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Literary Contact Zones in the Upper Secondary Classroom

Using Kiley Reid's *Such a Fun Age* to build health and life skills

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Abstract

This thesis utilizes Kiley Reid's novel *Such A Fun Age* with its realistic characters and themes as a method to teach students about the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills in the new national curricula, LK20. Because the LK20 began its implementation in Norwegian schools the year prior to this thesis, there is a need for more in-depth knowledge about the interdisciplinary topics as well as how to teach them. This thesis contributes to the development of teachers' in-depth knowledge about the topic of health and life skills. I suggest three topics that are important in the interdisciplinary topic, namely career anxiety, intercultural competence, and empathy. In regards to these topics, this thesis provides a close analysis of how the characters and themes in Reid's fictional work can provide new ways of thinking, as well as presents methods to how teachers can utilize the novel and how it can contribute to upper secondary students' building of health and life skills. My hope for this thesis is that other teachers will find inspiration in the methods, exercises, analysis and ideas suggested to see new perspectives and ways of teaching the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose and relevance

According to the new national curriculum in Norway (hereafter referred to as LK20), students shall acquire competence linked to three different interdisciplinary topics *health and life skills*, *democracy and citizenship*, and *sustainable development* (Kunnskapsdepartementet), however, LK20 does not explicitly state how teachers are supposed to work with these topics. The three interdisciplinary topics are to be taught across subjects, meaning that in English, as well as in the other subjects, students are to learn about all of these topics. The LK20 began its implementation in 2020, a process that will take about three years before it is completely implemented, which means that it is quite new and both teachers today and future teachers will have to teach based on the new curricula. In order for teachers to teach competently in regards to the LK20, there is a need for in-depth knowledge about each of the interdisciplinary topics. My thesis addresses this large question by focusing on the topic *health and life skills*, and will provide an example of how teachers in Norway can teach about this new and large issue through working with fictional literature from the English-speaking world.

For the purpose of teaching about health and life skills through literature, I have chosen the novel *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid as an example of literature teachers can use to teach about this topic. Reid's novel was published in 2019 which makes it fairly new, and it deals with themes such as career, friends, love, transactional relationships, family, social media use, making responsible choices, and racism. The novel is written with colloquial and everyday language that makes it easy to read and which might be a motivational factor for when working with literature. Reid wanted the novel to be as realistic as possible ("Kiley Reid BookExpo"), and I will examine the novel's realistic elements of theme and characterization and how it can help readers see themselves and their world in more healthy, mature and compassionate ways. The novel will be analyzed in a practical sense from a didactic perspective where I will look at different themes and characters in the novel and find out how these can teach about several aspects of health and life skills. I am therefore more interested in the realistic features of the novel rather than elements of form and style and other literary features. My main focus is finding out how this novel can teach about health and life skills in the subject of English in upper secondary schools, specifically how it can help prevent career anxiety, develop intercultural competence, and how it can help developing skills of building empathy in the students, as these are topics that readers are repeatedly exposed to throughout the novel. For

these purposes, Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the *contact zone* provide a helpful framework for how a variety of students can interpret, understand, and relate to Reid's novel when working with the novel's theme of career, to develop intercultural competence, and to build empathy to characters one might not relate to. The idea of contact zones and how it will be applied as a framework will be further explained in section 1.2.1. But first I will offer a summary of Reid's novel.

Such a Fun Age is the story of two women's encounters with career choices, the transactional relationship between them, and the different backgrounds they come from and how their choices are affected by their backgrounds. The story revolves around the two main characters Emira Tucker and Alix Chamberlain, who have a transactional relationship with each other. They are connected through Alix's three-year-old baby, Briar, who Emira works for as a babysitter. Emira is a twenty-five-year-old African-American woman living in Philadelphia, who is unsure about her career and what to do with her post-college life. While her friends get "real jobs" and buy apartments, Emira is in a place where she loves to work as a babysitter for Briar, but her job does not provide benefits such as health insurance and vacation days. Alix is an established, privileged, white woman in her thirties, who is thriving in her self-made career as a lifestyle coach, mother of two children and married to Peter, a news anchor. After an incident in a grocery store where Emira was trying to entertain Briar, and were accused of kidnapping Briar by a security guard, Alix becomes obsessed with getting to know Emira as a person, which complicates their relationship. Alix believes she is getting to know Emira for the right reasons, but at the same time, Alix is the type of person who compliments herself for having five African Americans over for Thanksgiving dinner. After the incident at the grocery store, Emira meets Kelley, a white guy in his thirties who soon becomes Emira's boyfriend. She invites him to Alix's Thanksgiving dinner, where it is suddenly revealed that Kelley was Alix's boyfriend in high school, a relationship which ended quite bad. This revelation results in what seems like a battle between Alix and Kelley about who has the "best" intentions for Emira, without recognizing what Emira herself wants. At the end of the story, Emira stops trying to conform to the pressure she gets from Kelley, Alix, her family and friends, and it seems like Emira has gained more self-awareness and developed new confidence and strategies for dealing with difficult choices. The reader is also made aware that the issues Emira has experienced were multi-faceted, situations that results in several ways of interpreting the story: from interpersonal angles as well as from the angles of self-awareness and confidence, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality.

Reid's novel is only one example of fictional literature that teachers can use to teach about health and life skills. There are lots of both fictional and non-fictional texts that can be used when teaching about this large topic. By examining only one fictional novel, this thesis can provide an example of how teachers can approach other fictional novels, either to teach about health and life skills or as inspiration as to how teachers can approach literature to teach about the other interdisciplinary topics. On the other hand, fictional literature can only teach us so much regarding health and life skills, and it cannot provide any direct solutions of how to make responsible choices regarding our health or how to gain different life skills. However, fictional literature can be inspirational in terms of health and life skills because students can learn about their own health choices and life skills when reflecting on fictional characters' choices and ways of living. As a result of reading this thesis, readers may find answers to the uncertainties teachers may feel when trying to become competent teachers of LK20, and adds a possible interpretation of the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills. An issue that arises, however, is that I have not had the opportunity to teach this novel myself. Therefore, the study of this novel and the results of this research is only theoretical and not based on practical experience.

To answer my research questions, this thesis will focus on how realistic characters and themes in Reid's novel say something about particular difficulties students face today, and will further provide examples of how teachers can use this in the English classroom to teach about these aspects in regards to the topic of health and life skills. The next chapter will look at what the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills should aim to do according to The Norwegian Ministry of Education, but also, because of its limitation in its explanation of what the topic should aim to do, this chapter will also provide a broader interpretation of the topic. This chapter will further discuss in more detail what my inquiry will add to the understanding of the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills. In the third chapter I analyze Reid's realistic examples of how the characters experience career anxiety, before I explain how we can use these examples from the novel to help students manage potential career anxiety. The fourth chapter focuses on realistic examples of culture clash in Reid's novel and will discuss how these examples can contribute to develop students' intercultural competence. Finally, the fifth chapter will present several perspective-taking exercises that can help students build empathy with the realistic characters in Reid's novel.

Before going into the analysis of the novel and the educational outlook of it, we need to establish a common understanding of the different terms and set a theoretical grounding for this

thesis. The next section will therefore provide explanations of the terms *contact zone*, *career anxiety*, *intercultural competence*, and *empathy* and answer how they can be interpreted with relation to the topic of health and life skills.

1.2 Theoretical grounding

1.2.1 Contact zones

The variety of students that exist in classrooms and their response to literary texts can be viewed through the theoretical lens of Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the *contact zone*. Pratt uses *contact zones* as a term to refer to "[...] social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34). The classroom functions as a social space, a contact zone, where not only several cultures meet, but also where diverse personalities with different backgrounds meet. The contact zone in the classroom therefore brings different languages, ideologies, and literacies to intercultural engagement (Nguyen 506), where the classroom functions not as a "homogenous community or a horizontal alliance but like a contact zone" (Pratt, 39) where a body of individual personalities grapple with each other. Patel argues that contact zones too often exist without "[...] ensuing engaged discourse that productively lifts up difference, discord, power differentials and conflicts" (Patel 334), however in the classroom context, teachers have the ability and the power to help their students create a deeper understanding of other's personalities and cultures by lifting up our differences in productive and positive ways. Each student's interaction with a literary text is in this sense also a contact zone, in that the cultures, choices, values, and the like from a character in a text can be different from that of the student's.

In this thesis, the idea of the contact zone will be applied to the interpretation of Reid's novel *Such a Fun Age*, as a way to interpret the novel from different point of views, because in classroom contexts students will interpret fictional literature in various ways. As teachers, we need to recognize and embrace the differences between the students to productively lift up these differences together with the students to result in them getting a more mature understanding of each other and the world. In section 3, contact zones will be applied as a way of looking at what specific issues Emira encounters with career anxiety, and how a variety of students can relate to similar situations and why. Likewise, in section 4 when analyzing parts from the novel that can help students develop intercultural competence, contact zones will be applied to discuss how cultures clashes in the novel and how students can relate to in more or less similar

experiences and limitations that Emira and Alix has to deal with. Finally, in section 5, the characters that drives the plot of Reid's novel will be looked at to figure out how students can feel empathy with them, and functions therefore as a contact zone in which students can learn how to view other peoples' perspectives as well.

1.2.2 Career anxiety

The idea of contact zones can provide a helpful framework for how students interpret the novel in numerous ways, and one of the topics that students can relate to in various manners is the topic of career anxiety. In this thesis, the term *career anxiety* refers to “negative emotions experienced before or during various stages of the career decision-making process and during job performance” (Shin and Lee 110). Although LK20 does not state that career anxiety is a relevant topic for health and life skills in the subject of English, it might be a very important topic to discuss regarding health and life skills, because education that helps the student recognize which values are important for them when choosing a career can help the student manage this type of anxiety. Because work is a basic force in adult stabilization, development and self-identification (Grady 11), and further provides opportunities to “[...] develop a social identity, increase self-esteem, improve abilities, and is central to adult life in modern economies” (Corey and Chen 151), career anxiety is definitely a topic that can be discussed in regards to health and life skills. A study from Pisarik et al. looked at career anxiety in college students and found that most of the participants had experienced some degree of career-related anxiety (340). Each of them even discussed a lack of career guidance before college which seemed to increase the experience of career anxiety (Pisarik et al. 345), which clearly shows a need for more competent career guidance in upper secondary schools.

According to LK20, the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills in English should aim to develop the ability of the students to express themselves in writing and orally in English, which should form “[...] the basis for being able to express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions and can provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patters, as well as on the pupils' own way of life and that of others” that can help students develop a “positive self-image and a secure identity” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Interdisciplinary topics”). Teaching about career and career anxiety can help the students make choices that they can be confident about, which might result in developing a positive self-image and a secure professional identity. Being able to deal with challenges that can increase career anxiety can create better mental health for the individual student; therefore it is important to

help students reflect on and recognize which values are important for them when choosing a career or applying for a job or further education. If the student is aware of which values are important for them when pursuing a career path, this awareness can help them make choices about their career which in turn can prevent, or help them manage, career anxiety. According to the Norwegian Ministry of Education, it is the school's job to provide opportunities for the students to make responsible life choices (Kunnskapsdepartementet), and because having a job (or building a career) is part of being a contributor to the society, it is important that the students know how to make responsible choices regarding their own career and which takes into consideration the values that they find important.

In Reid's novel, readers are introduced to the topic of career from the first page of the novel, where Emira has to leave a party to go babysit for the Chamberlains in the middle of the night due to an accident in their home that they did not want their child to witness. Also, throughout the novel, Emira faces several difficulties regarding her job situation, and in the end of the novel, when Emira is deep into her thirties, she wrestles with what to take from her time as a babysitter for the Chamberlains (Reid 305). The fact that anxiety and decisions regarding one's career, and reflection on one's career, is so visible in this novel through its plot and characters, suggests that career is a major topic in this novel. It is possible that Reid wanted her readers to identify how career anxiety may be common amongst young adults today, and teachers can use that to help their students recognize and manage career anxiety should it ever appear.

1.2.3 Intercultural competence

Not only can Reid's novel contribute to the development of career anxiety management, but it can also contribute to developing intercultural competence in the student. *Intercultural competence* as a term will here be referred to as the ability to "relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one's own" (Dypedahl, qtd. in Dypedahl and Bøhn 81). Intercultural competence is therefore closely related to the interdisciplinary topic of democracy and citizenship, but the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills also states that students should develop "the ability to handle situations that require linguistic and cultural competence" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Interdisciplinary topics"), which makes it important for teachers of English to help students develop both a linguistic and a cultural competence. This can be done by reading fictional literature, as it is closely connected to intercultural competence (Carlsen 121) and as it can help the students

develop their understandings of other people's ways of living, mindsets, and communication styles (Dypedahl & Bøhn 82).

As teachers of foreign languages who attempt to facilitate communication across cultural barriers in a globalizing world, "[...] one of the most challenging barriers to overcome is the stereotype" (Houghton et al. 1), and one of the reasons for stereotypes being a barrier is because it can undermine intercultural communication (Houghton et al. 1). Stereotypes will here be defined as: "the tendency to categorize individuals or groups according to an oversimplified standardized image and attribute certain characteristics to all members of the group" (Moore 36). The problems of stereotyping includes placing an individual's characteristics into a mental category that people easily apply to all members of that category (Lebedko et al. 7), and that such categories can be used for the purposes of oppression and discrimination (Pinker 5). It may therefore be important to teach about the dangerous consequences that stereotypes can lead to, and for the students to understand where they come from, in order for students to improve their knowledge on minority groups and reject stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination directed toward these groups (Moore, 35).

It is also important to note that engaging with texts from the English-speaking world cannot automatically develop students understanding of these (Dypedahl & Bøhn 82), however, with instructed learning and encouraged reflections, teachers can help the students develop their intercultural competencies by working with fictional literature. Through her novel, Reid gives voice to young people experiencing racism and discrimination, topics that are "[...] important to both young people and the larger society [...] which may rarely be discussed openly among peers in this age group" (Carlsen 131). Reid's novel therefore has a pedagogical value as it makes these topics explicit and portrays their implications in realistic ways (Carlsen 131), with examples from the United States that may be recognized in many parts of the world.

1.2.4 Empathy

In order to understand the implications that race and gender discrimination and bias can have on individuals' feelings and well-being, it is a benefit to feel empathy with people who undergoes such challenges. *Empathy* is here referred to as what we feel to be the emotions of others (Keen 5). Empathy is a sharing of affect that can be "[...] provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen 4). Hogan argues that the empathic feelings readers experience when reading literature are "[...] directly parallel to the emotions we have when hearing about someone who experienced some

joy or sorrow at a distance from us, someone that we can neither help nor harm” (23). Empathy is not to be confused with the term *sympathy*: while empathy is the feeling of others emotions (feeling *with* another), sympathy is feeling *for* another (Keen xxi). Therefore, it is possible to say that empathy places both parties on an equal level, while sympathy places one party above the other, making the relation as unequal where one might be looking down at the other, and feeling sorry for the person, instead of feeling the persons’ actual joy or sorrow.

