

# MASTER'S THESIS

Asperger's Syndrome in Picoult's *House Rules*: to understand the special challenges for pupils with Asperger's Syndrome in school

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# ABSTRACT

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## English

Asperger's Syndrome is a developmental disorder generally involving difficulties with social interactions, hypersensitivities to lights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc., and uncoordinated or repetitive movements. These qualities can at times be challenging - especially in the classroom. This study aimed to identify the different challenges Asperger's Syndrome brings to the classroom. Specifically, it investigated how fiction could enlighten teachers and school staff regarding the diagnosis, and how to ensure a safe and motivating environment for pupils in upper secondary school diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010) could be of help for teachers to get a better understanding of the special challenges regarding Asperger's Syndrome. Through a close reading of the novel, colour coding and categorising examples illuminating the different hallmarks of the diagnosis, as well as a focus group interview with three teachers, the results suggested that Asperger's Syndrome is only one of many diagnoses in desperate need of teacher's attention in school.

## Norsk

Asperger Syndrom er en utviklingsforstyrrelse som vanligvis involverer vansker med sosiale interaksjoner, overfølsomhet for lys, lyder, lukter, smaker osv., og ukoordinerte eller repeterende bevegelser. Disse egenskapene kan til tider være utfordrende – spesielt i klasserommet. Denne studien hadde som mål å identifisere de ulike utfordringene Asperger Syndrom bringer til klasserommet. Konkret ble det undersøkt hvordan skjønnlitteratur kunne opplyse lærere og skoleansatte om diagnosen, og hvordan sikre et trygt og motiverende miljø for elever i ungdomsskolen med diagnosen Asperger Syndrom.

Picoults roman *House Rules* (2010) kan være til hjelp for lærere til å få en bedre forståelse av de spesielle utfordringene rundt Asperger Syndrom. Gjennom nærlesing av romanen, fargekoding og kategorisering av eksempler som belyser de ulike kjennetegnene ved diagnosen, samt et fokusgruppeintervju med tre lærere, antydte resultatene at Asperger Syndrom bare er en av mange diagnoser som har et desperat behov for lærerens oppmerksomhet på skolen.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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*The objectives clause is based on the inviolability of human dignity and that all people are equal regardless of what makes us different. When teachers show care for the pupils and acknowledge each individual, human dignity is then recognised as a fundamental value for the school and society. (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training: Core Curriculum)*

## 1.1 THE EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

School is believed to be a safe area for all children to learn, explore and develop their skills. In addition, education and training ought to help pupils to increase their knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity and show respect for each individual's principles, such as tradition, beliefs, and background. By principles of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, schools shall show the pupils trust and respect, as well as give them challenges that stimulate their desire to learn.

However, some pupils see the world from a unique perspective: children on the autism spectrum, for example. One way to assure the inclusion of these children in the classroom situation is to put ourselves in their shoes: what do the surroundings look like, what do the surroundings feel like, and how does this affect us? One approach for achieving this is by using fiction in the classroom. Aristotle once said that poetry is more serious than history, as it works with possibilities rather than what has already happened. By 'poetry' he meant imaginative literature, also known as fiction (Oatley, 2012, p.425).

This thesis addresses the challenges for the teacher presented by the presence in the classroom of pupils diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. It argues that fiction offers a neutral basis for discussion, whereby teachers may reflect on such challenges without necessarily referring to their own pupils. With the aid of Close Reading and a focus group interview, I demonstrate that Jodi Picoult's novel, *House Rules* (2010), offers opportunities for in-depth discussion which not only raises important questions but also had the potential to

suggest possible reactions. Teachers are thereby given the opportunity to explore a number of options.

Regarding high-functioning autism, in this case, Asperger's Syndrome, there are numerous popular and highly celebrated contemporary adolescent novels featuring characters with Asperger's Syndrome, one of which is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (2003). Haddon's novel is found more suitable for children due to the novel being told from the first-person perspective and illustrations are included throughout the novel. However, since this study is being justified by close reading, as well as a focus group interview of teachers, Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010) is found more suitable for this purpose for reasons to be discussed later in this chapter.

Using the novel *House Rules* (2010) and its protagonist diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, Jacob, as a base, this thesis addresses the presence of Asperger's Syndrome in schools (primarily in the age range of 13-16 years old), focusing on how literature can help teachers above all to understand the special challenges and possibilities for pupils with Asperger's Syndrome. Picoult's novel is the primary literature, serving as a source of knowledge, as well as a basis for discussion. The question of whether this novel can be used in the educational sector to inform pedagogues, such as teachers, teacher students, and paraprofessional aides about Asperger's Syndrome will also be discussed in chapter four.

In *House Rules* (2010), Jodi Picoult creates the fictional character Jacob, diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, illustrating how the neurotypical life can be experienced for someone neurodivergent. Neurodivergent is the term used for when someone's brain processes, learns, and / or behaves differently from what is considered "typical", and is the antonym of "neurotypical" which will be used throughout the present thesis.

One of the reasons for this specific novel is that Picoult presents the story from five different perspectives, not only the perspective of the protagonist, which highlights the diagnosis from different points of view, thus making it more suitable for adults.

Eighteen-year-old Jacob Hunt is deeply interested in forensic analysis, to the point where it becomes an obsession. Jacob and his mother constantly set up crime scenes with

coloured corn syrup as blood, footprints, hints and clues for his mother, Emma, to solve. The novel contains brief discussion sections of different murders committed by real murderers, including Ted Bundy, Richards Crafts, Christopher Hightower, and several others. Due to Jacob's extreme interest in forensic science, he is deemed a suspect by law enforcement and subsequently accused of murdering his social skills tutor, Jess Ogilvy.

The behavioural issues following Asperger's Syndrome can be challenging for both teachers and general staff especially since the difficulties occur often in the classroom. Hypersensitivity, trouble with participating in the communication, and repetitive behaviour are some of the issues connected to the diagnosis and might therefore cause trouble in the classroom if they are to be triggered. For the purpose of the present study, only three characteristics of individuals suffering from this syndrome are considered: tactile and auditory hypersensitivity, linguistic problems, and repetitive behaviour.

