have encountered with microaggressions, or it could be about how they self-monitor themselves to conform to norms in society. This could be an activity that leads towards deeper engagement with the text's subject matter, as well as a task that is creatively fulfilling for the students.

5.3.5 Fostering a classroom of inclusivity

The teacher needs to assure that they are fostering an inclusive classroom. Working with these graphic novels there are several methods the teacher can use in order to work towards this goal. Like the previous activities featured, collaborative learning is a way a learning method that promotes understanding, empathy, and cooperation among students (Sobel & Alston, 2021, pp.108-109). Encouraging group work and collaborative activities can bring together students with different backgrounds and abilities. This assures that the learning benefits from a diversity of perspectives. When teaching diversity and inclusivity the teacher should establish classroom rules that emphasize open-mindedness and empathy (Campion, 2016, pp.60-62).

The students should learn to be active listeners and accept difference in opinion. The teacher should be ensuring that activities in the classroom abide by those standards by promoting inclusive

language and addressing any exclusionary language immediately. Creating a space that respects other cultural perspectives and practices is necessary for that inclusivity to occur. In classroom discussions the teacher should take the opportunity to address biases and stereotypes in society and provide examples of why generalizations are not beneficial. This will encourage critical thinking and promote awareness of diversity and inclusivity in the classroom.

5.4 Limitations

Some of the challenges in doing a textual analysis can be described similarly to challenges that are encountered in qualitative content analysis. When the levels of abstraction and degrees of interpretation are high it becomes difficult, but important, to show the logic of how the themes were interpreted and connected to the aim of the research (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.33). This can make the trustworthiness of the study be put into question as much of the research relies upon the specific interpretations of the researcher and how well they are able to draw connections between the abstract and the aims. This also creates the issue of knowing to what degree the interpretations should be described. The argument of the paper relies upon a researcher's single interpretation of a text. As with any study that relies upon interpretation, this form of methodology creates a challenge of making the results applicable in other situations.

A textual analysis only highlights how the graphic novels convey themes, and arguing for how they can be applied to the classroom does not test what effect the graphic novels have on students. Research that only interprets a text can only infer what implications and effects it will have on the classroom, as opposed to measuring this through a methodology that is applied to participants who engage with it. The reliability becomes more difficult to measure as even if the same steps are followed the results rely on individual perspectives. Choosing a methodology that relies upon identifying the effects that reading the graphic novels have on learning may be more suitable for arguing their value as tools in the classroom.

5.5 Further research

Although this study has done research on these graphic novels that does not invalidate the stories from further study. Other researchers would have an opportunity to highlight other themes or express different interpretations of the texts in the study. Similar studies on the same themes can be done using different methodology. A critical discourse analysis could work to decipher how the

linguistic and semiotic elements come together as how it may pertain to dominant discourses. This would be an interesting approach that could serve to highlight aspects of the graphic novels that this study was not able to apply much weight towards.

Further research should also be done on the effects of implementing these graphic novels in the classroom. This would be able to measure to what degree activities and implementation was able to achieve transformative learning in students. Further research could also investigate how the graphic novels can assist in making an inclusive classroom. Campion (2016) researched creating an inclusive classroom with teacher research, a qualitative action research design where teachers systematically study their own teaching practice and students' response to the activities (pp.21-22). This could be applied to the graphic novels in this study to further validate them as tools for the EFL classroom. What also needs to be researched further is the effects that these graphic novels have on students in the Norwegian EFL classroom. After having used the graphic novels in the classroom, a researcher can utilize interviews with the students to investigate to what degree their understanding and awareness of diversity and inclusion was affected.

6 Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion are key values to be taught in Norwegian schools and in this paper, we have discussed how these values can be taught in the EFL classroom through graphic novels. The paper highlighted how reading fiction can have help students achieve transformative learning. Learning that in many ways changes their values and perceptions. If you want students to learn tolerance, then you cannot just implore them to change, you need to give them the opportunity to reflect and change it. In this paper it is argued that this can be achieved using the graphic novels *Heartstopper Volume 1* (2019a), *Heartstopper Volume 2* (2019b), and *New Kid* (2019). Graphic novels contain narratives that are conveyed both through text and visuals. Utilizing a textual analysis of the graphic novels follow the process of a thematic content analysis the study was able to investigate how texts convey themes of diversity and inclusion through textual and semiotic resources. Unique experiences and perspectives are conveyed through the characters and narrative elements of the graphic novels. The discussion argues that these graphic novels featuring narratives with themes of diversity and discrimination can be an effective way of facilitating a transformative learning experience for many students. This is argued through how intersectionality theory explains how structures of power are intertwined, and that to fully understand how it all works, it requires to listen to different individuals' experiences. This is another of the reasons why these graphic novels serve as learning tools, as they convey the emotions and experiences of characters in positions of marginalization. Through getting to know the experiences of these individual marginalized characters and witnessing the oppression that they feel and encounter, it helps to better prepare students for understanding the complex nature of the systems of oppression in society. Awareness and understanding diversity and inclusivity cannot just be viewed as a matter of gaining knowledge. Understanding the issues necessitates being able to see others' perspective and reflect upon the issue. It exposes Norwegian EFL students to perspectives of characters living in different cultures than their own and allows them to reflect on their own complicity or related circumstances. These are themes that the analysis of the graphic novels was shown to inform. The study has shown that the graphic novels can be read to gain awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusivity, and the discussion showed how the implementation of these in the classroom would assist towards a transformative learning experience.

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