Through reading fictional literature, students can learn how to view other’s perspectives, and thereby it has the ability to enhance students’ empathic emotions. Research has found that reading literature provoke empathic emotions (Hogan 23), and that reading literature can create empathy with (and sympathy for) fictional characters (Keen 8). Because both students and characters in a fictional work are made up of many different aspects that creates their identity and personalities, students will arguably feel empathy with different characters. Reid’s novel is interesting in regards to who one would normally feel empathy with. Emira is possibly the character that readers would feel most empathic with because she is arguably the one students in upper secondary can relate most to – she is young, unsure about her career, her language contains slang and profanities, and she is the one that changes the most throughout the story. However, because she is African American and lives in the United States, some students might not feel empathy with her experiences because they cannot relate to the racial discrimination that Emira has to deal with. “A great deal of our emotional lives are bound up with group identifications, and our empathic responses are shaped by racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and other affiliations” (Hogan 26), therefore it can be difficult to understand the emotions of characters who do not come from groups with which the reader identifies. There are also two characters in Reid’s novel that can be said to be the antagonists of the story: Alix and Kelley. These two characters challenge Emira in different ways, as well as they portray racist and paternalistic behavior that Emira finds disturbing. On the other hand, their racist and paternalistic actions are based on good intentions and readers are revealed that these two characters really care for Emira. It is possible that both Alix and Kelley have sympathy for Emira, instead of empathy with her, and therefore acts in ways that seems patronizing. Because of the complexity of these characters it can be difficult for some students to feel empathy with them. Hogan states that we typically feel compassion for someone if we ourselves would be likely to feel sorrow upon undergoing his or her experiences (23). Therefore, teachers could encourage their students to examine characters they would not typically relate to or feel

compassionate about on deeper levels in order to discover multiple perspectives on life, as well as attitudes, mindsets, and values of others.

One of the aims for the intercultural topic of health and life skills in the subject of English is to gain new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns to understand other people's experiences, feelings and thoughts (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Interdisciplinary topics"). Through fiction, students can come in contact with characters different from themselves, and by building empathy for the characters in Reid's novel, students can get a deeper understanding of these characters experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Through exercises that help the students see the characters' experiences from the characters' perspectives, students can become more open for the understanding of others' feelings and attitudes, and can lead to more compassionate views of others outside of literature. It is however not possible to conclude students will be able to empathize with everyone; nevertheless, it can help in changing their perspectives and thoughts about people from groups that they do not relate to.

Before going deeper into the novel, we will have a closer look at what the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills should aim to do and in what ways literature can or cannot conform to the goals of the topic.

2 Health, life skills and literature

In order to become competent teachers of the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills, it is important for teachers to gain several nuanced perspectives of the topics' guidelines. Because curricula and other steering documents often include limited information about processes, contents, and methods that should be included in different topics, it is the teachers' job to interpret these, both individually and collectively with other teachers and school personnel (Uthus and Øksnes 175). This chapter provides an interpretation of the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills that other teachers can look to for inspiration and information about how one can teach certain aspects of this topic in the subject of English. The terms *health* and *life skills* are two wide and comprehensive terms that are not necessarily associated to a fixed definition. Interpretations and definitions of these two terms can therefore be subjective and can be understood differently in terms of which subject they are to be taught in. This chapter examines what the LK20 explains about the topic of health and life skills, and provides some explanations of the two separate terms given from public instances to offer a nuanced understanding about the terms and the interdisciplinary topic. It will also discuss how the subtopics of career anxiety, intercultural competence, and empathy are relevant for teaching and learning about health and life skills. Because this thesis focuses on how teachers can use fictional literature in the English subject to build health and life skills, this chapter will also discuss in what ways literature can or cannot conform to the goals of the topic.

2.1 Health and life skills in LK20

According to the Norwegian Ministry of Education, stated in the core curriculum of LK20, the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills shall give the students competence “[...] which promotes sound physical and mental health, and which provides opportunities for making responsible life choices” (Kunnskapsdepartementet). The curriculum further points out the importance of developing a positive self-image and a confident identity during the childhood and adolescent years (Kunnskapsdepartementet). Through making confident career choices, intercultural competence, and the ability to feel empathy with other people, students might be able to see themselves as self-reliant and as confident citizens in a globalized world. Other relevant areas in the topic of health and life skills are, according to the LK20:

[...] physical and mental health, lifestyle habits, sexuality and gender, drug abuse, media use and consumption and personal economy [...] value choices and the importance of meaning in life and relations with others, the ability to draw boundaries and to respect other's boundaries, and the ability to deal with thoughts, feelings and relationships" (Kunnskapsdepartementet).

In the subject of English, the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills should specifically aim to:

[...] developing the ability of the pupils to express themselves in writing and orally in English. This forms the basis for being able to express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions and can provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupil's own way of life and that of others. The ability to handle situations that require linguistic and cultural competence can give pupils a sense of achievement and help them develop a positive self-image and a secure identity. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Interdisciplinary topics")

Whereas LK20 provides guidelines as to what the topic of health and life skills should cover, it does not state how to put them into practice. Nor does it give any further explanation of the two terms "health" and "life skills", which may indeed be important to fully understand how to implement the topic in the subject of English. Because of the curriculum's vague descriptions it is possible that the topic can include all factors that have to do with health and life skills. Before explaining why this thesis has chosen career anxiety, intercultural competence and empathy as fields that can be used to teach this topic, we will have a closer look at the terms *health* and *life skills*.

A wide perspective on the term *health* (folkehelse) can be found in the definition provided by the government: the society's effort to influence factors that directly or indirectly promotes the population's health and well-being, and that prevents mental and somatic diseases, harm or injury, or that protects against health threats, and that works for an even distributions of factors that directly or indirectly influences health ("Folkehelse"). It is possible to conclude, based on this statement from the Norwegian government, that the society has a role in the definition of "health". Therefore, understanding this term from a societal level may be necessary, as this interpretation in a way is about joint efforts to insure the health of the population. Likewise, the core curriculum in the new curricula states that "[a] society which

gives the individual the platform from which to make good health choices will have great impact on health” (Kunnskapsdepartementet), which also puts the society as a central part of the term. Because the school can be understood as its own society, teachers may be responsible for teaching about and giving insights into making choices that supports their students’ health.

Life skills, on the other hand, may be seen at the individual level instead of a societal level. According to the Norwegian Ministry of Education, *life skills* refers to “the ability to understand and influence factors that are important for mastering one’s own life” and further that students shall “[...] learn to deal with success and failure, and personal and practical challenges in the best possible way” (Kunnskapsdepartementet). This understanding of the term is quite broad and does not offer any explanation for the school’s staff to understand how to achieve this practically. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the term life skills, we can look at the definition given by The Norwegian Children and Youth Council (LNU) that defines life skills as “the ability to develop skills and acquire practical knowledge that can help the individual to handle success, adversity, personal challenges, serious incidents, changes, and conflicts, in the best possible way [...] and to] create a confident belief in one’s own abilities, also in the future” (Prebensen and Hegstad 9) (author’s translation). According to this definition, life skills are possible to view at the individual level, rather than on a societal level. One student may find communicating with others as troublesome, another may find difficulties in getting up in the morning, while another may see challenges in being at school or around other people at all.

As we can see, health and life skills are terms that differ from each other, where health may refer to the societal level, and life skills may refer to the individual level. However, these terms also belong together as there is no society without individuals. The description of what the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills should evolve around in the LK20 does not give any clear distinctions on what should be included in either of the terms, however, it seems as if they find the terms as one collected topic even if the terms refers to different subtopics. It is also possible to say that some topics related to life skills, may also relate to health. For instance, mental health clearly belongs in the category of health, but at the same time, dealing with and promoting one’s own mental health may indeed belong to life skills as one is trying to mastering the skill of one’s mental health. Likewise, creating one’s own identity may fit well in the category of life skills; however, it also fits perfectly well into the category of health. Some might experience mastering one’s health decisions, or defining their sexuality, or refrain from drugs, as acquiring life skills and not only making good health choices.

The broad and different definitions of the two terms that are incorporated into the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills may contribute to why it might be difficult for teachers to know exactly what they are supposed to do when the new curriculum is implemented. In a study from Andersen (2019), teachers were interviewed based on their views on the new curricula. Andersen found that some teachers are what she calls as “opponents of change”. These teachers found the topic of life skills as something that should be taught in the homes of the students, not at school, and further that they (the teachers) lack competence on the topic, and they believe that the topic is something new and elusive (Andersen 33-41). In short, they argue that they should not have to teach life skills at all. However, based on Ungdata’s report from 2020, 15% of the students in lower secondary and 21% of the students in upper secondary, are struggling with mental health problems (Bakken 2). Further, this report shows that there has been an increased reporting from students in the last years of mental illness and loneliness, and more students are reporting unhappiness or dissatisfaction in school (Bakken 2). It is also evident that for the last years, students are having more difficulties in finding their future as optimistic (Bakken 2). It is therefore clear that young adults and students still experience mental health problems and other difficulties, and because they carry out a lot of time in school, it is impossible to avoid working on health and life skills also in the classroom context. In addition, the Education act states that “All pupils are entitled to a good physical and psychosocial environment conducive to health, well-being and learning” (The Education Act §9 A-2). Therefore, it may seem as a teacher’s job to actually work with the students to help them learning ways of dealing with their own health and in developing life skills. As opposed to what the teachers who are opponents of change believe, there is a lot one can do to work on these topics with the students. One of the ways for English teachers may be to do this through working with fictional literature.

As jobs and careers are normally huge parts of a person’s life, it is important that students are able to make responsible choices regarding their own careers. If students are having difficulties in choosing a career or further education, or if they receive pressure from friends and family, it might become a distressing activity to choose a career path that they can be confident about, which then can contribute to decrease their mental health. As the education should also provide the students with different mindsets, communication patterns, and ways of living, it can be necessary for students to explore other cultures and their ways of living and thinking in order to see the world in more compassionate ways. By utilizing fictional literature from other cultures than the students’ own cultures, they can examine other mindsets, lifestyles,

and communication patterns. It might be important to develop students' intercultural competence to become confident speakers of the English language and to act respectfully to other human beings. In order to actually understand other peoples' attitudes, thoughts, and feelings, exercises that help students feel empathy with fictional characters can increase their understanding of other people's mindsets. In short, management of career anxiety is a life skill that can increase the individuals mental health; development of intercultural competence and empathy with people from groups one does not necessarily identify with, can contribute to promote the health of a whole society. Fictional literature can work as an opening for discussing these subtopics in health and life skills, however, there is only so much literature can teach about health and life skills. The next section will therefore look at how literature can and cannot conform to the interpretation of health and life skills provided in this section.

2.2 Fictional literature and how it can teach about health and life skills

Although the interdisciplinary subject of health and life skills should aim to teach students how to make responsible life choices that promote sound physical and mental health, it will not be possible to actually ensure that every student knows how to make the right decisions for every obstacle they encounter. Teachers can only do so much in order to help their students become the best versions of themselves and in helping them make responsible choices. What a teacher can do, however, is to help students acquire and develop different ways of coping with life and challenges they may encounter, so that when they do meet different challenges, they know different ways to reflect on the challenges and the different outcomes a choice may give, in order to make the best possible choices for themselves that are based on their own values in life. By now, we know that career anxiety, intercultural competence, and empathy, are some topics that can be worked with to improve and develop students' health and life skills. But how exactly can fictional literature contribute in this process?

Fictional literature in itself cannot teach the individual student how to get their dream job, or how to get the highest score on a test, nor can it give any actual answers for other specific questions. On the contrary, it can help inspire students through other characters ways of living and how these characters are dealing with specific choices. If a fictional work revolves around the theme of career development, students can look at how characters deals with certain situations that affects their career. When the student reflects on the choices and issues a character faces in terms of career development, the student can be inspired to think in similar ways in order to deal with their own career development. Because fiction has the ability to make

the reader look into others' situations, it will "[...] challenge readers to explore different identities and perspectives on life" (Carlsen 121). When students explore the consequences and outcomes of a character's career decisions, they can also see how the character is affected. If a work of fiction presents a character that makes career decisions based on parental desires, and the character ends up miserably, students might realize that making a career decision based on parental input alone might not be a good idea for everyone. As a result, students might get another perspective on career choices that can help them reflect on their own career choices.

Fiction that revolves around characters from other cultures than from that of the students can also help develop the students' intercultural competence. Literature then serves as a point of contact with other mindsets, attitudes, and ways of living, and can help students gain a more "nuanced understanding of the society we live in" (Carlsen 121). Fiction cannot in itself teach students everything there is to know about a specific culture, but it can provide new perspectives on ways of living, thinking, and communicating. It can also portray how people from different cultures or the same cultures are both similar and different from each other. Students who read fictional literature from the English-speaking world who also makes an effort to understand the characters' underlying values and attitudes communicated, as well as reflect upon their own standpoint in the process, may develop their intercultural competence (Carlsen 121). When students make an effort to understand certain character's ways of living and reflect upon their own standpoint at the same time, they will be more able to relate constructively to people from these cultures.

By developing their intercultural competence, students might also develop skills of empathizing with characters different from themselves. Literature in itself cannot tell someone how to feel empathy with others, but it can allow for the possibility of empathetic responses with characters that one would not necessarily feel empathy with. By reading about other characters, readers are engaging in roles that help them understand a character's actions, motivations, and perspectives, while building empathy (Beach et al. 11). By learning more about other people's cultures, mindsets, and ways of living, students might become more competent in recognizing characters' feelings and why these feelings appear.

Reading literature can open possibilities for students to interpret the characters' experiences, and from that develop their own awareness and understanding. Teachers can help their students recognize factors that can increase career anxiety, as well as help them deal with career issues they might encounter. Also, teachers can provide further background information

on other cultures and their values to help students increase their knowledge of other people's ways of living, thinking, and communicating. Finally, teachers can provide students with exercises that helps them get further into the role of the characters to be able to understand their feelings, and therefore help them become more able to feel empathy with them.

Reid's novel is an example of literature that teachers can use to teach about health and life skills, as it deals with career anxiety, cultures that clashes, and has ambiguous characters that might be difficult to empathize with at first hand. The next chapter will begin the analysis of Reid's novel, as well as portray how teachers can use it together with instructed learning to teach about career anxiety and ways to manage it.

3 Recognizing and managing career anxiety

The realistic challenges that Emira faces regarding her career in Reid's novel, such as career indecisiveness and parental pressure and pressure from peers can be relatable for students in Norway on a number of levels, and has the potential to help them manage their own career anxiety. Through the theme of career anxiety in *Such a Fun Age*, Reid portrays the realistic difficulties of finding one's career path, as well as a variety of feelings linked to career anxiety that young adults may experience. When choosing a career path, students have to consider both personal preferences as well as distinguish their preferences with healthy and practical choices. By recognizing the struggles Emira experiences in the Reid's novel, students can reflect on how they can make responsible choices regarding their own careers. This can in turn help them develop positive self-images and secure identities where they can be confident about their own career choices. In order for students to make such responsible choices, it is essential that they know which opportunities that exists and where they can find out more, the advantages and disadvantages of different jobs, as well as how to deal with external pressure.

When we understand the novel as a contact zone, whereas students relate to the novel in various ways, it becomes clear that the feelings of career anxiety expressed by the character Emira might be experienced differently from that of the students. Each student will meet the novel with their own unique experiences, and even though Emira is an African American woman from a big city in the United States, her experiences with career anxiety can be related to the students' on several individual levels. In addition, a group of students might relate differently to the same problems. Consequently, it might be necessary for teachers to help their students recognize the different kinds of anxiety related to career decisions expressed in the novel in order for them to further look at how various students can relate to these problems, either now or in the future. If the students are made aware of some of the feelings of career anxiety in the novel, it might be easier for them to recognize their own feelings of career anxiety and it might be less troublesome for them to manage this type of anxiety if it ever appears.