Even though Picoult is a writer of fiction, her novels contain important facts about Asperger's Syndrome. As a result, even though the novel is purely fictional, the different explanations, hallmarks, and triggers of Asperger's Syndrome are correct and are thus highly relevant to implementing knowledge in school. The above-mentioned triggers are in focus throughout this thesis in the light of fiction. Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010) illustrates what the life of someone diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome can look and feel like. The descriptions of the protagonist portray how, as an "Aspies"-teenager, the protagonist, Jacob, reacts to unexpected events.

On her webpage, Jodi Picoult answers common asked questions, where one of them asks how she does her research to her books. Here, she explains that she has gone to the measure of observing a heart surgery, watched actors on a movie set, explored bone marrow transplants, and spent time on Death Row. Furthermore, she explains that she has several professionals on her team when drafting books: "... *I have several folks on call for me during a book – a few lawyers, a couple of psychiatrists, some doctors, a pathologist, a DNA scientist, a handful of detectives.*" (Picoult, 2022). This shows the author's endless opportunities to ask the experts regarding her books, such as *House Rules* (2010). These answers illuminate that her descriptions of the protagonist, Jacob Hunt, is based on facts



provided from professionals, and includes extensive research to gain the knowledge needed to create the protagonist.

One of Jacob's triggers are the colour orange, for instance, making him avoid all things orange: *"On television, the jumpsuits (prison jumpsuits) are always orange. Sometimes it is enough to make me change the channel"* (House Rules, p.243). *"... and he ran across an orange construction zone sign on the way home that required him to take a detour"* (House Rules, p.132). *"The chairs are metal frames with pleather cushions. One is orange, and that's totally not happening"* (House Rules, p.295). There has been some investigation regarding colour perception in children on the autism spectrum disorder, and if there are colour preferences regarding the luminance of the assorted colours (Franklin, Sowden, Burley, Notman & Alder, 2008, Grandgeorge & Masaraka, 2016). This proves how intricate details, such as the colour of the wall, can become a great obstacle for someone diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Furthermore, the school environment surrounding the pupils should also be optimal for motivation and concentration. As explained above, children on the autism spectrum are prone to hypersensitivities, such as too bright lights, unexpected, loud noises, and over-stimulation. These are factors that need to be taken into consideration when adapting your classroom as a teacher. Moyes (2002) proposes the solution of, for instance, putting felt on the bottom of the chairs in the classrooms to prevent scraping sounds (p.42), to lower the risk of triggering a pupil with hypersensitivity to noises.

Further adaptations such as dimmable lights, routines regarding schoolwork, and just a simple heads-up could be helpful for the pupil to avoid stimming and lead to a more predictable and calm experience. Stimming is an involuntary repetitive behaviour often caused by over-stimulation and can include flicking their fingers, tapping their foot, repeating words, or phrases, and even banging their head repeatedly against a table or a wall.

Moyes (2002) also proposes that *"dark-colored desktops are more conducive to maintaining attention than light-colored ones"* (p.50). Moyes (2002, p.50) emphasises Flick's (1996) recommendation of non-verbal cues in the classroom, e.g., tugging one's earlobe, to let

the misbehaving student know when he or she is not paying attention, thus eliminating the risk of embarrassment when calling out his or her name in class.

Along with hypersensitivity, the autism spectrum also includes triggers such as repetitive movements, extreme focus on specific interests or topics, trouble with social communication, and the need for strict routines. All these factors can creep into the classroom as well as the schoolyard where children are initiated to engage in different activities and exercises. A triggered pupil can experience the incident not only as traumatic but can also lead to violent behaviour in the classroom, which could be seen as threatening to the other pupils and staff members.

This is one of the many reasons for diving deeper into the subject of Asperger's Syndrome in the classroom, and why *House Rules* (2010) can be a valuable resource for teachers and school staff. Since the novel is fiction, it enables teachers to avoid running the risk of breaching the oath of confidentiality. The teachers can discuss fictional situations freely and test innovative ideas and methods in the classroom. Such discussions can enable teachers to share their thoughts and opinions on how to best work with pupils on the autism spectrum.

## **1.2 ASPERGER'S SYNDROME – SOME IMPORTANT FACTS**

Eugen Bleuler, a psychiatrist from Switzerland, introduced in 1911 the term autism to describe schizophrenic patients appearing disconnected from the world. In the same era of time, Hans Asperger (1906-1980) worked as an Austrian physician and paediatrician. During Asperger's career, he and his fellow psychiatrist Leo Kanner identified characteristics, or rather patterns of behaviour, in four young boys that later were diagnosed with autistic psychopathy. The pattern identified included a lack of empathy, a poor ability to form friendships, one-sided conversations, intense focus on specific interests or topics, and strange movements. These are now clear characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome.

Furthermore, Asperger discovered that some of the children diagnosed with the syndrome used their extraordinary talents and knowledge in adulthood to achieve a life with successful careers. One of Asperger's patients became a professor of astronomy who even solved an

error in Newton's work while still a student. The diagnosis was originally named autistic psychopathy, but the patients were rarely regarded as psychopaths or anything similar. However, Lorna Wing, an English psychiatrist, suggested the term 'Asperger Syndrome' is more fitting (Cumine, Dunlop & Stevenson, 2010).

In 1994, Asperger's Syndrome was listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) but was later in 2013 folded into one umbrella diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in DSM-5 (Autism Speaks). There are some shared symptoms related to these disorders. However, the most used term for disorders on this spectrum is Asperger's. According to the book *Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guide for Teachers* (2009), Lorna Wing established the following criteria for the diagnosis on the spectrum:

- Impairment of two-way social interaction and general social ineptitude
- Speech, which is odd and pedantic and stereotyped in content, but which is not delayed
- Limited non-verbal communication skills – little facial expression or gesture
- Circumscribed special interests and good rote memory
- Poor motor coordination, with odd gait and posture and some motor stereotypes

Behavioural differences such as repetitive behaviour, little to no speech, and severe cognitive impairments are now called the "classic" behaviour for children with Asperger's Syndrome but are also referred to as Kanner-type autism (Sheffer, 2018). However, the diagnosis expanded from Kanner's idea of withdrawing, speechless children into a disorder describing the endless possibilities the personality holds, such as mathematical geniuses who were just socially awkward. The diagnosis is therefore often referred to as high-functioning autism instead of Asperger's Syndrome, since the patients are fully capable of living a normal life despite their strong need of communicating in a very literal way, their love for routines, and often clumsy, repetitive behaviour.

### 1.3 ASPERGER'S SYNDROME IN FICTION

Since Asperger's Syndrome was formally recognised in 1994, several novels and television shows have featured main characters with the syndrome. Both Dr Sheldon Cooper and Dr Amy Farrah-Fowler from the famous tv-show *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), Dr Temperance 'Bones' Brennan and Dr Zach Addy from *Bones* (2005-2017) and lastly, Dr Shaun Murphy starring in *The Good Doctor* (2017-) all show traits though not officially diagnosed so.

Contemporary fiction, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (2003) in particular, has become a part of the curriculum in many schools. Because of its simple language, but yet complex content, it is found to be suitable for both older children and adults. As cited in *Representation of Asperger Syndrome in Contemporary Fiction* by Katherine N. Johansen (2015), Haddon's novel has left imprints on its readers, which also is well presented through Gyasi Burks-Abbot's own experience (Johansen, 2015, p.21):

"Back in the early nineties when I was first diagnosed with autism, the only way I could counter the blank stares I would get when I disclosed my condition was to mention the 1988 movie *Rain Man*, which left a deep imprint on the popular psyche. I once told a Harvard student I was autistic, and he was about to tell me that he has a friend with the same condition until he realized he was thinking about Dustin Hoffman. Less personal *Rain Man*-Inspired reactions to my autism came from the people who wanted to know about my particular savant skills. Today when I tell lay people that I am autistic, the first question they ask is, "have you read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*?" as if that were the best example of a book written about autism" (Burks-Abbott 294)

Taking into consideration the impact Haddon's novel has accumulated, the question of whether this novel is more suitable for children or adults remains unanswered. Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010) remains favourable in this thesis due to the thesis' focus on first and foremost teachers, and how teachers can help pupils with Asperger's Syndrome achieve a better learning outcome. As stated, Haddon's novel has become a great part of the school curriculum, emphasising its importance for pupils. Therefore, it was not seen as fitting to use the same novel when working with teachers.

## 1.4 THESIS STRUCTURE

First, this thesis will demonstrate in the literary review the relevance of Asperger's Syndrome in the context of important studies on the subject and connect this relevance to teachers' knowledge regarding the diagnosis. These findings will be relevant in several aspects of the school environment, including the classroom, when teaching, practice placement for teacher students, and the teacher education. Topics, such as the Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis, as well as the diagnosis' hallmarks presented in fiction will be discussed. Furthermore, the literary review will briefly be addressing Asperger's Syndrome, discussing different "treatments" within the school system.

Moreover, a presentation of how this thesis was conducted will be presented. A brief explanation of what the different methods are, as well as their relevancy for this specific research work, will be given. This chapter will be summarised with a brief presentation of its reliability and validity, as well as some limitations to this specific study.

In chapter four, the results from both the focus group interview as well as the novel will be presented and analysed thematically, as well as connected to the literature from both the literature review and the methods chapter. Finally, the thesis will present a conclusion presenting whether Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010) answers the following research question: *How is Asperger's Syndrome portrayed in Picoult's novel House Rules (2010), and how can this aide us in understanding the special challenges for children in school diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome?*

## 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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The following chapter will provide an in-depth review of the literature which will be used throughout the thesis. The key points of this chapter will be explained, discussed and, if necessary, clarified where needed to make sure of a comprehensible understanding of what is being reviewed and used. Furthermore, this chapter will present literature addressing salient facts about Asperger's Syndrome within the timeline of 1960-2022 and compare this to Jodi Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010) for similarities and differences. I will conclude with a detailed explanation of what is to be expected of those diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome

when confronted with specific situations, how the diagnosis can affect the school day of children, and what tools and measures can be used to avoid outbursts.

In this case, the definition of outbursts is the different situations that can take place where the pupil with Asperger's Syndrome either has a meltdown, throws a tantrum, shuts him or herself out from the situation or indulges in repetitive behaviour. Common signs of an outburst can also include hitting, kicking, pacing, hyperventilating, rocking, not communicating, or complete withdrawal. This last point will also be discussed further when presenting the results of this thesis.

## **2.1 WHAT IS ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?**

Before Asperger (1906-1980) and Kanner (1894-1981) were able to elucidate the special characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome, children with autism were diagnosed as schizophrenic. The Asperger's Syndrome and Schizophrenic Psychosis disorder will be compared below. This comparison will not only illustrate why the two diagnoses are similar to each other, but also provide insight into the diagnostic criteria that are needed to be met for a patient to be diagnosed, as well as to receive the help they need to function at their fullest. The diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia are also included below as it shares certain symptoms with Asperger's Syndrome.

The term Asperger's Syndrome is more acceptable socially than schizophrenia. The present thesis draws to some extent on psychology, and on the theories of Marinopoulou, Lugnegård, Hallerbäck, Gillberg & Billstedt (2016) as well as the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) in particular in order to explain why children have been misdiagnosed and how the two diagnoses are similar to each other and yet different.