In this section, I discuss how teachers can use the realistic elements of career anxiety in Reid's novel to help their students develop a skill in managing such anxiety by using the novel as a point of reference and an opening for discussion. This chapter focuses on some of the barriers that Emira faces in the novel and that some students may encounter when exploring career options, namely career indecisiveness and parental and peer pressure, and how it can help students recognize what factors might increase career anxiety and how to manage them.

There are also other barriers that students might experience, such as problems of getting into certain careers because of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, as well as other factors such as mental illnesses, lack of motivation, and others. However, as career indecisiveness and parental and peer pressure may be relatable for students regardless their backgrounds (and therefore possibly may create challenges for more students than the other barriers mentioned), this thesis aims to analyze only these two barriers.

3.1 Career indecisiveness

The first example of career anxiety in *Such a Fun Age* that some students may relate to, is career indecisiveness. Career indecisiveness is portrayed through Emira's quick and random choices regarding her career that she seems to have given little thought to. *Career indecision* will here be referred to as "[...] the difficulties preventing individuals from making a career decision" (Gati et al. 3), specifically difficulties that derive from uncertainties about which career path to take on. Making quick and random decisions regarding one's education and career can be a sign of career indecision due to not having a plan, and because research indicates that "[...] anxiety is positively related to college student's career indecision" (Pisarik et al. 339), it is important to know how to manage such indecisiveness. Career indecision can be relatable for students who are unsure about what they would like to do for a living, not only in college but also in upper secondary school. Actually, most young adults "[...] reports facing difficulties in making career decisions" (Gati et al. 4), however in various degrees. Some of the individuals experiencing career indecisiveness have only temporary or developmental career decision-making difficulties, while others suffer from more "[...] chronic and pervasive difficulties, mainly stemming from emotional problems or personality-related characteristics" (Gati et al. 4). The realistic indecisiveness that Emira experiences in Reid's novel might be relatable for many different students, therefore, this part will provide examples of why Emira appears as indecisive, as well as discuss how students can use this to their advantage when trying to manage similar issues.

Emira constantly makes decisions regarding her career and education randomly, in a hurry, or without a further plan, which indicates that she is suffering from career indecisiveness. This is shown in several examples. First, Emira attended college because she did not know what else to do at the time and because it seemed like an acceptable place for her to be while trying to figure out what to do next (Reid 37). Already, readers learn that Emira is unsure about her career path and what she would like to work with. The narrator also explains that Emira "[...]

had no idea what she wanted to do with her life” (Reid 129), which might be why Emira makes random decisions regarding her career. When she went to college, “Emira tried to make her hands find formal sign language at Temple [the university] [...] Emira also tried transcription, which seemed like a career path and a narrative that made sense” (Reid 37), suggesting that Emira signed up for random courses to see if these could lead to a career one day. In addition, Emira’s choice of major during her college education also seems like a random and unplanned choice: “Emira typed lecture notes for two deaf students for thirteen dollars per class. This was more or less the reason she ended her five years at Temple with a major in English” (Reid 37). It seems as if Emira was trying out different courses with a hope that she would find something that she loved doing and could make a living off, but which ended up in a major in something she does not seem to be particularly passionate about. Furthermore, after graduating college and after being forced to departure from her job as a transcriber for Temple University, Emira signed up for a babysitter job “in a quiet panic” (Reid 38), which suggests that she was feeling quite stressed about her job situation and had to find something quickly that she could make money from. Another example of Emira’s quick and random choices, is when her friend Zara states that she cannot work for the Chamberlains any more due to Alix publishing a private video of Emira without her permission (Reid 270). Emira agrees, and in a hurry, Emira called to accept a job offer she received earlier (Reid 274) even though she already has made a deal with the Chamberlains to continue as their nanny rather than a babysitter.

The fact that Emira makes many quick and random choices throughout the novel, both regarding her education and her jobs, suggests that she is experiencing career indecisiveness. Emira’s indecisiveness possibly comes from the fact that she does not know what she would like to do with her life, and because she does not have any particular interests or something she is passionate about doing for a living, as she “[...] didn’t love doing anything, but she didn’t terribly mind doing anything either” (Reid 37). For students who are unsure about what they want to do for a living, the lack of passionate interests might be a factor that can create career indecisiveness. When one does not have any particular hobbies or other interests that they wish to work with or make a living off, it can be difficult to choose a career path. According to Pisarik et al., a common concern for students are securing employment and developing a career that provides “[...] a medium for meaning, purpose and fulfillment in life” (Pisarik et al. 344), and it can be even more difficult to find a meaningful job if the student is like Emira and does not love anything specifically but does not particularly mind doing anything either. A question therefore arises: how can students find a career path that provide meaning, purpose, and

fulfillment in their lives if they do not have any particular hobbies or interests to guide them in a specific direction?

One way to go about this question is by looking at how Emira progresses in Reid's novel. Although Emira did not love doing anything specifically, she tried out different paths and in the end she found a job as an administrative assistant that made her happy and content: "[...] I actually think I'm okay" (Reid, 301), Emira said to her boss Paula who asked when she was going to move on to a better job, reassuring herself and the readers that she was happy in her position, and she even continued working for her until Paula retired (Reid 302). What students can take from this is that even though they are unsure about their career paths, they will continue to grow and get more experience down the road. They might find interests that they did not have before that they can turn into employments and careers. Also, as one tries out different jobs, he or she will gain networks who can lead them in new directions. This is what happened to Emira: when she quit working as a babysitter for the Chamberlains and began working as a receptionist, she was introduced to Paula who offered her a new job (Reid 301). Even when Emira was working as a babysitter, Emira began to realize that caring for Briar Chamberlain was something that interested her because Briar was a person whom she wanted to continue working with. In the first chapters, although Emira states that she has to get a new job that includes benefits (Reid 41), it is also made visible how Briar is "her favorite little human" (Reid 8), and she thinks of Briar as a welcome break from her constant worry of what to do with the rest of her life (Reid 38), and every time Emira saw other children, "[...] anyone who wasn't Briar Chamberlain, she felt viscerally disgusted" (Reid 40). It becomes clear for the reader that Emira really cares for Briar, so when Alix offers her to work full time as a nanny for the family (including health insurance and vacation days), she accepts (Reid 260). Emira was not happy being only a babysitter because it did not include the benefits she needed, but she loved working with Briar and she had the possibility to turn it into a full-time job which included all benefits she was in lack of. This scene therefore shows an example of how experience and connections can turn into career paths for others as well.

Although Emira did not have any specific interests that she wanted to work with, she had set some goals for her career: she wanted to work full-time, she wanted benefits such as health insurance and vacation days, and she wanted to be a tax-payer (Reid 40). And although working with Briar was her "favorite position so far [...]" (Reid 40), "Emira knew she had to find a new job" (Reid 41) that included the benefits she was lacking. Emira made conscious goals for what she needed her future job to include in order for her to work there. By setting

goals for her career, Emira managed to not settle for anything less and found a job that she could be content with even though she did not have a certain dream job to reach for. For students who are indecisive about their careers, it can be helpful to set a few goals for their jobs and careers like Emira did. These goals can be anything they wish for in their jobs and careers, and they can help guide the students in directions of different occupations that provides what they wish for. To do this, it can be helpful to figure out some personal traits that they inhabit, for example: is the individual an introvert or an extrovert? This simple question, which might be difficult for the student to answer, can lead the student in direction to certain jobs. If the student is an extrovert who loves to communicate with different people, the student can be assigned to find some jobs or branches where it may be important or helpful to be an extrovert (for example: teacher, salesperson, waiter, health care, tourist guide). Another example of questions the students can reflect on to find jobs that could suit their personality, could be to figure out if they are more practical or theoretical. Practical people might enjoy working in fields where they can be more creative rather than in fields where they have to do research or studying for instance. By doing this exercise, students can figure out what kind of personality traits they have and use them to find some jobs that could benefit from these traits. For some students it might help them realize which line of work they could be interested in or good at, which can later help them develop in ways that are meaningful to them. For other students, it might help reduce the list of career fields they are interested in. These personality traits that they have found about themselves have the possibility to turn into goals: “I want to work with people” or “I want to do something creative”, for instance. By helping the students recognize their personality traits, it might become easier for them to set goals for their future careers or further education which can turn into helpful management of career indecisiveness.

Another way for teachers to be helpful in students’ career indecisiveness, could be through providing sufficient career guidance, also in the subject of English. For students to make confident and responsible career choices that does not turn into career anxiety, it is important that they are aware of many occupational lines of work that exists. Students will most likely have access to counsellors that can help guide the students further, however, they can also teach each other about the lines of works that exists while at the same time learn for themselves if this is a career path that makes sense for them. It can be helpful for them to gather information about future job opportunities and evaluate their own interests and abilities as it can facilitate “[...] development of career attitudes and values, which in turn affect career and academic decisions [...]” (Corey and Chen, 152).

Appendix A presents a task that students can do to inform both themselves and their classmates about different types of jobs and careers one can pursue and some of the tasks, skills and education that is needed in order to work in the chosen field. The task is to give a presentation about a job they could be interested in to the rest of the class to learn more about it. Because some students' knowledge of certain occupations might be limited, and their career decision processes may be based on impressions rather than on "[...] knowledge gained through true exploration" (Howard et al. 669), this task can offer the students a deeper insight into jobs and careers they may have considered, along with jobs and careers they might have given little thought to. The goal of this task is for the students to gain insight into different lines of work, both what is required of an employee in the jobs they have chosen and further what kind of personalities that could fit for the job. Ideally, all students should choose different jobs to present to result in a variety of presentations, however there may be several students who wish to present the same job. Teachers can help these students find jobs that are somewhat similar to their first choice in order to get a variety of occupations, jobs, and careers presented to the whole class. For students who are particularly indecisive and cannot choose a job of their own can get a job assigned by the teacher. The teacher can decide which format the presentation should be in (PowerPoint, oral presentation, podcast or other) or they can let their students choose for themselves, depending on which competence aims the teacher aims for (some competence aims that this task can be linked to is stated in appendix A). Teachers should also encourage the students to ask questions to each other about the jobs they have chosen for the presentations if they want to know more. If the students do not have the answers for certain questions, the teacher can help them look it up.

Another way for students to learn each other about different occupations is to give them an assignment where they have to interview a person from a job they are interested in or want to learn more about. They can use the same questions from Appendix A, and present their answers to the class. For this exercise, it might lead to more knowledge about the occupation if the students have to figure out which questions to ask themselves, rather than only using the questions suggested from the teacher. That way they get answers to the exact questions they are wondering about, but it should be monitored by the teacher so that in the presentation they are able to present important information that they might not have thought about themselves. It is also possible to make the students choose for themselves whether they would like to do the interview or simply find the information they need on the internet in order to teach the rest of the class about different jobs and careers. After seeing each other's presentations, the students

will hopefully end up with more knowledge about different jobs that exists from these tasks, and some information about what is required of them to work within certain fields. This task can provide them with ways to reflect on whether or not a job could be suitable for them, and how to look up information about jobs and careers they are interested in, and might further help them in the process of deciding their own career paths.

To summarize, students can relate to Emira's career indecisiveness on a number of levels. Maybe they do not know what they wish to do for a living because they do not have any particular interests, or maybe because they do not know the many options that exists. In order for teachers to help their students manage this form of career anxiety, teachers can help their students recognize which personality traits they have and further help them find different jobs that could benefit from these traits. In addition, students can teach each other about different occupations that they are interested in or wants to learn more about, which can broaden the students understanding of certain jobs. In this way, students can learn how to reflect on whether or not a specific job could be of interest, and may help them come closer to deciding their career path.

3.2 Parental and peer pressure

Another career related concern that some students might have to deal with other than career indecisiveness, is parental desires and pressure received from both family and peers. Such pressure can make it difficult for a person to choose a career path or a job, and in some cases it can lead to career anxiety. Pressure from friends and family is not uncommon and might be relatable for many students regardless of where they live. Because young adults often "[...] seek approval from their parents" (Corey and Chen, 158) and their peers, this can develop into a form of anxiety that needs to be managed. According to the study by Pisarik et al., the students that participated in this study reported feelings of pressure related to making decisions regarding their careers that would satisfy their parents in particular ways (349), a concern that might be relatable for students in Norway as well. As the students try to navigate around their own thoughts about the future and receive advisable input from their parents, the students might feel anxious about making career choices that does not satisfy their parents in some ways. Likewise, the participants of the study reported feeling pressure from their peers, as they lived with "[...] constant opportunities to compare their abilities, experiences, and career development progress with that of their peers" (Pisarik et al. 347). Students in upper secondary will also get opportunities to compare their grades, experiences and skills with each other both during school

activities and in their spare time. With the current prominent usage of social media, the possibilities of comparing one's own set of skills and achievements with those of their peers can continue as the students graduate and get job offers or are accepted for universities. If the particular student does not achieve the goals set in mind, anxious feelings regarding their careers and future life may appear, making it important to know how to deal with various forms of pressure received from their peers. In *Such a Fun Age*, Emira experiences parental pressure and pressure from her peers to find a "better job". Reid's novel presents realistic examples of pressure one might get regarding their careers from friends and family, and students can look at these examples to reflect on how they themselves can manage such pressure.

In Reid's novel, Emira experiences pressure to continue in the line of work that her family have been in for generations, and it seems as if it is expected of her to find a similar occupation. The narrator states that "The Tucker family worked with their hands" (Reid 36), and goes on to explain all the different jobs her siblings and parents have: "Mr. Tucker owned a bee store [...]" (Reid 36), "Mrs. Tucker bound books [...]" (Reid 36), "[...] Alfie Tucker won second place in the National Latte Art Competition in 2013" (Reid 36), and "[...] Justyne Tucker sewed" (Reid 37). In the next paragraph it becomes obvious that Emira is unsure about what she could do with her hands: "Because the interests of her family members had come so naturally to them, and because University seemed like an acceptable place to wait for her hands to find themselves, Emira became the first person in her family to attend a four-year college" (Reid 37). Emira attended college because she did not know what else to do, but she were still waiting to find something that her hands could work with. Even though she does not explicitly state that she has to work with her hands, it seems as if it is expected of her. Therefore, when she began her college education, she signed up for courses where one needs to use their hands (formal sign language and transcription), but she did not develop a passion for either that she wanted to continue working with. Emira might have wanted to make her parents proud by trying to find a career path that would follow her family's footsteps. Not being able to find a career path that both made sense to her family and Emira herself, may have caused stressed and anxious feelings.

In a study from Corey and Chen about parental pressure of young women's career decisions, each of the participants demonstrated a "[...] desire to comply with the career wishes of their parents" (157), and over half of them described feeling anxious in response to parental pressure (158). The anxious feelings that the participants in the study felt can have implications for their emotional well-being "[...] which can have negative consequences for their career

exploration” (Corey and Chen 158). This might also be what happened to Emira: she might have been so consumed with the idea that she has to do something with her hands in order to please her parents, that she has missed opportunities to explore other career paths that could have been interesting, making it challenging for her to figure out what she wants to do with her life. After receiving “[...] a stern suggestion from her father: to find something and to stick with it” (Reid 37), Emira enrolled in transcription school, “and she absolutely hated it” (Reid 37). She complied to the parental pressure and expectations she received, but it did not lead to doing something she liked. In addition, “Emira hadn’t told her parents that she was babysitting and typing for a living” (Reid 39), which might suggest that she were embarrassed of her jobs or had some other negative feelings connected to her job decisions, making it clear that she feels some desire to comply with the career wishes of her parents.