Even though DSM-5 is a useful tool for experts, teachers are only pedagogues: they teach and help children to develop basic skills and knowledge, such as reading and writing, and assist students to aspire to become productive members of society. The DSM-5 should be regarded as a clinical tool for those with a special interest in the field, whereas Picoult's *House Rules* (2010) is more suitable for those who do not have a strong interest in the field but wish to understand their pupils. DSM-5 is only mentioned here because it is a means of

providing a broader perspective than that associated with Asperger's Syndrome by itself and provides some common diagnostic criteria to look for. It can also be used to explain the similarities between the two diagnoses of Asperger's Syndrome and Schizophrenic Psychosis.

As will be explained further in this chapter, some of the Asperger's Syndrome are physical, such as hitting or kicking things. A child with Asperger's Syndrome can also react to different situations by screaming or becoming catatonic (unusual behavioural and movement disturbances), which are similar to the diagnostic criteria for Schizophrenic Psychosis.

Furthermore, Jacob Hunt explains in Picoult's novel (2010) that some autistic children can be perceived as mentally ill due to them banging their head against a wall (p.321). This is one of the common misunderstandings regarding the two diagnoses: Asperger's Syndrome and Schizophrenic Psychosis. These two diagnoses will be compared further in section 2.3. The relevance of comparing these two diagnoses, however, is the similarities that can be misinterpreted by bystanders. A child with Asperger's Syndrome can exhibit common traits of Asperger's Syndrome but can look as though he or she is Schizophrenic at the same time without a formal Schizophrenic diagnosis.

### **2.1.1 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders**

The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, 1952)* is the product of more than six decades' worth of work performed by hundreds of international experts in all aspects of mental health. The manual brings forth a respected volume identifying and categorizing mental disorders to improve diagnoses, treatment, and research. Furthermore, it is meant as a tool for clinicians, an educational resource for students and practitioners, and a reference for researchers in the field (DSM-5, 2013, p.41). Therefore, the DSM-5 can be regarded as a useful tool for teachers and educational staff when collaborating with diagnosed pupils due to their explanation of treatment and thorough research in the field.

In conjunction with this section of the chapter, it is mentioned in the DSM-5 that: "Although DSM-5 remains a categorical classification of separate disorders, we recognize that mental disorders do not always fit completely within the boundaries of a single disorder"

(p.41). It is further exemplified that there are diagnostic criteria, such as depression, which are involved as a symptom of several mental disorders, including Asperger's Syndrome.

### **2.1.2 Diagnostic criteria – autism spectrum disorder / Asperger's Syndrome**

According to DSM-5, for a child to meet the diagnostic criteria of autism spectrum disorder, he or she must have persistent deficits in each of three areas of social communication and interaction (see figure 1 below), as well as at least two of four types of restricted, repetitive behaviour (see figure 2 below).

#### **Social communication (must exhibit all areas):**

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication: to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

*Figure 1 - Diagnostic criteria for ASD (DSM-5) in the area of social communication*

#### **Repetitive behaviour (must exhibit two of four):**

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal and nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take the same route or eat the same food every day).



3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or preservative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures. Excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

*Figure 2 - Diagnostic criteria for ASD (DSM-5) in the area of repetitive behaviour*

## **2.2 DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA – SCHIZOPHRENIC PSYCHOSIS**

For a patient to receive the diagnosis schizophrenic, two or more core symptoms must be present for a significant portion of time during a 1-month period, or less if treated successfully. One of these core symptoms must be either hallucinations, delusions, or disorganized speech (e.g., frequent derailment or incoherence) (DSM-5, p.99). In addition to these three symptoms, the patient can also experience grossly disorganized or catatonic behaviour (usually involves a lack of movement and communication) and negative symptoms such as diminished emotional expression.

However, in the schizophrenic diagnostics criteria, there is mention of:” If there is a history of autism spectrum disorder or a communication disorder of childhood-onset, the additional diagnosis of schizophrenia is made only if prominent delusions or hallucinations, in addition to the other required symptoms of schizophrenia, are also present for at least 1 month (or less if successfully treated)” (DSM-5, p.99)

## **2.3 SCHIZOPHRENIA VS. ASPERGER’S SYNDROME**

When looking at the diagnostic criteria for the separate disorders, they can seem quite different from one another. However, at the very end of DSM-5’s description of autism spectrum disorders, there is a wide selection of diagnoses that can be found within the Asperger’s Syndrome diagnosis, including schizophrenia. The DSM-5 writes as follows: “A prodromal state has been described in which social impairment and atypical interests and

beliefs occur, which could be confused with the social deficits seen in autism spectrum disorder” (p.58).

Furthermore, the DSM-5 exemplifies a situation where the two diagnoses can be confused, as the answer refers to the schizophrenic disorder as well as the literal world of one diagnosed with autism: “Do you hear voices when no one is there?” “Yes (on the radio)” (p.58).

When researching, the similarities between Asperger’s Syndrome and Schizophrenia become clearer. However, Marinopoulou et al. explain that studies have been scarce (Marinopoulou et al., 2016, p.2292). Although they clarify that their study contributes to the current research due to few studies comparing individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and Schizophrenic Psychosis, their results show that there are similarities between the two diagnoses.

“(…) there were similarities between groups at a cognitive level, such as limitations in working memory, processing speed and several aspects of executive functioning” (Marinopoulou et al, 2016, p.2301). Furthermore, based on their qualitative research, there was increasing evidence that Asperger’s Syndrome and Schizophrenic Psychosis are more alike than we usually acknowledge, both in clinical practice and when strictly considering their diagnostic criteria (p.2301). Nevertheless, whether behavioural and cognitive interferences developed for each one of the groups can be of value for the other is to be further discussed.

## **2.4 HOUSE RULES (2010) BY PICOULT, J.**

As briefly presented in the introduction, Jacob Hunt is a teenage boy diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. As emphasised numerous times throughout the novel, Asperger’s Syndrome is characterised by repetitive behaviour, a need for strict routines, difficulties in communication and feeling empathy, and, like so many other children on the autism spectrum – he focuses on one specific subject, in this case, forensic analysis. Jacob’s love for the forensic field shows clearly when he carefully listens to his homemade police radio looking for murders and mysteries to solve – and subsequently crashing the occasional crime scene.

*"I'm a civilian with a better understanding of forensic science than the local police"* (p.49) Jacob explains, illustrating his well-developed knowledge in the field. The plot thickens when Jacob's social skills tutor, Jess Ogilvy, is found dead on the bathroom floor. The hallmarks of Asperger's Syndrome: the lack of eye contact, stimulatory tics, and communication difficulties: can be misinterpreted as guilt by law enforcement, and Jacob is therefore accused and later arrested for Jess's death.

Each chapter is told through the voice of a character: Jacob, Emma; the mother, Theo; Jacob's younger brother, Oliver; the attorney, and Rich; the lead detective, unfolding their inner thoughts and feelings, as well as their knowledge of Jacob's diagnosis.

This thesis has previously stated the fact that Asperger's Syndrome exhibits many different triggers or hallmarks, such as hyper fixation on a specific topic or interest as well as difficulties communicating in both words and expressions. However, this thesis will also be focusing on the hallmarks that are not so frequently mentioned, such as hypersensitivity and repetitive behaviour due to their occurrence in the classroom.

Picoult and her seventeenth novel *House Rules* (2010) have been criticized by non-fictional "Aspies", or neurodivergent (Nikki, 2010), as well as neurotypicals (Life with Asperger's, 2010) claiming that she took all the hallmarks of both the Asperger's diagnosis as well as the autism spectrum disorder (which are two different diagnoses) and combined them to create Jacob's character. We run the risk of a margin of error in the literary analysis due to the author of this fictional novel cross-examining the two diagnoses whereas this thesis only focuses on one: Asperger's Syndrome.

The characteristics of the two diagnoses are quite similar, whereas Asperger's Syndrome is a less extreme case of autism spectrum disorder. Asperger's Syndrome is also known as high-functioning autism since its symptoms are much less severe than in autism. What distinguishes Asperger's Syndrome from "classical" autism is subtle – autistic individuals usually want to be left alone, whilst individuals with Asperger's Syndrome usually want to fit in and make friends, but they do not know how. Emma, the protagonist's mother, describes her son as someone who *"tries to be like everyone else but truly doesn't know how"* (House Rules, p.5). Furthermore, Jacob explains that: *"I just don't get the social*

*hints that other people do*” (p.21), emphasising that fitting in is not necessarily as effortlessly done as portrayed.

Thus far, this thesis has briefly presented the presence of children with Asperger’s Syndrome in school, how to ensure inclusion of these children in the classroom, various aspects of the diagnosis, and how Picoult’s novel *House Rules* (2010) presents the diagnosis in fiction. In conclusion, a child with Asperger’s Syndrome may just seem like a neurotypical child that behaves differently.

Nevertheless, what is being emphasized in this thesis is the message that Picoult conveys through her writing, the use of figurative language and what this tells the reader. Since the findings needed to be analysed and interpreted, a colour-coordinated chart was made to keep track of which examples belonged to the different themes, or “hallmarks”, of the diagnosis, accompanied by the page number the example was taken from. This will be explained further in the methods chapter, under the “Close reading”-section. An extract of the colour chart will also be presented under point 3.7 “Coding and categorising data” as well as in “Appendices”.

#### **2.4.1 Orange – Linguistic impediments**

As shown in appendix 7.1, the novel *House Rules* (2010) by Jodie Picoult, a substantial assortment of linguistic issues is presented - categorized in orange - in the book. Already on page 4 of the novel, the author writes from Emma’s perspective, the mother of the main character: “*Jacob blinks at me, expressionless. He lives in a literal world; it’s one of the hallmarks of his diagnosis*”. These illustrations come quite frequently throughout the novel where it describes how the diagnosis can surface without necessarily making it very noticeable.

In Rebecca Landa’s *Social Language Use in Asperger Syndrome and High-functioning Autism* (2000), it is argued that many children on the autism spectrum, including those with a high IQ, exhibit developmental issues of communicative intentions (p.130). “*Autistic children show an idiosyncratic form of expressing intentions, a restricted variety of intentions expressed, and limitations in their ability to flexibly control the degree of directness with which some intentions are expressed*” (Landa, 2000, p.130). In the sense of clarification,

idiosyncratic in this context refers to something *unique to an individual*. The fact that Albert Einstein rarely wore socks is an example of one of his idiosyncratic habits.

Another author who emphasises how autistic children struggle with linguistic impediments is Rebecca Moyes (2002). In the book *Addressing the challenging behaviour of children with high-functioning autism/Asperger syndrome in the classroom: A guide for teachers and parents*, she points out that “*Avoid figures of speech, sarcasm, and idioms. Children with autism are very literal.*” (p.38). Circling back to the introduction of this chapter and establishing that not all autists have Asperger’s Syndrome, but all with Asperger’s Syndrome are autistic, the statements regarding autistic children being extremely literal will also be included as a hallmark of the Asperger Syndrome.

Another example from Picoult’s novel is when the main character (diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome), Jacob, explains situations from his younger age where someone would ask him to take a seat, and he would lift the chair up. He explains further that “*Now I know that it means I am supposed to sit down.*” (p.235). This illustrates an additional example of taking things very literally.

#### **2.4.2 Purple – Repetitive behaviour**

Referring to appendix 7.1, the column highlighted with purple represents the repetitive behaviour often shown in ASD patients. This includes behaviour such as “stimming” (e.g., flicking fingers, flapping hands, walking in circles), self-injury (e.g., banging their head against a wall), or the frequent use of echolalia, the repetition of phrases or words. Often children diagnosed on the autism spectrum feel a sensation of wordlessness where the struggle of communication becomes so severe that they do not seem to find the right words to communicate their feelings or needs. When a situation like this occurs, the recalling of different phrases the individual has heard before can make the message easier to convey. These behaviours can also be categorized as idiosyncratic habits, as explained above.