As we have seen, Reid presents a realistic example of the influence parents have on their children, which teachers can use to help their students see that it is not always a good idea to comply to parental pressure. For some students, it might be satisfactory to follow their parents expectations because they share the same interests. For Emira, transcription was the only thing she found that she could do with her hands, but she did not particularly like the activity itself, making it difficult for her to see a future in this field. Likewise, for some students, it might be difficult to comply to parental pressure because they would know that the career related expectations from their parents would not lead to forms of happiness and/or fulfilment in the individual student. In the classroom, teachers can encourage their students to make career choices based simply on their own interests and skills, because after all, they are the ones who have to live with their choices. On the other hand, pushing students to think about parental input about their career choices as unimportant might have negative consequences for students who are close to their parents and who wish to comply to their wishes, and the students might then react with distrust and disconnection with the teacher (Corey and Chen 160). Instead, teachers could help students reflect on Emira’s situation about how she feels and see themselves in the same perspective because it might help them balance their decision on more than parental pressure alone (Corey and Chen 160). To encourage students into making their own balanced decisions based on their own interests, skills, and attitudes, rather than only complying to their parent’s wishes, we can look to Emira. Students can be asked to think about and discuss if it is possible that Emira enrolled into transcription school only to please her parents, and why she may have felt such pressure from her parents. Teachers can also ask them to discuss what would have happened if Emira told her parents about her job, and questions about how they would

feel themselves if they were in the same situation (see Appendix B). If the students are encouraged to reflect on how Emira felt in her situation, it might be easier for them to set their own experiences (or possible future experiences) in perspective.

Not only will some students might have to deal with parental pressure, but also forms of pressure from their peers as they explore possible career paths and career development, just like Emira did in Reid's novel. When Emira worked as a babysitter, she received several opinions about her job from her friends, and more often than not, their opinions came across as negative and judgmental. For instance, in the first chapter when Emira is leaving her friends birthday party to babysit, her friend exclaims: "You're leaving to *babysit*? Are you fucking kidding me?" (Reid 5). The pressure on "babysit", and the rhetorical question that follows, indicates that Emira's friend sees babysitting as less important than the birthday party. Such behavior from trusted friends can create doubtful feelings for one's job situation and can decrease their confidence. Likewise, when Emira tells her friend Zara that she needs a new job, Zara's reply was: "Ummm... fucking duh, bitch" (Reid 130). Because "duh" is usually used to express that something that have been said is extremely obvious ("Duh", Cambridge Dictionary), Zara's reply might be of mocking behavior towards Emira and her choices. Emira's boyfriend also expresses his opinion about her job as a babysitter: when Kelley meets Emira after the incident at the grocery store and says: "I've gotta know if you quit or not" (Reid 59) although Emira never expressed to him that she wanted to quit in the first place, suggesting that he degraded her job into one that is easy to quit; when Kelley states that his company could recruit her, implying that this would be a better job (Reid 67); and after Kelley and Emira has a whole fight about Emira's job, he says: "You have to quit [...] You have to. You cannot work there" (Reid 189), and Emira responded: "I feel like you're being kind of a dick right now" (Reid 189), and: "You're not better than anyone" (Reid 191). The external pressure Emira receives from her friends regarding her career, has created an internal pressure in Emira where she compares her own career development with her friends', thinking that she does not have a real job (Reid 39).

These examples portray the direct pressure Emira receives from her peers regarding her job situation, but Emira also has to deal with internal peer pressure that stems from her peers as they continue to develop in their careers while Emira is still unsure about her own career path. When Emira's friend Shaunie got a job promotion, Emira said she wanted to be happy for her, but instead she just wanted to "[...] punch her in the face and go to bed" (Reid 135), which suggests that Emira might have been jealous of her friend's career development. Because of

Shaunie's promotion, Shaunie begins looking for an apartment, which resulted in that "[...] Emira was shocked, and then she was jealous, and then she wondered: *'Is that what we're supposed to be doing right now? 'Cause if it is, I ain't there'*" (Reid 132). Emira is both jealous of her friend for having received a job promotion, and she is also comparing herself with Shaunie, thinking that they are not on the same place in life, which can create a stressful pressure for her to get to a similar level of career development.

Pressure from peers is not uncommon, and it can be a challenge that some students in Norway also may have to deal with in order to make confident and balanced career choices. According to Pisarik et al., students live with "[...] constant opportunities to compare their abilities, experiences, and career development progress with that of their peers" (347). And likewise Emira (although they are still in school), students in upper secondary will also get opportunities to compare their grades, experiences, and skills with each other both during school activities and in their spare time. With the current prominent usage of social media, the possibilities of comparing one's own development and achievements with those of their peers can continue as the students graduate and goes on to explore career opportunities or further education. In Emira's situation it might have been more difficult to deal with peer pressure because she appears as indecisive as well as uncertain and not confident about her current job and career opportunities. At the end of the novel, when Emira works as an administrative assistant for Paula, she is more confident and content in her job situation, and interestingly, peer pressure is not much of a concern anymore: "Maybe [Emira] wasn't by her girlfriends' standards (Shaunie was engaged, Josefa was teaching at Drexel, Zara made enough money to get a two-bedroom apartment and pay rent for both her and her little sister), but Emira really *was* doing okay." (Reid 301). Although Emira still compared herself to her peers' career development, the pressure to be on the same level as them has decreased. And it is possible that she does no longer perceive peer pressure as a stressful concern because of the fact that she is happy with her current job. Therefore, one can argue that students who are more confident about their career choices will manage peer pressure in better ways. Reid's novel describes a situation where indecisiveness and doubtful feelings toward career opportunities might make it more difficult to deal with peer pressure. Managing pressure from friends and family can relieve the individuals' expectations to themselves, making it possible to choose careers more freely based on their own wishes, which would result in a happier self. Thus, being aware of one's set of skills, values, interests, and personality might make the individual better shaped or prepared for

dealing with peer pressure, namely because the individual is able to make career choices that they can be confident in.

In order to deal with parental and peer pressure, students should be encouraged to reflect on how they themselves can speak with their friends and family in ways that encourage them to make practical and healthy career choices without pressuring them or making them feel embarrassed about their job situations. Although Emira's friends probably were trying to support her in her career decisions, some of the things they said can have been hurtful and difficult to deal with. Appendix B suggests some questions that students can reflect on in order to give support to their own friends in more compassionate ways. In this way, peers can be supportive of each other, while at the same time express their concerns if there are any.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at realistic challenges that the main character, Emira, has faced regarding her career choices and development, namely career indecisiveness and parental and peer pressure. These kinds of challenges are not dependent on cultural or ethnical situations, and students from all over the world can relate to the issues Emira experiences on different levels. Emira was experiencing career indecisiveness because of the fact that she did not love doing anything particular, along with the pressure to choose an occupation where she could work with her hands, which made it difficult for her to figure out what she would like to do with her life. For such problems and similar issues that students can experience also in Norway, this thesis suggest that plentiful career guidance and tasks where the students teach each other about career opportunities can help them explore their options in deeper ways, and learn more about occupations they may or may not have given much thought to. Reid's novel is a great example of that a person does not have to be passionate about a specific career in order to succeed in life, and that allowing oneself to be human and to try out different paths can increase the individual's experience and connections, as well as that hobbies, interests, and values might grow as the individual develops.

Emira's experience with parental pressure made it difficult for her to find a career that would satisfy both herself and her parents, and the pressure she received from her peers (friends and boyfriend) made her unsure about her job situation and if it was good enough. This type of pressure is also something that students in Norway might have to deal with as they explore career options and try to decide on a career path. Because individuals often have friends or family that cares for them, they will probably receive input about what they believe is the best

for the person of matter, and for some, this might create negative consequences when dealing with career related challenges. This chapter suggests that students should learn ways to reflect on how they can speak with their friends in ways that encourage them to make practical and healthy career choices without pressuring them or making them feel embarrassed about their job situation.

This chapter has focused on some of the barriers that students may encounter when exploring career options, and which might develop into career anxiety if these are not recognized and managed appropriately. The barriers of career indecisiveness and parental and peer pressure can make the career exploring activity as a dreadful or painful experience that increases stress and uncertainties. In the subject of English, teachers have the potential to teach about career anxiety through fictional literature where characters experience forms of career anxiety in order for the students to reflect on and discuss how they could have handled similar situations. Nevertheless, students can also encounter other forms of barriers that can lead to career anxiety, such as different forms of physical or psychological limitations. However, this chapter has suggested some examples of how teachers can provide their students with a point of reference and an opening for discussions about career anxiety, what creates such anxiety and ways to manage it, through Reid's work of fiction: *Such a Fun Age*. The next chapter will move away from managing career anxiety as a life skill, to discuss in which ways Reid's novel can contribute to the development of intercultural competence in the students as well.

4 Intercultural competence

Not only can Reid's novel teach about ways to manage career anxiety, it can also contribute to the development of students' intercultural competence. *Such a Fun Age* is set in the United States, and its portrayal of clashing cultures gives the novel great potential to teach about other people's mindset, underlying values and attitudes (Carlsen 121), specifically in those who view people from certain groups in stereotypical ways. Stereotypical images of African Americans can be traced to English and African contact in the sixteenth century, and were used to justify slavery, discrimination and segregation (Moore 36). African Americans have therefore been stereotyped in the past as "stupid, lazy, childlike, criminal savage, and sexually promiscuous (Moore 36) by slaveowners to see people of color as slaves instead of human beings. These stereotypical images still exist today, and are central to "[...] formation of prejudice and the pervasive acts of violence, segregation, and discrimination against minority groups" (Moore 36). It is therefore crucial to reject stereotypes, and teachers can help their students in the process.

Reid's novel confronts these stereotypical images of African Americans and has the potential to teach students about how people cannot fit within a stereotype; to reflect upon words that relies on prejudicial and stereotypical images, and; how stereotypical images can result in oppression and discrimination. Although a complete overview of race relations is beyond the scope of this thesis, this chapter suggests ways to discuss stereotypical images in classrooms that can develop students' intercultural competence because it can provide new perspectives on different mindsets, both in those who stereotype and in those who is stereotyped. The aim of this chapter is therefore to help teachers discuss Reid's novel in ways that help students "[...] reject stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination" (Moore 35), and to apply the same mindset when speaking about (or talking with people from) different cultures, religions ethnicities, and countries, as well as those from other groups based on social, political, territory/geography/region, profession, gender, and age affiliations (Lebedko 4). Students will then have the potential to develop their understanding of other's boundaries and deal with thoughts about interracial relationships (Kunnskapsdepartementet), as well as gain new perspectives on different ways of thinking (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Interdisciplinary topics").

Reid's novel can in this sense be seen as a contact zone. Students in Norway can come in contact with mindsets and attitudes communicated from characters within cultures in the United States and connect them with similar ways of thinking and living in their own social

spheres and other environments. In order to understand the characters' underlying values, mindsets, and attitudes, students have to make sense of the gaps, misunderstandings, and open questions about the topics of race, culture and discrimination (Carlsen 121) in Reid's novel. The novel then opens for moving beyond personal and moral attitudes toward historical and cultural contexts that shape individuals' attitudes and behavior, and can help students see stereotypes in more critical ways. When students have to interpret the underlying values and attitudes of the characters Alix, Kelley, and Emira, they can understand why these characters behave in the ways they do. This can further expand the students' potential to understand other people's mindsets and ways of living, and relate constructively to them.

This chapter argues that Reid's novel confronts stereotypical images of African Americans that can result in more cultivated thoughts in students who reads *Such a Fun Age* and receive instructional teaching about the issue of stereotypes. Reid's novel confronts stereotypical images of African Americans through Alix's preconceived ideas of Emira, and through Kelley who fetishizes black culture. The last section will look at Emira's experiences of racism and discrimination that stems from her belonging to a culture, ethnicity, and gender that has been stereotyped for years.

4.1 The character Alix and stereotypes

The first character we will look at, Alix Chamberlain, upholds stereotypical images about the many people she meets on her path. Alix is in her thirties and works as a lifestyle coach who help others achieve their goals in life. She is married to Peter Chamberlain, and together they have two children: Briar and Catherine. Throughout the story, Alix's mindset and attitudes contain some gaps that readers have to make sense of in order to understand her underlying values. On one hand, Alix believes in stereotypical images and holds prejudice against people from certain groups. On the other hand, she seems to genuinely care for Emira although she belongs to a group that Alix stereotypes. This section will analyze Alix's attitudes and mindset to get a deeper understanding of her values, and discuss how teachers can work with their students to understand Alix's character at deeper levels.

Alix holds stereotypes against African Americans and people from groups she does not identify with, which at first hand suggests that she has racist attitudes. By believing in stereotypical images, Alix reduces Emira to an image she believes is true for all African Americans. This is first shown when she is about to hire Emira as her babysitter. Alix found Emira on SitterTown.com (Reid 30), a website where people can request babysitting services,

where “Emira Tucker’s profile did not come with a picture” (Reid 31). It did however come with a description: “[...] she was a Temple University graduate, [...] she knew beginner sign language, and [...] she could type 125 words per minute” (Reid 31). To this, Alix said: “Huh” and requested an interview (Reid 31). When Emira showed up on her doorstep, she again thought: “*huh*” (Reid 31). It seems as if Alix may be confused by the woman in front of her, and it is possible to interpret that she did not expect Emira (who is African American) to have graduated university, to know beginner sign language and to be able to type 125 words per minute. Alix is also confused when Emira used the word “connoisseur” in passing:

There were moments like this that Alix tried to breeze over, but they got stuck somewhere between her heart and her ears. She knew Emira had majored in English. But sometimes, after seeing her paused songs with titles like ‘Dope Bitch’ and ‘Y’all Already Know,’ and then hearing her use words like *connoisseur*, Alix was filled with feelings that went from confused and highly impressed to low and guilty in response to the first reaction. There was no reason for Alix to be impressed. Alix completely knew these things, but only when she reminded herself to stop thinking them in the first place. (Reid 79)

Here, the narrator points out that Alix is both impressed and confused with that Emira knew the word “connoisseur”, implying that Alix has placed Emira into the stereotypical image of African Americans as “stupid”. It is therefore highly possible that Alix holds negative and false beliefs about all African Americans (Moore, 35) because she did not expect Emira to be smart enough to know such a word. On the other hand, the narrator also points out that Alix had no reason to be impressed, and that she feels guilty because knew her thoughts are wrong in some way. If Alix feels guilty for the prejudice she holds against Emira, then she must be aware that her prejudice is based on false ideas and that her thoughts are not justified. Alix therefore seems to have a mindset where she expects stereotypes although she knows it is wrong to do so. The fact that Alix tries to “breeze over” moments like this highlights that she tries to forget about the stereotypes she expects, but the problem of them getting stuck between her heart and her ears suggest that she has an internal struggle of trying to figure out why the stereotypes are false images and why they appear in the first place. The plantation columns outside of Alix’s childhood home (Reid 108) suggest that she may have grown up in an environment where her parents or other relations may have influenced her perception of African Americans in false and stereotypical ways, making the perception of stereotypical images as true for Alix. Her own

development and personal insight, on the other hand, has made her aware of the false images these stereotypical images represent, but she does not know exactly how to deal with them.