Echolalia is also regarded as another abnormality or hallmark for the diagnosis. An illustration from the book *House Rules* (2010) is when Jacob says the phrase “*Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.*” (p.224) when he asks the detective to send a message to his mom. Even though “phrase” and “idiom” are synonyms,

the previous paragraph clearly states that one should avoid using idioms due to children on the spectrum use a very literal form of speech but are some exceptions on their (ASD-children) own terms. This phenomenon, however, will be discussed further in the results chapter. Landa (2000) supports this finding by illustrating a situation where a child had heard the phrase “Got a splinter” during a painful experience, and the child continued using the phrase in different contexts which were resembling the original experience (p.131).

### **2.4.3 Green – Hypersensitivity / “sensory assault”**

Among the numerous lines of characteristics related to the autism spectrum disorder, the attention is often directed towards sensory dysfunction since this is the one hallmark that could potentially cause a scene in public. Although sensory problems are not yet considered an official symptom of the disorder, the issues seem to not only cause an impact on the configuration of the disorder but also directly influence the daily life of autistic people. When reading Picoult’s novel *House Rules* (2010), one may notice the frequent use of the phrase “Sensory break!”, meaning the main character, Jacob, needs a get-away from all the impressions and senses in the occurring situation.

In addition to this, the novel clearly illustrates how hard of an impact sensory assault can be on a person with an autism disorder. On page 48 of the novel, Picoult exemplifies how difficult it can be for a child with sensory issues to use a nasal spray: “...(It) is like waterboarding.”. For clarification, waterboarding is a brutal practice whereby a prisoner is strapped to a board with his/her limbs restrained and a cloth is put over their nose, eyes, and mouth. Water is then poured over their face, which induces a controlled drowning. Using this torture method as an illustration shows the reader the perspective of an autistic person where every sense, impression and surrounding is heightened and even an act of kindness, such as offering a nasal spray, can feel like torture.

Hypersensitivity is also known as “sensory assault”. The reason for this terminology is due to the abrupt impact this experience puts on a child on the autism spectrum disorder. However, hypersensitivity can be divided into two different sub-categories: tactile hypersensitivity and auditory hypersensitivity. Tactile hypersensitivity includes physical touch, the sensation of different textiles, temperature changes and gestures, while auditory

hypersensitivity will in this case be used in situations of noises, overload of stimuli and the unusual act of making eye contact.

### *Tactile hypersensitivity:*

Recent research states that people with autism and Asperger's Syndrome are "anecdotally said to be hypersensitive to touch" (Blakemore et al., 2006). In the same manner, Gerland (1997) acknowledges in his book *A real person: Life on the outside* that autistic people experience hypersensitivity as such: *To be just lightly touched appeared to make my nervous system whimper, as if the nerve endings were curling up. If anyone hit on the terrible idea of tickling me, I died. It was so way beyond unbearable unbearableness that I simply died – or that's what it felt like* (p.38). In a fictional case in *House Rules* (2010) where Jacob explains touch as follows: *"If someone touches me when I am not expecting it, I scream – not out of fear but because it sometimes feels like my nerve endings are on the outside rather than the inside"* (p.322). With these discoveries at hand, Blakemore et al. (2006) state that the empirical research field regarding tactile hypersensitivity is lacking, despite autobiographical reports such as shown in Gerland's book, as well as fictional descriptions.

However, Moyes (2002) suggests that if you are to approach or touch a child with autism (or in this case Asperger's Syndrome, or high-functioning autism), you should always do this from the front (p.43). This approach, however, is only acceptable if you are certain that the pupil is comfortable with touch, and if they are – you need to be certain of *where* you are allowed to touch the pupil. A similar example is to be found in the novel where the following is explained from Detective Matson's perspective: *"I put my hand on Jacob's shoulder, but from his reaction, you would have thought I'd just run him through with a sword"* (House Rules, 2010, p.213).

While one pupil might prefer to be touched on their arm or shoulder, others can experience this to be the most sensitive place to be touched. Furthermore, Moyes (2002) also illuminates that *"it is common belief that deep pressure activities may help to relieve stress and/or tactile defensiveness"* (p.42). Furthermore, Moyes (2002) also suggests on the same page that students with hypersensitivity or sensory problems should have access to a quiet spot or retreat when the students are feeling overwhelmed and need to calm down. A fictional

example is shown when Jacob explains his school's routines when it comes to hypersensitivity: *The sensory break room at school has a swing hanging from the ceiling. It's made of rope and stretchy blue material, and when you sit inside it, it wraps you like a cocoon. You can pull the sides close so that you can't see out and no one can see in, and spin in circles. There are also mats with different textures, wind chimes, a fan. There's a fiber-optic lamp that has hundreds of points of light that change from green to purple to pink. There are sponges and Koosh balls and brushes and Bubble Wrap and weighted blankets* (Picoult, 2010, p.127)

Moreover, Blakemore et al. also add in their report that "... people with autistic disorder and their carers report that they are intolerant of certain textures and find wearing materials aversive" (source). This statement is exemplified when Jacob explains his experience with his t-shirts: *"My skin is so sensitive that I can tell whether my shirt is cotton or polyester just by its temperature against my back. I have to cut all the labels out of my clothes so they don't rub because they feel like coarse sandpaper"* (p.321-322). The behavioural symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome are diverse and are thought to emerge from complex genetics, as well as environmental or epigenetic interactions (Sapey-Triomphe, Lamberton, Soniè, Mattout & Schmitz, 2019). In addition, the article supports the statement saying research within the tactile hypersensitivity field is scarce even though the very first reports on autism mentioned an atypical tactile sensitivity.

#### ***Auditory hypersensitivity:***

Autistic children can often be observed putting their hands over their ears, shutting their eyes, and crumpling together like a ball. This is usually when they hear an unexpected or uncomfortable noise or when they experience a "sensory overload". This behaviour has been explained to be hypersensitive hearing, oversensitivity to sound, or the term hyperacusis - "abnormally sensitive hearing in which normally tolerable sounds are perceived as excessively loud" (Stach, 1997, p.102), or, more pejoratively, "consistently exaggerated or inappropriate responses to sounds that are neither threatening nor uncomfortably loud to a typical person" (Baguley, 2003).