Another example of Alix acting in ways that holds stereotypes against others, is how she categorizes other people based on a few characteristics. When she and Peter held a birthday party for Briar, “Alix’s home was filled with the types of mothers she often saw in airports and had come to completely despise. Women with full faces of makeup, way too much luggage [...], cork wedge sandals, and plastic bags with souvenirs that took up all the room in the overhead compartments” (Reid 55). Without knowing the women that she thinks about, she reduces them to these qualities alone and despises them. Alix herself, on the other hand, is an “incredible packer [that] frequently found herself texting Peter that she’d jumped on another flight that got her home quicker” (Reid 55), qualities that seems, according to her, as better, and that she looks for in the guests at the birthday party. “I hate everyone here” (Reid 54) Alix texted to her friends in New York, even though she has not really gotten to know any of them. In addition, Alix is described as a person who used to call “[...] things as gay in high school” (Reid 219), and she had used the word “Oriental” until she was in college “[...] and only stopped because a roommate told her to” (Reid 219). The fact that Alix only stopped using “oriental” because a roommate told her to suggests that she does not know the origins, meanings, or effects words and racial and ethnical slur can have. Reid therefore seems to be calling out Alix as a privileged and judgmental white woman, but she also leaves the question of why Alix acts in judgmental ways; Does Alix have insecurities or other feelings that has led her to become this judgmental?; May her behavior be influenced by her upbringing as wealthy and white? The narrator in this passage blames the system instead of the individual for stereotyping others. The focalization of Alix’s negative and judgmental characteristics mixed with her own confusion and awareness is exaggerated to make readers see that it is not necessarily Alix’s fault that she upholds stereotypes, but that they stem from somewhere and that they need to be addressed in order to move forward.

Alix not only categorizes and stereotypes people based on a few characteristics, she also has a habit of doing things for egocentric reasons, and she may justify her own negative behavior because she sees herself as better than others, leaving readers to question why this is. After hiring Emira as their babysitter, Alix had developed “[...] what she knew was an awful and invasive habit of returning home, closing the door quietly behind her, bending at the hip, and looking at Emira’s phone” (Reid 75). By secretly looking at Emira’s phone she invades Emira’s privacy. If it is true that Alix holds Emira to the stereotype of black people, she may

justify this behavior because she sees herself as more valuable than Emira and therefore has some sort of “right” to invade her privacy. On the other hand, it could be that Alix tries to find a way to connect with Emira. Emira is not particularly chatty, and because Alix wants to get to know her, but has difficulties in communicating with her, it could be that she saw this as her only opportunity to find a point of connection. The narrator does express Alix’s awareness of her actions being wrong and invasive; therefore, it is possible that her actions are actually innocent and a way for her to connect with Emira.

Another example of Alix’s ambiguous actions, is when Alix posted a video of Emira without her permission. When Emira were hold and questioned for kidnapping Briar, Kelley had recorded the incident and sent it to Emira. But even though Emira did not want the video published on the internet, or any attention around the matter, Alix got into Emira’s e-mail account, found the video, sent it to herself, and published it on social media (Reid 232). She did not respect Emira’s wish to not get into that night any further, and it may again have been because she thinks that the best for Emira is to publish the video and highlight the issue. Again, readers are left with the question of why Alix feels that she can justify her behavior. Is it because she believes she knows what is best for a person of color? Or does she genuinely care for Emira and wants to highlight this issue because being accused of kidnapping based on skin color is immensely unfair?

Alix’s actions can be interpreted as ambiguous, and is a gap that readers have to make sense of in order to understand her character. Because Alix also acts in ways that shows her love and affection for Emira, it is difficult to pinpoint her behavior as racist or discriminating. In the classroom, teachers can help students move beyond the personal failure level and see Alix’s behavior as a result of a larger issue of systemic racism. Systemic racism is here referred to as social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that produce privilege for some and disadvantage for others (Hardeman et al. 241, Bonilla-Silva, 4). If Alix upholds stereotypes against African Americans, then she might also (unconsciously) place herself on top in a racial hierarchy (Feagin and Bennefield 7), and therefore believe that her race and ethnicity can justify invading Emira’s privacy. If students are encouraged to examine systemic racism and the intentional outcomes of systemic racism, they can begin to understand that it does not help to blame Alix alone, but rather the system that has led her to this position in the first place. Reid might be portraying the aftermath of the systemic racism that has lasted from the seventeenth century in the United States, where the “[...] white elite has played the central role in maintaining racialized institutions and a racializing white framing, while ordinary whites have

usually supported oppression because of white privilege” (Feagin and Bennefield 7). Reid does not blame Alix as a person for her prejudice and position in unjust power relations because she characterizes Alix as a woman with good intentions. She develops her into a person who is aware of her flaws, a characterization that suggests to her readers how systemic racism is still lived out in the world today and it needs more critical, self-aware attention.

The mindset of Alix and the guilt she feels for expecting stereotypes can encourage students to reflect on their own unconscious thoughts and attitudes against people outside their own culture or ethnicity, or other groups they may or may not be part of. In a world that is still affected by earlier generations misjudgments about race and ethnicity, similar thoughts like Alix’s may have developed into the youths’ own perceptions. Reid’s novel acts as a bridge for relating to the issue of expecting stereotypes, and recognizing if they have the same expectations. It is possible that some students have similar expectations of stereotypes like Alix expects, but they may not be aware of where these stereotypes comes from or why having such expectations can be dangerous for social and democratic development. Reid’s novel can make students relate to Alix’s confusion about stereotypes, and through instructed teaching on historical contexts and how stereotypes are based on false ideas and to create distance between groups, they can more easily deal with their own unconscious thoughts and attitudes concerning stereotypical images.

Although Alix might be acting with good intentions, she still holds preconceived ideas about Emira and the people at her daughter’s birthday party, and judges other people based on a few characteristics and categorizes them accordingly. Such an attitude can be dangerous, especially as a person who works as a life coach because she can influence people who look up to her to uphold the same prejudices and stereotypes against others. In order for students to reflect on this behavior as negative and dangerous for social and democratic development, students can be asked to do a “who says, and who benefits?” exercise (Bell 30). In this exercise (see Appendix C), students will be encouraged to discuss stereotypical images they are familiar with, in order to understand the underlying values of making a particular stereotype, and understand that some stereotypes are made to justify slavery, discrimination and segregation (Moore 37). It can help them think critically about stereotypes - they can find out who contributed to this being a stereotype and who benefitted from it being a stereotype. In order to fully understand these aspects of stereotypes, teachers need to be involved and may have to provide students with long and historical views on race relations (Bell 28) in order for their students to understand where stereotypical images originates from. This exercise can also

connect the novel to their own lives as they may be familiar with stereotypes in their own social spheres. The novel can then make the students develop their own self-actualization and move “[...] beyond textbook understandings to see ‘racial and ethnic relations’ as something they are linked to quite personally” (Mueller and Feagin 12), to result in a multifaceted understanding of the dangers of upholding stereotypes.

As we have seen, Reid’s novel can contribute to the understanding of that racial attitudes and mindsets are not necessarily developed personally and consciously, but that they may be inherited from past historical contexts. In order for students to fully understand this, thorough historical contexts on race relations is needed, and together with the novel, teachers can encourage students to see why stereotypes are made and the dangers of contributing to their existence. The way Alix first think of Emira as a stereotype suggest that she holds prejudice against certain people, however, Alix’s attitudes may be a result of systemic racism that has happened for generations. When Emira acts in ways that challenges the stereotype Alix believes in, Alix is shocked and reminded that her thoughts are wrong and based on false ideas, which further can help students understand that a person is made up of a large number of aspects, not their culture or ethnicity alone. *Such a Fun Age* therefore provides an opening for students to look at their own prejudices and where they come from. Interestingly, Alix expresses racist ideas in a different way than Kelley. The next section will discuss in which ways the character Kelley can develop students’ ability to further see beyond stereotypes, and understand how different forms of racist ideas can stem from gendered socialization.

4.2 The character Kelley, fetishizing culture and gendered power

While Alix holds preconceived and oversimplified ideas about people, Kelley is trying too hard not to be a racist that he ultimately portrays racist attitudes. Kelley is a white man in his thirties, and he and Emira are dating in parts of the novel. Because of his interest in black music, his number of black friends, and because he is dating Emira who is a black woman, he is suggested as someone who fetishizes black culture. Combined with the fact that he tries to help and protect Emira in paternalistic ways, Kelley’s character portrays an image of a paternalistic male, as he reduces Emira to her culture and her gender while trying to protect her from her current job as a babysitter because he thinks it would be for Emira’s own good. Paternalistic behavior is someone’s “[...] interference with a person’s liberty or autonomy for her good” (Grill, 359). Although paternalism does not necessarily intend gender distinctions, Kelley’s attitudes and mindset might suggest that he is behaving in a paternalistic way because

of his gender and race. Likewise Alix's behavior, Kelley also acts in ambiguous ways, making it difficult for readers to understand whether his intentions are good or bad. A discussion of Kelley's underlying values and attitudes can help students reflect further on the fact that people cannot be reduced to only their culture and gender, as well as learn about the historical contexts of gendered power. This section discusses how Kelley in Reid's novel can suggest ways of learning about origins of racial slur and how racism and gender discrimination is a result from historical contexts. This section will at the same time integrate methods which can result in students' development of intercultural competence and communication.

First, Kelley seems to be fetishizing black culture because of his large number of black friends and girlfriends. The second time Emira met Kelley she invited him to a bar where she and her friends would be. Kelley showed up with a group of friends too, "[...] and these friends, to Emira's indisputable surprise, were all black" (Reid 64). Emira's friends are also questioning him being with only black friends: "[...] does someone wanna tell me why all his friends are black?" (Reid 65) Josefa said, and continued with: "I hope he doesn't have a fetish or something" (Reid 66). Emira herself defends Kelley by answering Josefa's question with: "Ummmm... [...] I don't know, [Josefa], why are yours?" (Reid 66), and may be Reid's way of contributing to the conversation of that it does not have to be a reason for being friends with people from other cultures or ethnicities. However, when it is revealed that Kelley's next girlfriend (after Emira) is also black (Reid 303), his idealizing black culture becomes even more prominent. In addition, when Kelley went to high school, he also admired Robbie, a black kid who he thought was "awesome" (Reid 105). Kelley admitted: "I probably thought the black kids in high school were much cooler than the white ones. I don't think I was the only kid who thought athletes and rappers and rich kids [...] were cooler than everyone else" (Reid, 225). Finally, all of Kelley's ex-girlfriends "[...] were all ethnically ambiguous looking" (Reid 198), and none of them were white (Reid 198). On the other hand, it would be unfair to completely disregard Kelley having African American friends as a coincidence. Kelley may find his friends interesting in ways that are not defined by their ethnicity or culture, and he points this out: "It doesn't matter how we became friends" (Reid, 225), referring to the black friends he has.

Kelley might have been practicing a color blindness-approach to his lifestyle; an approach where he does not take skin color into account (Apfelbaum et al. 205). However, although color blindness may stem from a "[...] well-intentioned desire to avoid bias (or at least a desire to appear unbiased)" (Apfelbaum et al. 206), it could also result in negative consequences: "[i]ronically, for example, White individuals who avoid mentioning race appear

more biased in the eyes of Black observers than do White individuals who openly talk about race” (Apfelbaum et al. 206). When it is made apparent that Kelley is also interested in African American music (he states that he has “[...] the music taste of a middle-aged black woman” (Reid 70)), Emira thinks “Maybe Josefa was right and he did have a fetish” (Reid 70). It would therefore be unfair to disregard that Kelley is not acting in ways that fetishize black culture, too. There seems to be an ambiguity in Kelley’s behavior where his attitude either represents a fetish for black culture, or where he applies a colorblind view of race.

Whatever the reason is for Kelley (consciously or not) being involved with black people and culture, it is a gap that Reid has left in the novel for readers to interpret. For the purpose of developing intercultural competencies, students can be asked to consciously reflect and discuss with each other if Kelley is acting in ways that fetishize black culture, if he has applied a colorblind view of race, or whether these incidents are all coincidences. They can further look into the problems of fetishizing a culture, and how a colorblind view of race can work against its well-intentioned desire to avoid bias. Students should also be asked to look at where Kelley’s behavior stems from, to understand that his behavior, likewise Alix’s behavior, may come from a historical context regarding both race and gender discrimination. If it is true that Kelley has a fetish for black culture, he may also reduce people to their culture alone without recognizing their entirety as a human being. If Kelley idealizes black culture, he assumes that Emira is synonymous with particular cultural systems that she identifies with, but he disregards that she is also a member of a great many other social groups that makes up her identity (Baker 107). Because identity can be viewed as “[...] the network of social groups and social relations that we take part in and orientate towards” (Baker 108), students could be assigned to make a list of every aspect that has contributed in creating their own personality (for example; family relations, school, friendships, role models, upbringing, values, religion, work, politics, ethics, and so on), to see that everyone is set up by a number of pieces that belongs to a person’s identity, not one aspect alone, and thus see people in greater perspectives. Afterwards, Kelley’s behavior could be used to discuss if he is fetishizing black culture or if he sees Emira’s multitudes of personalities, traits and experiences.

In her novel, Reid comments on the racist effect that results from fetishizing black women:

It makes it seem like we’re all the same, as if we can’t contain multitudes of personalities and traits and differences. And people like that think that it says something good about

them, that they're so brave and unique that they would even dare to date black women. Like they're some kind of martyr. (Reid 200)

This example portrays how the black women in Reid's novel feel when white people fetishizes their culture, and could be used to figure out where Kelley's behavior comes from. Kelley might believe that dating black women and having black friends is a way to tighten the cultural gap between white and black, and therefore he is being a "good white" (Thompson 8). On the other hand, when he almost exclusively connects with people of color, he does regard race. Kelley might want to be, and to be seen as, a good a person, a notion that stems from the "[...] recognition that our whiteness is problematic, a recognition that we try to escape by being demonstrably different from other, racist whites" (Thompson, 9), and therefore he finds it important to befriend people of color. However, this reduces the people he meets to only their culture instead of their multifaceted identities. Kelley might be having an interest in black culture to "[...] demonstrate friendship and solidarity with people of color – to show that [he] gets racism in ways that other whites do no" (Thompson 10). Nevertheless, the ways in which Kelley behaves is not necessarily his personal fault; Kelley's interest in black culture may come from a history of racism in the United States that he wants to take distance from by showing solidarity, however, he has become too obsessed with not being a racist that he ultimately fetishizes black culture to the point where it turns into a form of racism against black people.

Kelley's interest in black culture is undoubtedly ambiguous, and it might start conversations in the classroom about his well-intended behavior that have gone too far. Kelley may not even be aware that he behaves in racist ways because he thinks that he acts in good ways. A discussion about Kelley's underlying values and interest in black culture has the potential to help students recognize their own unconscious bias (that may even stem from stereotypical images they have been presented to), and to see that some forms of racism cannot be blamed to individuals, but that it comes from a long line of history that still has impact on the world in both racist and anti-racist ways. This will then help them recognize different forms of racism and see racism and bias in more critical ways, both in the United States as well as racism they might have witnessed first or second hand.