Picoult illustrates in her novel *House Rules* (2010) an incident where Jacob, an 18-year-old boy diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, experiences an auditory assault: "There are fluorescent lights on the ceiling, (...) – the lights spit and hiss sometimes due to their transformers and I worry that the ceiling will collapse on me" (p.240). This is an example of a sound that often goes unnoticed by neurotypicals. In addition to this, Moyes (2002) writes that: "fluorescent lighting causes severe problems for many autistic people because they can see a 60-cycle flicker. Household electricity turns on and off sixty times each second, and some autistic people can see this" (p.30).

Not only can the sound of flickering lights disturb an individual diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, but they are so aware of their surroundings that they can even see the flicker – something most of us cannot. Speaking of flickering lights, Picoult (2010) also describes the situation Jacob encounters e.g., a police patrol car: "He may have a meltdown if confronted by flashing lights or sirens" (p.358).

The presence of intolerable sounds may cause autistic children emotional stress which could then lead them to a "fight-or-flight"-response. This response could either be crouched down in a foetal position, running around in circles uncontrollably, hiding or even fighting the aids who are trying to calm them down. Thus, uncomfortable stimuli regarding sound can lead to concerns of behavioural issues (Lucker, 2013).

Moyes (2002) explains that the use of aversive, unpleasant stimuli that induce changes in behaviour via negative reinforcement or positive punishment, is the most common approach that has been utilized to address problem behaviour along with restraints and/or behaviour modification techniques (Moyes, 2002, p.12). Furthermore, she emphasizes that the use of aversive is only supposed to be a response to unacceptable or inappropriate behaviour and should thus not be considered as a preventative measure for that specific type of behaviour (Moyes, 2002, p.13).

This form of hypersensitivity is often what is firstly observed regarding physical behaviour in the autism spectrum disorder. In addition to this, and to illustrate one of many combinations connected to the disorder, Picoult describes the following situation: "All those little autistic kids you see smacking their heads against the walls? They're not mental.

They're doing it because the rest of the world is so loud it actually hurts, and they're trying to make it all go away" (House Rules, 2010, p.321).

This situation not only mentioned the common misconception that autistic people have a mental disorder, although autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder and was previously described as schizophrenia, but also illustrates how much it can physically hurt the individual leading to unintended self-harm.

Another form of self-harm for an individual diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome is making eye contact. Eye contact is something a conversation needs for one of the parties to feel like they are fully in communication (Argyle & Dean, 1965). Cindy Little (2002) explains that the use of nonverbal behaviours, in this case eye contact, has to be impaired to fulfil one of the criteria to be diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Here, Picoult also includes an example of how this interaction can affect someone with the diagnosis: "*... and then I stare directly into his eyes. It's like having strips of my skin pulled off from the inside. Like needles in every nerve center of the brain.*" (p.208).

When something occurs that is either extremely disturbing or extremely interesting (hyper fixation on an interest or specific topic), individuals with Asperger's Syndrome will stray from their routines of behaviour, and in this case make eye contact. Professor Tony Attwood is considered to be one of the world's foremost experts on autism spectrum disorder, and addressed in his book *Aspergers Syndrome* (2007) the ways a human to anticipate how another human being feels (translated from Danish):

*"How do we know what a person is thinking or feeling? One of the ways is our ability to read faces, especially the area around the eyes. We have known for some time that children and adults with autism spectrum disorder, including Asperger's Syndrome, do not use eye contact to the same degree as one would expect, do not often look at other people's faces and therefore miss out on changes in facial expressions"* (p.143).

The use of facial expressions and eye contact is illustrated in Picoult's novel where the protagonist's mother made several facial expressions, and Jacob was to guess which emotions it belonged to (p.7). Furthermore, in cohesion with Attwood's statement of children on the

autism spectrum disorder miss out on changes in facial expressions, Picoult illustrates this specific problem: *“When I correct Mr Hubbard’s mistakes in class, he smiled with the left side of his mouth. I assumed that meant he was grateful. But that weird half smile apparently meant he was annoyed with me, even though if someone’s smiling it is supposed to signify that they’re grateful”* (2007/2008, p.148).

Problems such as these signify the importance of facial expressions and eye contact in social interactions and therefore results in a communicational deficit in children with Asperger’s Syndrome.

## **2.5 ADDRESSING ASPERGER’S SYNDROME**

The above review has attempted to explain what the Asperger’s Syndrome diagnosis entails and how it is portrayed in Picoult’s *House Rules* (2010). To summarize this chapter, children with Asperger’s Syndrome exhibit difficulties in several areas of development.

However, one question remains for this literature review: how do we address the diagnosis? Despite the importance of this question, much-conducted research has failed to address it. Klin, Volkmar & Sparrow (2000), on the other hand, has not. In their book *Asperger Syndrome* (2000, vol.12) Klin, Volkmar & Sparrow address the challenges of giving substantial treatment to individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome but are concerned that children with this diagnosis have been identified with different diagnostic concepts (p.342).

This thesis has addressed the complications regarding misdiagnosing children with Asperger’s Syndrome for Schizophrenic Disorder, whilst Klin et al (2000) have addressed other diagnoses, such as learning disabilities, social-emotional maladjustment, and autism. The difference between Asperger’s Syndrome and autism, which is explained in section 2.2, is subtle – but still exists. Klin et al (2000) therefore address in their book that: *“Parents of children with AS who carry a diagnosis of autism or pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) often had to contend with educational programs designed for much lower-functioning children, thus failing to have their children’s relative strengths and unique disabilities properly addressed”* (p.342).