Kelley's well-intended behavior can also come from the fact that he is of the male gender. He is not only acting in racist ways, but also in paternalizing and sexist ways. The ways in which he tries to protect Emira from her current position as a babysitter may suggest that he sees himself as the stronger gender and therefore knows what is best for Emira. Kelley tries to

get Emira to recognize racism in her own workplace and get her to quit her job because he believes she deserves better. He states that he can take care of her: “If it’s money or a job or if you need to live with me for a bit, whatever [...] Tell me what I need to say to get you to leave” (Reid 190), as if Emira is incapable of taking care of herself and in need of someone to do it for her. Also, Kelley states that “You have to quit [...] You have to. You cannot work there” (Reid 189), suggesting that he knows what is best for Emira although Emira does not want to quit her job (“I can’t just fucking leave [Briar]” (Reid 191)). Kelley’s paternalistic behavior may therefore also be seen as sexist, that he sees women as “[...] warm but incompetent or weak individuals in need of men’s protection and support” (Dardenne et al. 764). Again, his behavior may stem from a long history of gender inequality, where the female gender have not had the same rights as men and where the female gender were subordinated to the male gender. Not until the year 1920 did women have the right to vote, which many Americans at the time “[...] considered a radical change in the Constitution” (“Woman Suffrage and the 19th amendment”). Because the male gender has been considered the stronger gender for generations, its aftermath still affects today’s society, and Reid might have wanted to comment upon the fact that there still is a distinction between men and women in society. Discussions of Kelley’s underlying values and mindsets can therefore also be connected to how he views gender relations (as equal or not), which can further move into the historical context of gender inequality to give a background for what his behavior can be connected to.

Kelley not only fetishizes black culture, but he also comes to a point where he mistakenly includes himself in the culture. On a date with Emira, Kelley retells a quote from his little brother: “Mom, why is Moesha nigger shit?” (Reid 92). Emira does not say anything, but her feelings are revealed: “[...] Emira’s eyes went wide and her mouth twisted as if she’d found a hair in her food” (Reid, 92) and “her heart started to double” (Reid, 92), which explains how shocked she feels for his use of the word, and the discomfort she feels about him using it. She asks herself “Shouldn’t he have said ‘the N-word’ instead?” (Reid, 93). This particular passage from the novel has the potential to teach about intercultural communication as well as the history of the N-word, and how it can have different meanings depending on the context. The aims for the interdisciplinary subject of health and life skills includes developing the ability to handle situations that require linguistic and cultural competence (Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Interdisciplinary topics”), and in order to sufficiently communicate with people from other cultures without offending them, it is important to know about racial and ethnic slurs and that they are insulting and used to refer to groups of people in derogatory ways. Many students will

already know about racial and ethnic slurs and their origin and meanings, but it is also possible that some students only know them as “bad words” but not why, and therefore continue to use them. In intercultural communication “[...] it is important to always be sensitive to potential referential differences” (Sercu 4), and if students are not aware of a word or sentence being a racial or ethnical slur, he or she can fail in communication and create a distance from the receiver. If students are taught why these words originated (who used them and for what purposes), they can also learn about the feelings that might evoke in the recipients of racial slur.

The N-word, for instance, has been used by whites in as a relief for (and to justify) seeing black people as something other than human beings: “[...] masters pretended that slaves were simple-minded and childlike because it helped ‘to relieve themselves of the anxiety of thinking about slaves as men’. In the centuries that followed – long after the official end of slavery – whites of all classes came to rely on language [...] in their pursuit of such relief” (Asim 14). In modern times, people of color have started to take back the control of the word, and have subverted the N-word to “[...] assert their right to define themselves” (Asim 16). This might explain why Emira was shocked when Kelley used the racial slur, because he does not belong to the African American culture in the same way as Emira. Learning the meaning behind racial slurs and the negative consequences of using such words can develop the students’ ability to communicate in intercultural settings, without being condescending or offending anyone. The example of the N-word from the novel needs grounding in “[...] historical context that has shaped contemporary racial inequality” (Bell 28), and one way to do this is by placing the experiences of people of color at the center of the issue to change the way students perceive racial slur (Bell 30). Bell suggests that simply asking students “How would you fix this?” can provide exiting and creative ideas for discussion (32), and after learning about the origin and the meanings behind different kinds of racial and ethical slur, students can together come with solutions for the society to stop using them. Instead of only being able to call out “bad” behavior, this exercise could lead students toward finding better solutions to dealing with tricky situations as allies.

To summarize, Kelley inhabits qualities that makes it seem as if he is fetishizing black culture. As mentioned, it is unfair to disregard that his contact with black people and culture may be unintentional or arbitrary, but it is also unfair to suggest that it is in fact only random incidents when it is mentioned several times in the story that it could be a fetish (see Reid 66, 70, 200, 219, 224, 304). Either way, Kelley’s character has the potential to open for teaching about origins and consequences of racial and ethnic slur, both in the United States and in their

own areas. With competence linked to critical race relations, students will be better able to communicate interculturally, and they will also be more capable to understand the ways in which Emira feels regarding her experiences with gendered power, and with racial biases, which is discussed in more detail the next section.

4.3 Emira's experience with racial bias

Emira's experiences with racial biases can work as great examples to learn students about the consequences that prejudice and stereotyping of groups can create. Her experiences are many, and they can in various manners be used by students to discuss the ways in which white power in history has resulted in a society that is still divided and loaded with prejudice and discrimination because of it. In her novel, Reid presents realistic examples of racial prejudice that not only Emira has experienced, but that people all over the world can have similar experiences with based on their cultural or ethnical background. When the novel is utilized as a contact zone, teachers can develop students' ability to think interculturally, and to critically connect Emira's experiences of race relations with similar experiences in Norway, in their city, in their neighborhood and in other social areas. This section will provide examples of the racial biases and experiences of discrimination that Emira experiences in Reid's novel, as well as connect them to a pedagogical platform in which students can become aware of how different cultural backgrounds can influence values and behavior (Myklevold 140). Reid presents realistic examples of police brutality and every day racial bias that African Americans are exposed to and victims of in today's society, which makes these issues explicit and portrays their implications in realistic ways.

Reid represents the issue of police brutality directed toward African Americans in the United States through realistic examples in her novel. Police brutality involves "[...] the use of more than the minimal amount of force needed to overcome resistance or counter an attack or threat" (Albrecht 30). In the first chapter, Emira takes Briar to a grocery store to entertain her while an emergency is being resolved in Briar's home (Reid 4). Zara refers to this store as a "[...] rich people grocery store" (Reid 6), which might suggest that this grocery store is for upper-middle class white people. A security guard approaches Emira and Briar and he believes the child's safety is in danger (Reid 11). Although Emira explains the situation, she is not believed or let go until the father of Briar ("He's an old white guy so I'm sure everyone feels better" (Reid 14) Emira explains) comes to reassure the security guard that she in fact is their babysitter (Reid 16). This scene portrays how African Americans are "disproportionately

subject to racial profiling, stop and frisk, and police brutality” (Wilson and Wolfer 67), very often based on prejudice alone. Reid comments on this by introducing readers to Emira as a person who does nothing wrong, but is still being accused of committing a crime, likewise a mass of African Americans have experienced in different ways. The recent case of George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African American, who died due to police brutality (Krieger, 1620), sparked protests against the unjust police brutality against minority groups (Wilson and Wolfer 66-67), and Reid’s novel can be used as one example of America’s racial reckoning.

Emira’s expressed feelings and actions during the scene in the grocery store can make the feelings of other victims of police brutality or racial discrimination more explicit, and it can be easier to recognize the implications actions of police brutality and racial discrimination can have. First, Emira seems to think that if she were white, she may not have been approached by the security guard at all: Emira asks the security guard if the store is going to close soon, although she knew it would stay open for another forty-five minutes, because she “wanted him to hear the way she could talk” (Reid, 10). This example suggests that Emira is aware of the racial bias – if she talks in a different way, there is a chance that the white security guard will act differently and more kindly. She also feels a discomfort both during and after the incident: “Emira felt her skin becoming tight at her neck (Reid, 11), she feels humiliated “as if she’d been loudly told that her name was not on a guest list” (Reid, 11), she feels alone in the situation and is hoping for someone to help her as she felt like “raising her arm as if she were finding a friend in a large crowd, “[...] saying *Do you see me? I’m waving my hand*” (Reid, 12), and at one time her body is shaking (Reid, 14). Emira also seems to be nervous based on her laughs when being asked if the child is Emira’s own child (Reid, 10), another time when the security guard says that he cannot let them leave because a child is involved (Reid, 11), and after the incident when she is back home talking with her friend Zara about what happened “Emira laughed and said, ‘[Zara], it’s fine,’ but then she put the back of her hand to her mouth and silently started to cry” (Reid, 19). Considered together with the other feelings of nervousness, loneliness and humiliation, Emira’s laughter highlights how nervous she may have been for the possible outcomes of this situation, resulting in a distressed laughter rather than aggression. These examples clearly portray the discomfort Emira feels, along with a feeling of loneliness, helplessness, nervousness and humiliation.

It is not unexpected that Emira feels this way when looking at the trouble African Americans can get into based on prejudice and racial profiling. The police kill upwards of 1000 people each year in the United States (Krieger, 1620) – and, according to a study from Nix et

al., more unarmed black civilians were shot and killed than unarmed white civilians in 2015 (324), a statistic that highlights how African Americans are more susceptible for police brutality even when they are not acting in threatening ways. “In the last decade, there have been a shocking number of police killings of unarmed African Americans“ (Wilson and Wolfer 67), and some of the recent events where African Americans have been killed due to police brutality includes the deaths of George Floyd, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown (Peeples 22), to name a few. Based on these numbers, there is no wonder why Emira might have been scared for what could have happened that night in the grocery store. This reality may also be the background for why Emira worries about her future children’s experience with the police, and therefore planning to tell his future son “*that he should slowly and noticeably put his keys on the roof as soon as he gets pulled over*” (Reid 194) in order to not become victims of this brutality. In this scene, Emira’s response echoes the insecurities and feelings that African Americans may have to deal with regarding police brutality and racial discrimination. Discussing this in the classroom can help students get a broader understanding of why there is a tension between African Americans and the police.

Furthermore, Reid might have wanted her readers to recognize police brutality and racial discrimination: when Emira and Kelley is talking about the incident in the grocery store, she states: “I don’t need you to be mad that it happened. I need you to be mad that it just like... happens” (Reid 194). This sentence expresses how both Kelley and readers of the novel should recognize and denounce such behavior when they see it happening. The examples of police brutality in the novel can also create an opening for students to learn another aspect of where systemic racism comes from: “Given that American policing has its roots in the system of slavery and racialized violence, it’s perhaps less surprising that we continue to witness present-day police brutality against African Americans” (Wilson and Wolfer 68).

Not only is Reid portraying realistic examples of police brutality and systemic racism, but she also highlights some of the everyday racial biases in the United States based on stereotypical images. Earlier, this thesis discussed in which ways Alix held preconceived ideas about African Americans and therefore saw Emira as a stereotype, however, the narrator also presents other incidents Emira has had to deal with because of her skin color:

In the fourth grade, a white classmate had marched to Emira’s lunch table and asked her if she was a coon [...] Emira was once followed by sales associates in Brooks Brothers while she shopped for a Father’s day gift [...] And once, after a bikini wax was

completed, Emira was told that because she had ‘ethnic texture,’ the total came to forty dollars instead of the advertised thirty-five. (Reid 39)

This quote can make readers to recognize the everyday racial biases that African Americans experience, as well as the condescending comments people can make, because it is still very relevant. If this passage is discussed with students in a classroom context, students might become aware of how their own words and actions can have harmful consequences and result in negative feelings in the recipient. Some students will probably hold biases themselves against certain cultures or ethnicities that can stem from the society they live in, their biases might even be implicit to a point where they do not recognize their own prejudices. Likewise, it is possible that the child that called Emira a “coon” was not aware of that his or her words made Emira feel bad. By listing several incidents where Emira experienced racial biases, Reid creates an opening for students to recognize and reflect on their own mindsets and attitudes.

Through Emira’s experiences with systemic racism, police brutality and everyday racial biases, Reid has made these issues explicit for her readers, and made it easier for them to understand their implications in society. Students can be encouraged to figure out the possible origin of police brutality by looking at the slave patrols from the 18th century to get a broader idea of why police brutality still exists today. Along with the old common perception of African American slaves as something other than human, their understanding of American systemic racism may increase. Furthermore, by being exposed to several incidents of racial bias that Emira have experienced, students can become more aware of racial bias in their own environment, as well as reflect on their own racial biases and their consequences.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how *Such a Fun Age* has the potential to develop students intercultural competence through realistic examples of clashing cultures. Alix’s and Kelley’s mindset and attitudes have been analyzed at to understand their underlying values and where these values may come from. This chapter has presented in ways that racism can be individual, but more often as a result from systemic racism that have been happening in the United States for centuries. The focal point of this chapter is stereotypical images that creates bias – where they come from and how to recognize and denounce them.

The character Alix in Reid’s novel held Emira to the stereotypical image of African Americans as lazy and stupid, but she were confused when Emira contradicted the stereotype

Alix believed in. The particular example of Alix's prejudice and stereotypical images were suggested as not being personal beliefs, but beliefs that the society around her have made her believe in. Students should be encouraged to reflect upon their own personality and how many aspects that makes up their own identity in order to see that stereotypes cannot be true because they reduce a person to a singular trait, while at the same time recognizing how every person belongs to a web of aspects that creates each identity. Breaking down stereotypes can be done through both the suggested exercises and through providing historical contexts of where stereotypes come from.

The character Kelley, on the other hand, tries so hard not to appear racist that ironically he ends up expressing racist attitudes. By fetishizing black culture, Kelley reduces people of color to their culture and ethnicities, and not into the complicated webs of personality traits that makes up an individual's identity. Kelley is further suggested as portraying paternalistic behavior because of the way he tries to save Emira from her job thinking he knows what is best for her, although for Emira, the situation is more complicated. Kelley therefore acts in ways that highlights both racial bias and gender bias, because he as a white male believes he knows what is best for the black woman.

Emira on the other hand, contradicts the stereotypes presented by Alix, and she is given a voice that exemplifies and shows the implications of stereotyping and prejudice. Emira's experiences with systemic racism and everyday biases presents to readers how common African Americans are victims of different forms of racism, and has the potential to further teach about historical contexts that has formed systemic racism in the United States.

This chapter has explored how Reid's novel confronts a stereotypical image of African Americans and how students can be taught to look at individuals in critical and broader ways to understand their underlying values. The characters Alix and Kelley have been analyzed in quite a negative light, but, as briefly mentioned in this chapter, their racist and paternalistic behaviors comes from systemic racism and common prejudices. This is also a reason for why readers might feel empathy with both Kelley and Alix although they behave in racist ways. The next chapter will examine how readers can increase their feeling of empathy with the different characters in.

5 Empathy

Reid's novel *Such a Fun Age* has the potential to help students feel empathy with characters that they may or may not differ from, which is important for further development of their understanding of others' values, mindsets, lifestyles, and attitudes. Because fictional literature invites the reader to view different perspectives on life, it has the ability to enhance reader's feelings of empathy with other people. *Such a Fun Age* functions therefore also as a literary contact zone because students from Norway can come in contact with characters in other areas and cultures. In the classroom, teachers can draw on the novel as a contact zone to have their students place themselves in the shoes of the characters to more clearly understand where they are coming from. In order to understand other people's mindsets, values, and attitudes on deeper levels, the ability to empathize with them can help them understand the characters in more compassionate ways.

In Reid's novel, students can come in contact with many different characters, but most importantly these three: a young African American woman who struggles with career decisions as well as issues based on her skin color and gender (Emira); an upper-middle class white feminist woman who seems to express racial beliefs (Alix); and a white male who seems to care for others, but also portrays racial and paternalistic behavior (Kelley). However, as we have looked at in the previous chapter, Alix and Kelley does not express individualistic racist and gender ideas, rather, they are a construct of historical contexts in which both African Americans and women have been discriminated against. It is therefore possible to feel empathy with these two characters, but some students might find it difficult. Likewise, some students will automatically feel empathy with Emira because of some shared interests, values or other aspects, but on the other hand, she may also be difficult for some students to feel empathy with because of their differences.

This chapter presents three different methods to develop students' skills of building empathy through literature: digital storytelling, comparing experiences in the novel with real world experiences, and through writing diary entries. Each method requires students to step out of the novel and use their own experiences or others' experiences to draw on the events in the novel and connect them with their own or others' feelings. These methods will thus help students recognize that the realistic events in the novel are, in fact, realistic, and can therefore help the students increase their empathic emotions with the characters in Reid's novel, as well as with real people. The goal of these exercises is not to tell students how they should behave,

but to help them change their perspectives and thoughts to see the world in more compassionate ways. Feeling empathy with the characters in Reid’s novel can increase students’ engagement with the novel (Hogan 36). It can also help them develop their intercultural competence because they will be able to understand boundaries and mindsets in other cultures and areas. Finally, it provides them with new perspectives on different ways of thinking (Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Interdisciplinary topics”).

5.1 Building empathy with Emira: digital storytelling and comparing experiences

Digital storytelling is a role-playing tool that allows for a combination of analytical and creative approaches to literature (Carlsen 126). As a student-centered learning activity (Carlsen 126), digital storytelling has the potential to place the students in the roles of the characters. The idea of digital storytelling is to use basic video editing applications to create personal, imaginative and multi-modal texts (Carlsen 126) where the students take on the roles of characters and express their thoughts and actions in ways that are not necessarily stated in the novel. Digital storytelling is similar to, but different from, role-playing: instead of acting out a scene physically in front of the class or the teacher, digital storytelling makes it possible for students to be more creative in their work because they can apply several elements such as still images, video, voice narration, soundtrack and texts, for instance. Digital storytelling would therefore typically consist of a multi-modal video where students are taking on the roles of the characters and acting in these roles. When working with literature it also connects to all of the four basic skills that the curriculum of the English subject focuses on: Oral skills, writing skills, reading, and digital skills (Utdanningsdirektoratet “Basic Skills”). Its creative form can therefore be a motivational factor for students that find “[...] traditional approaches to literary analysis uninspiring” (Carlsen 127), and thus has the potential to get uninterested students more interested.

Another exercise that students can do to feel empathy with characters in the novel is through comparing their experiences with experiences from the real world. In this way, students can recognize realistic elements in the novel and thus create empathy for the characters because they can understand that certain incidents in the novel can also happen in their own environments. Students will then make a *text-to-world* connection in which they can question and draw on their knowledge from the novel intertwined with their own “[...] lived experiences and understandings of local and global contexts” (Beach et al. 11).

This section provides an example of how students can do digital storytelling while engaging in Reid's novel to adopt Emira's experiences and feelings and thus increase the feeling of empathy with Emira's character. It will also discuss how teachers can help students compare events and experiences from Reid's novel with experiences in their own world or experiences from other people as a way to feel empathy with Emira.

5.1.1 Digital storytelling

Role-playing exercises are great for adopting a character's perspectives because students can assume the voices of others whose perspectives differ from their own in terms of race, class, gender and age (Beach et al. 9). Emira may be easy to relate to for some students in upper secondary because of shared challenges with career decisions for example, however, her experiences with racial and gender discrimination might not be as easy for every Norwegian student to relate to. In order for them to understand Emira's struggles and difficulties regarding race and gender on deeper levels, students can be encouraged to place themselves physically in Emira's shoes. They will then be able to adopt her perspectives, and gain insight into the subjective truths associated with how Emira lives (Beach et al. 10). The exercise presented below is thus a perspective-taking exercise that challenges the students' egocentricity: "[...] the propensity for them to perceive themselves as the primary actors in the world, leading to an openness to consider how others experience the world" (Beach et al. 10). Through digital storytelling, students can place themselves in Emira's experiences and recreate her feelings. In that way, students can become more open to the understanding of how being treated in the ways Emira are leads to certain feelings.

Appendix D presents a planning document that can be used for this task. It presents a way to organize digital storytelling with the purpose of learning more about Emira's underlying values and feelings that may or may not be expressed in the novel in order to increase their feeling of empathy with her. The tasks involve choosing a scene or a passage in the novel where Emira is being discriminated or treated in particular ways because of her being African American and a woman. It is also possible to connect digital storytelling with other incidents where Emira is experiencing other kinds of challenges, but in the scenes and passages chosen for this task, Emira experiences a form of pain or unfairness because. Because "empathy with pain moves us more surely toward sympathy and altruism than shared joy does" (Keen 41), these scenes might make it more possible for students of all kinds to understand Emira's feelings of unfairness.

For students to develop in ways that enhances an appreciation for diversity instead of excluding or discriminating people of certain groups, a role-playing task like this can help students understand how people of color and of the female gender are being treated in unfair ways. As digital storytelling can “[...] foster a level of supportiveness and mutual respect that brings people together in ways that are fundamental for our humanity” (Hessler and Lambert 26), a digital storytelling task where students have to pretend to actually be Emira or the characters around her can get the students to see the levels of Emira’s actions, feelings and mindset. By placing themselves in the character of Emira, and by having to interpret her feelings and express these, students are forced to think of Emira as an actual thinking and feeling human being that are affected by both racial slur, bias, and discrimination. The result will hopefully lead them to understand the consequences of discriminating based on gender and race, and see other people in more compassionate ways. A digital storytelling task in which the students have to express a character’s feelings, thoughts, experiences, and opinions can thus “[...] provide new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupils’ own way of life and that of others” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, “Interdisciplinary topics”). It can therefore also help them break down stereotypical images they may or may not believe about certain out-groups because they have to look at themselves in the ways Emira is being viewed as a stereotype, and see that they too are composed of several aspects that creates their identity.

5.1.2 Comparing the novel with real events

Another way for students to feel empathy with Emira could be to connect her experiences with similar events from the real world in order for them to discover that the events in the novel are realistic. If students understand that Emira’s experiences are realistic, it could be easier for them to recognize her joys and sorrows because they can see her feelings as something other than just words written in a book. By comparing events in the novel with the real world, students can reach a greater awareness of why Emira feels the ways she does. To view certain incidents and experiences in the novel through a realistic lens can be beneficial for students who find it difficult to believe that Emira’s experiences are credible.

When Emira is being questioned for kidnapping Briar in the beginning of the novel, her feelings are somewhat directly described (humiliation, feeling alone (Reid, 11-12)) but most of her feelings have to be interpreted based on her utterances. For students who might find it difficult to interpret her feelings and understand why she feels the ways she does, teachers can

show news articles or videos of incidents where African American people have been accused of committing crimes for which there is no evidence. Students will then be able to recognize Emira's experiences as real events which might make it more possible for them to reflect on the way she acts and feels. For instance, teachers can use the example of when two black men were arrested and escorted by the police for not having purchased anything and were waiting for their friend ("Starbucks black men arrested"). The incident in this video is similar to what happened to Emira in the novel, although she were not arrested, nevertheless, both Emira and the two men who were arrested, were victims of prejudice based on their skin colors. Students should be prompted to discuss similarities and differences from Emira's experience and the Starbucks incident (or other real events) in order to see how these events are connected and how they reflect on a social issue in where diversity is not celebrated but where minorities and out-groups are being treated differently because of their appearances. This incident can therefore help students connect the novel to the real world and recognize its realistic elements, and therefore maybe feel empathy with Emira because they get a broader sense of the injustice she experienced.

Teachers can also relate Emira's experiences with experiences from minority groups in Norway in order to see how the novel connects with their own home country. An article from NRK (Norwegian National Broadcasting) for example, presents some examples of times where Sami people have experienced ethnic bias in Tromsø (Brekke and Utsi). This article explains what a Sami had heard while sitting on the bus: "Sami people do not belong anywhere, especially not on the bus where everyone has to listen to the language" (Brekke and Utsi) (author's translation), along with other examples of racial bias. Students can use the experiences in this article and connect it to how Sami people are discriminated against based on ethnicity in their own country. Since Norway's assimilation politics (norwegianizing) of the Sami people during the 19th and 20th century (Minde 6), the Sami people had to drop their language, change the basic values of their culture and change their national identity (Minde 20). The Norwegian policy of getting rid of the Sami culture led to a shameful view of the culture during the 19th and 20th century, and is a probable reason for the discrimination of Sami people in today's society. This historical context can be looked into to provide a historical background consisting of systemic racism, and can be compared with the systemic racism in the United States. "Ethnic minorities face challenges that Western people are largely spared, such as human rights violations, racism, discrimination, or unfair treatment in general" (Friborg et al. 1009), both in Norway and in the United States, and these can be looked closer at, and in comparison with,

African Americans' challenges. By comparing the conditions of minority groups in the United States and in Norway, students can learn more about how systemic racism in the past has led to certain living conditions today.

Another way to gain empathy with Emira through comparisons, could be to look at other texts that deals with similar character types, themes, issues, and cultural perspectives (Beach et al. 11). *Text* as a term is here referred to in the broadest sense: "it does not only denote literary [...] sources" (Lardinois et al. 1), but includes all formats which expresses different meanings. The texts for this task may not necessarily be based on real events, but the texts should be products of authors who tries to express similar emotions as Emira. There are several poems, novels, paintings, songs, films, and other texts that can provide a backdrop to understand Emira's emotions regarding discrimination based on gender and race more clearly. For example, Maya Angelou's poem *Caged Bird* can be interpreted before reading the novel - looking at it themes of racial oppression and freedom versus captivity can be seen as another point of view on the discrimination based on race. Angelou's poem describes a caged bird with clipped wings and tied feet that can be seen as a metaphor for members of "[...] minoritized and racialized groups who encounter systemic restrictions and man-made forms of oppression" (DePasse et al. 107). There is a contact zone between Reid's novel and Angelou's poem that connects them to the same aftermath of the systemic racism in the United States, and if teachers prompt their students see the connection of these two texts as a contact zone, students may find it easier to interpret Emira's actions, emotions, and mindset in the different situations she encounters.

5.2 Building empathy with Kelley and Alix through diary entries

While Emira might be difficult for some students to relate to and feel empathy with, Alix and Kelley may be difficult for other students to relate to. We judge Alix for believing in stereotypes and for congratulating herself on having African American friends, however, we can also understand that her actions are well-intended and that her beliefs stem from systemic racism instead of individual and personal beliefs. Likewise, we can feel resentment for the way Kelley fetishizes black culture and the way he tries to protect Emira as if she is not capable of taking care of herself, but on the other hand, we can also understand that his intentions are good and that he just wants to help Emira. Some students will feel empathic with either Kelley or Alix or both because they can recognize their well-intended behavior and may even relate to it. Other students might only see the personal flaws and failings of these two characters and

therefore not feel empathy with them. In order for students to get a nuanced picture of both Kelley and Alix, and not only judge them for their flaws, they can do a diary entry exercise where they have to explain Alix's and Kelley's intention as if they were these characters themselves.

Writing a diary entry in the perspective of either Kelley or Alix can enhance students' empathy with these characters. Instead of framing the characters as evil or bad, students can recognize their well-intended behavior although they may not have worked in the way these characters wished them to do. By taking the perspective of either Kelley or Alix (or both) and writing in their own words why these characters chose to say the things they did and act in the ways they did in the novel, students can increase the feeling of empathy with both characters. This exercise is therefore also a perspective-taking exercise where students have to shift their perspective in order to understand the characters underlying values, attitudes, and mindset, and it can encourage students to consider how others experience the world. In this task, students have to explain the characters' actions, and formulate reasons or motives having to do with their beliefs, traits, and goals (Beach et al. 11). There are several passages from Reid's novel would work for this task, and some are presented below.

One way to get a deeper understanding of Alix's intentions and feel empathy with her, could be to write a diary entry from Alix's perspective of why she published the video of Emira in the grocery store when she were accused of kidnapping Briar although Emira clearly did not want it. Emira had earlier explained to Alix that she was fine, and that she did not need any support (Reid 50). However, when Alix found the video of Emira in the grocery store, she published it on the internet without Emira's consent (Reid 232). Readers have been aware all along that Emira did not want the video to be published: "[...] I don't want anyone seeing it" (Reid 193), and when Alix finds out there is a video of the incident, she says: "[...] I would die if that video got out" (Reid 171). Alix is therefore completely aware of that Emira does not want anyone to see the video, but she still publishes it. And because Emira is the one being affected by Alix's action, it is easier to feel empathy with Emira rather than Alix. However, students should be challenged to feel empathy with Alix to see her good intentions without condoning them, although it was wrong of her. Teachers can therefore challenge their students to write a diary entry, from Alix's perspective of trying to help Emira, explaining why she published the video without consent and what she hoped to achieve. Through this diary entry task, students can become aware of the feelings Alix has for Emira and how her action of publishing the video is a reflection of these feelings.

Students could also write a diary entry from a time Kelley acted in well-intentioned ways, but which came out as racist or sexist positions. For example, when Kelley wanted Emira to quit her job as a babysitter for the Chamberlains (Reid 189), it is unclear if his motives are based on his past conflict with Alix and therefore believes that he knows what is best for Emira, or if he genuinely cares for Emira and wants what is best for her. His intentions are arguably based on a combination of the two, he therefore cares for Emira although his motives are unclear. Students who find it difficult to feel empathy with Kelley could write a diary entry from his perspective in which they explain why he wants Emira to quit her job. They should be encouraged to reflect on why it is important for Kelley that Emira quits and what he worries about if Emira continues as a babysitter. Students will then use Kelley's character to interpret his values and interests in ways that can lead to empathic feelings. Myklevold states that it is important to "utilize literature that discusses values, respect and shifts of perspective [...] in a global and, it sometimes seems, ever more polarized world" (154), and since Kelley acts in ambiguous ways, an interpretation of his character could help with the understanding of his values and perspective, instead of only blaming him for his flaws.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the importance of feeling empathy with the characters Emira, Kelley and Alix in Reid's *Such a Fun Age*, as well as presented different examples of how teachers can guide their students into looking at the characters and their experiences in empathic ways. Digital storytelling of different scenes in the novel, comparing the novel with real events and other works that deals with the same themes and issues, as well as writing diary entries from the perspectives of the characters, are presented as methods for students to increase their feeling of empathy with the characters. The methods presented and the characters mentioned can be changed – it may be of importance to feel empathy with the security guard as well because he was just doing his job (although his job is affected by systemic racism). This chapter suggests different methods to build students' feelings of empathy with characters they might not initially dislike, judge or not find relatable.

Digital storytelling is a method that enhances students' awareness of the characters perspective. It forces them to think like a specific character in order to act out his or her feelings in ways that are not described in the novel. When students are more aware of a character's feelings, they may also become more aware of their underlying values and mindsets. The character Emira and her experiences with racial and gender discrimination in Reid's novel has

been used as an example for how students can utilize digital storytelling as a tool for understanding how systemic racism can affect real individual people.

Comparing experiences in Reid's novel with real events or texts that deals with the same themes and issues have been presented as another method to feel empathy with different characters. It is here suggested that to gain empathy with Emira, and to get a sense of how it feels to be discriminated, it could be ideal to connect the novel with real evidence of systemic racism in the United States as well as in Norway. In that way, students can see how Reid's novel connects with other places and cultures, and how Emira's experiences are similar to others' experiences, making them not only fiction.

Another exercise that is discussed as a way to gain empathy with characters, is having the students pretend they are the characters themselves and writing a diary entry that explains the underlying values and purposes of the characters' actions. When students have to look at the characters' experiences from the characters' perspectives and explain their reasons, it is possible that the students can increase their empathic feelings with the characters because they are forced to think like the characters themselves. It is here suggested that diary entries could be written from the perspectives of Alix and Kelley as a way to view their perspectives more clearly and to understand their reasons for their actions, but it is also possible to write diary entries from the perspectives of other characters as well.

Reid's novel functions as a contact zone where students can experience the mindsets, attitudes and values from realistic characters. Exercises that help students develop empathy work as a means toward understanding the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of people different from themselves. Although not a guarantee, these exercises may help them become more compassionate human beings.

6 Conclusion

This thesis aims to bring clarity to the so far very general and vague request from the Ministry of Education about what the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills should include. Although most teachers would agree that the topic of health and life skills are important, they might be uncertain about how to interpret and develop this topic in their classrooms. This thesis therefore provides some interpretations and methods of how teachers can teach about health and life skills in upper secondary. Kiley Reid's novel *Such a Fun Age* serves as an excellent example of how teachers can use fictional literature in the classroom to develop students' health and life skills. The realistic elements of theme and characters in Reid's novel can open up for students' management of career anxiety, develop their intercultural competence, and help the students feel empathy with others. The fact that the novel is also set in the United States and deals with different cultures, lifestyles, and mindsets, makes this novel function as a contact zone in which students can come in contact with realistic characters from other countries than their own. As a contact zone, the novel can help students see that they can compare with other people's anxieties, how to communicate with people from other cultures than their own, and how to feel empathy with other people.

Because jobs and careers will be crucial parts of students' individual lives that also contribute to a healthy functioning society, it is important that teachers become aware of methods and strategies that students can use in order to prevent normal anxieties about future careers from becoming insurmountable barriers. This thesis has discussed how Reid's characters address issues such as career indecision, as well as pressures from parents and peers. It has considered how teachers might use examples from the novel as a springboard for encouraging students to manage their own very common uncertainty and indecision about job prospects, both in the short and long-term. The character Emira in Reid's novel experiences career indecisiveness and has trouble figuring out what she wants to do with her life, an experience that might not be too uncommon for students in upper secondary school as they are soon to begin applying for jobs or for further education. Career guidance, also in the subject of English, can contribute in students' awareness of opportunities that exists. Emira's experiences with parental and peer pressure might also be relatable for students, and was a factor that made it difficult for Emira to find a career that would satisfy both her parents as well as her peers. As adolescents might compare their own education and career development with their peers, they can feel pressure to compete with their friends for the same outcomes. Likewise, students might feel pressure to conform to parental desires about one's career choices. This thesis has given

examples of how teachers can provide their students with an opening for discussions about career anxiety, what creates such anxiety, and some ways to manage such anxiety, through exercises that focuses on discovering other career options they might not have thought of, and by reflecting on Emira's situation in Reid's novel and look at how she managed her parental and peer pressure. Reid's novel therefore has the potential to help students make responsible life choices regarding their careers.

The interdisciplinary subject of health and life skills in English states that students should also be provided with new perspectives on different ways of thinking, and handle situations that require cultural competence. Therefore, this thesis suggests that developing intercultural competence in the students can provide more mature and compassionate perspectives on others' lives as well as help them respectfully communicate with people from groups that they do not identify with. Reid's novel includes several examples of clashing cultures and their complications. Students can look to the character Alix to understand that although her intentions are well-intended, they might come off as rude and disrespectful, and even racist at times. On the other hand, Alix also portrays how systemic racism indirectly has made people believe in stereotypes and therefore holds prejudice against certain out-groups. A discussion of Alix's mindset and attitudes in the upper secondary classroom can help students become aware of their own unconscious prejudices and reject stereotypes. Alix's character can also help students see how the legacy of slavery is alive in the everyday life of Americans today. Likewise, Kelley's actions can be seen as him fetishizing black culture and thereby reducing people to their cultures alone. He also portrays paternalistic behavior which implies that he is better than Emira because of his gender. On the other hand, it is also clear that he cares for Emira and sincerely wants to help her. Kelley seems to have applied a colorblind view on races, and it seems as if he can use this fact to justify him using racial slurs. Here, teachers can provide information about different racial slurs, and explain who uses it and why. A greater understanding of the power of words and racial/ethnic slurs can help students understand that slurs can be disrespectful and hinder communication. Lastly, Emira's experiences with racial bias and discrimination can provide an opening for students to understand the reality of her experiences and the historic context of why she experiences the incidents in the novel. When students are prompted to look at Alix's, Kelley's, and Emira's perspectives on life, they can become more competent in dealing with intercultural relationships, communicating across cultures, and understand that every person consists of multitudes of traits and aspects that creates individual personalities.

A third topic that this thesis has focused on, is the topic of building empathy. If students are able to empathize with characters and people different from themselves, they might be able to view other people's lives in more compassionate and cultivated ways. Because both Alix's and Kelley's behavior in Reid's novel are ambiguous, and because Emira experiences incidents that students in Norway might not experience, it might be difficult for some students to relate to them and feel empathy with them. If students are encouraged to explain these characters thoughts, actions and attitudes through the characters' perspective, they might increase their feeling of empathy with these characters. Student-centered activities that motivate students to think like the characters may enhance their understanding of the characters' underlying values and attitudes. By seeing the world from the perspectives of characters in a fictional work, students can become more aware of other people's boundaries, thoughts, feelings and opinions.

The three topics of career anxiety, intercultural competence, and empathy, have been used as examples of topics that can be worked with to increase students development of health and life skills. These topics are not specifically mentioned in LK20, but as these deals with mental health, lifestyle habits, value choices, and boundaries, this thesis has suggested these new ideas to how teachers can work with the new national curricula through fictional literature. This thesis has utilized Reid's novel as an excellent example of literature that can teach about value choices, mindsets and lifestyles in other countries to teach about health and life skills. However, there are lots of both factual and fictional texts that can be used to teach about health and life skills in various ways, which should be looked at and linked to how they can contribute to the topic in order for teachers to acquire more in-depth knowledge about the topic and its potential. For teachers to become competent in this interdisciplinary topic, there is a need for deeper interpretation of the curricula, as well as new methods and ideas that can result in interesting and meaningful classroom activities.

Reid's novel is also recent, and it deserves more attention both as a literary contact zone that can be used in schools to teach about other topics than the one mentioned in this thesis, for example: social media use, health care system in the United States compared to Norway, identity, exclusion and bullying, love, language use, and stylistic features; as well as it could be interpreted in regards to the interdisciplinary subject of democracy and citizenship. Its complex characters also deserve further analyzing; I find the character of three-year-old Briar especially interesting. As a child, her innocence might suggest a deeper meaning on how children perceive family relations, which could be the topic of another study.

My hope for this thesis is that other teachers will find inspiration in the methods, exercises, analysis, and ideas suggested to see new perspectives and ways of teaching the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills. As a future teacher, this thesis has helped me look beyond the steering documents of the interdisciplinary subject of health and life skills to interpret the topic and provided me with methods that can become very useful in the Norwegian upper secondary school classroom.

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Appendix A: Career presentation

Getting familiar with different types of careers.

Make a presentation about a job or profession you could see yourself having. The presentation should be about 5-10 minutes. The presentation should include information about the following:

- What are some tasks an employee of this job usually needs to do?
- How long is a typical workday? Do you need to work shifts, or is it a typical 8-16 job? Do you need to work nights or weekends in this job?
- Do you need any form of education or training in order to be qualified for this job? What kind of education or training? How many years does it take? Where can you get this kind of education? (For example, in Tromsø, in Norway, in another country?)
- What kind of skills do you need for this job? (For example, do you need to be creative, innovative, good with kids, do you need communication skills, do you need to be good in Math, do you need more theoretical or practical skills, physical strength, being able to sit before a computer for several hours a day, etc.?)
- For this job, is it important to be an extrovert or an introvert? Why?
- Does the job require more independent work or team work?
- What is the average annual salary for employees of this job?
- Your own thoughts about this job, for example: What aspects of this job would you enjoy most? What could be the most difficult? How can you get more information about this job?

You may find information about your chosen job/profession on these websites:

- www.utdanning.no
- www.vilbli.no
- Other websites for universities, technical, and vocational colleges, or other educational programmes and schools.

This task can be linked to these competence aims after VG1 general studies:

- use appropriate strategies for language learning, text creation and communication

- use appropriate digital resources and other aids in language learning, text creation and interaction
- listen to, understand and use academic language in working on own oral and written texts
- express himself or herself in a nuanced and precise manner with fluency and coherence, using idiomatic expressions and varied sentence structures adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation
- explain the reasoning of others and use and follow up input from others during conversations and discussions on various topics
- use different sources in a critical, appropriate and verifiable manner
- write different types of formal and informal texts, including multimedia texts with structure and coherence that describe, discuss, reason and reflect adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation

This task can be linked to these competence aims after VGI vocational studies:

- use appropriate strategies for language learning, text creation and communication
- use appropriate digital resources and other aids in language learning, text creation and interaction
- listen to, understand and use terminology appropriate for the trade, both orally and in writing, in work situations
- express himself or herself in a nuanced and precise manner with fluency and coherence, using idiomatic expressions and varied sentence structures adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation
- explain the reasoning of others and use and follow up input during conversations and discussions on vocationally relevant topics
- use different sources in a critical, appropriate and verifiable manner

Appendix B: Parental and Peer Pressure

Post-reading questionnaire – chapter 3

Questions to reflect on in order to deal with parental and peer pressure:

1. Do you think Emira only enrolled in transcription school to please her parents?
2. How do you think Emira's parents would react if they found out Emira was babysitting and typing for a living?
3. Do you think it is important to take into consideration what your parents wish for you to work with?
4. What other factors could be important when choosing a career path, other than your parent's wishes?
5. Are Emira's friends pressuring her to get another job? Why?
6. Why do you think Emira's friends are speaking negatively about her job as a babysitter?
7. Could Emira's friends act in more supportive ways while still expressing a concern for her job? Give examples.
8. How can you support your friends in their career development?
9. How can you express concerns about your friends career choices?

Appendix C: Intercultural development

Rejecting stereotypes

(For the purpose of this task, students will submit their answers anonymously in order for their answers to be discussed with the whole class, without anyone being labeled “wrong”, “bad”, or “racist”)

Answer the following question on a piece of paper

What are some stereotypes you are familiar with?

Questions to discuss with the class of each stereotype mentioned:

1. Who says (who originated this particular stereotype)? Who benefits (what could the goals be to make this a stereotype)? Look at historical context.
2. Have you seen this stereotype projected in social media or in advertising?
2. Name a person within the same group as the stereotype – how does this person contradict the stereotype?
2. How can you contribute to reject this stereotype?

Appendix D: Digital Storytelling

Planning document for digital storytelling exercise – Kiley Reid’s *Such a Fun Age*

Goal: The goal of this exercise is for students to understand Emira’s feelings when dealing with experiences that challenges her because she is African American and a woman, by placing themselves in Emira’s experiences. Students will then be better able to understand her underlying values and attitudes and where these come from.

This task is linked to these competence aims for VG 1 Vocational Studies:

- use appropriate digital resources and other aids in language learning, text creation and interaction
- express himself or herself in a nuanced and precise manner with fluency and coherence, using idiomatic expressions and varied sentence structures adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation
- read, discuss and reflect on the content and language features and literary devices in various types of texts, including self-chosen texts
- explore and reflect on diversity and social conditions in the English-speaking world based on historical contexts

This task is linked to these competence aims for VG1 General Studies:

- use appropriate digital resources and other aids in language learning, text creation and interaction
- express himself or herself in a nuanced and precise manner with fluency and coherence, using idiomatic expressions and varied sentence structures adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation
- read, analyse and interpret fictional texts in English
- write different types of formal and informal texts, including multimedia texts with structure and coherence that describe, discuss, reason and reflect adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation
- explore and reflect on diversity and social conditions in the English-speaking world based on historical contexts

Students' prerequisites: In order to do the following task, students must have some knowledge beforehand about the historical context of race and gender discrimination in the United States. They must also be familiar with Reid's novel, and know some of the passages in the novel where Emira expresses emotions because she is being discriminated (examples below). Students should also be familiar with video editing applications (such as iMovie or Windows Movie Maker).

Resources: Resources necessary for this task:

- Video editing applications
- A camera with microphone (they can also use their phones)
- A chosen passage from the novel
- Time frame: 1 hour to present task and organize groups. Each group should be finished with manuscript and organizing roles during this hour. 2-3 hours of filming and editing, and 1 hour for presentations in class

Task: Choose one of the tasks below and recreate the passage as a video. The video should be between 3 and 6 minutes. You can work in groups or individually, but every person on the group must be represented as a character in the video. Use fitting sound effects to strengthen your message. Remember to express Emira's and other characters' feelings through words, facial expressions, body language, actions, or a combination of these. If the text does not state how Emira or other characters feel, try to imagine how they feel and act it out! Be creative – add sentences that explain the situation better, or remove sentences from the novel that are unnecessary.

Task 1: Recreate Emira's meeting with the security guard in chapter 1.

Task 2: Choose one of the incidents mentioned in this passage and create a video that shows how the incident happened and how it made Emira feel (include background information that shows where Emira is or what she is doing):

“In the fourth grade, a white classmate had marched to Emira's lunch table and asked her if she was a coon (upon hearing this, her mother had promptly picked up the phone while asking Emira, ‘What's his name?’). Emira was once followed by sales associates in Brooks Brothers while she shopped for a Father's Day gift (her mother had said,

‘They ain’t got nothin’ better to do?’). And once, after a bikini wax was completed, Emira was told that because she had ‘ethnic texture,’ the total came to forty dollars instead of the advertised thirty-five (to this, Emira’s mother had responded, ‘Back up, you got *what* waxed?’). (Reid 39)

Task 3: Use the information in chapter 6 to create a video where you act as Alix and Emira, and Alix is looking at Emira’s phone. Instead of Emira not recognizing that Alix is looking at her phone, you should act as if Emira figures this out. How does she react? Does she confront Alix? What does she say? How do they solve the situation?

Task 4: Choose a passage or a scene from the novel where Emira is being discriminated for being a woman or for being African American, or where she is being challenged in different ways, and recreate the incident in a video.