Furthermore, implementing an adequate educational programme for children with Asperger's Syndrome in school, such as an IEP (individualised education programme), could provide the child with a more suitable educational programme, tailored to their needs. An IEP is designed to fit the individual student and includes educational instructions, support and services needed for the pupil to thrive in school

Jacob Hunt emphasises the impact an IEP has had on his life: *"In school, part of my IEP is a cool-off pass – a COP. If I need to, at any time, even during an exam, my teachers will allow me to leave the classroom. Sometimes, the outside world gets a little too tight for me, and I need a place to relax. (...) The only kids who use the sensory break room are special needs, and walking through the door, I might as well just slap a big fat label on myself that says I'm not normal."* (p.127)

Klin et al. (2000) also suggests children with Asperger's Syndrome be accompanied by a paraprofessional aide (p.345) with relevant expertise. Lastly, Klin et al. (2000) explains the benefits of providing children with Asperger's Syndrome with a communication specialist with experience within the field of pragmatics and social skills training, due to their difficulties in engaging in conversation with others. All these implementations - IEP, paraprofessional aide, and communication specialists – will be discussed further in the results chapter where the results of the research will be presented.

## **2.6 THEORY OF MIND**

*His voice is strange, his way of speaking and his way of walking are strange. It is therefore not surprising that this boy also lacks understanding of others' way of expressing himself and therefore can not react to them in an appropriate way. (Hans Asperger ([1944] 1991)*

This section will briefly explain the concept of Theory of mind (TOM), as well as how this relates to the present thesis. As mentioned in section 2.1, this thesis draws to some extent on psychology, where theory of mind refers to the capacity to understand other people. Additionally, it refers to the ability to *"understand thoughts, beliefs, wishes, and intentions*

*with other people to be able to make sense of their behaviour and predict what they will do next” (Attwood, 2007/2008, p.141).*

Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith (1985) implemented a test, called the Sally-Anne test, to measure a person’s social cognitive ability to attribute false beliefs to others. The Sally-Anne test presented two characters: Sally and Anne. Sally has a marble and a basket, while Anne has a box. Sally puts the marble in the basket and goes for a walk. While Sally is away, Anne takes Sally’s marble out of the basket and puts it in the box. When Sally returns, she wants to play with her marble. The children taking part in this test is then asked the **Belief Question**: *“Where will Sally look for the marble?”*.

Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith (1985) explains that to pass this test, the participating children must answer the Belief Question correctly. If the participants point to the previous location of the marble, the basket, they have passed the test by anticipating Sally’s now false belief. However, if the participants point to Anne’s box, they fail the question by not taking into account Sally’s belief (p.41).

When presenting their results, Baron-Cohen et al (1985) conclude with all participants answering correctly, apart from the participants diagnosed with autism. The autistic group did in fact not, during trial 2, point to the box at all. Instead of pointing to the box, which would be the “wrong” location during trial 1), the autistic participants pointed to the pocket of the experimenter, where the marble really was. The hypothesis of this experiment was strongly supported by the results, explaining that autistic children fail to employ a theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al, 1985, p.43).

Attwood (2007/2008) explains that another aspect of deteriorated or delayed employment of theory of mind is a tendency to make literal interpretations of what others are saying (p.145). Neurotypicals (see definition in chapter one) are able to understand the discrepancy between facial expressions, intonation, and context, and recognise when a person teases or is being sarcastic. Children diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, however, may be bewildered by the sarcasm and are prone to being teased by others because they are conspicuously gullible and assume that people say exactly what they mean (Attwood, 1996, p.145).

Picoult (2010) addresses this issue in her novel numerous times, for instance, explaining from Emma's perspective that: *"He takes words very, very literally – if you asked him to eat with his mouth closed, for example, he'd tell you that's impossible"* (p.266). The issue of taking words literally, however, will be discussed further in chapter three and four.

The different elements of the Theory of Mind-concept suggests that there are much to learn from the diagnosis, especially for teachers who work with their pupils roughly eight hours per day. Consequently, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

*How is Asperger's Syndrome portrayed in Picoult's novel, and how can this help teachers understand the special challenges for pupils with Asperger's Syndrome in school?*

### 3 METHODOLOGY

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*They tell me I'm lucky to have a son who's so verbal, who is **blisteringly** intelligent, who can take apart the broken microwave and have it working again **an hour later**. They think there is no greater **hell** than having a son who is **locked** in his own world, unaware that there's a wider one to explore. But try having a son who is locked in his own world and still wants to make a connection. **A son who tries to be like everyone else but truly doesn't know how.** (House Rules, p.5)*

Excerpts, such as the one above, were given to the participants of the focus group interview to be discussed. The example from page 5 in *House Rules* (2010), for instance, has some elements highlighted in red. Elements such as these was what was being discussed and later analysed in the present thesis. Close reading, as will be explained in section 3.3, addresses the process of analysing a text in the search of a deeper meaning. As an introductory example, the features highlighted in red in the excerpt above expresses Emma's inner thoughts on having a son diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Here, the narrator emphasises her son's intelligence with the adverb "blisteringly", emphasising the intensity or degree of Jacob's intelligence

### 3.1 OVERVIEW

This chapter presents an explanation of the methods chosen for the present investigation. Here, I shall present and justify the methodological choices implemented. The research aims will also be presented along with examples to justify both the theoretical perspective as well as the literary perspective. Furthermore, the choice of subjects will be justified. In addition, a brief description of the location where the data was collected as well as how the participants of the interview were chosen. As with much research, limitations are to be expected and will therefore also be discussed at the end of this chapter.

### 3.2 RESEARCH AIMS

The knowledge future teachers need regarding behavioural issues in the classroom is quite complex and develops over time. However, the Norwegian Curricula require students to read fiction in the classroom regarding several groups which may have been neglected or viewed as outcasts. These terms include ethnicity, religion, individual diversity, and differences. *“English is an important subject when it comes to cultural understanding, communication, all-round education and identity development. The subject shall give the pupils the foundation for communicating with others, both locally and globally, regardless of cultural or linguistic background”* (Ministry of Education, 2019).

As such, literature has to some degree contributed to raising awareness and acceptance of these groups. Novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee, *Moby-Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) by Mark Haddon represent characters with disabilities, which according to the Ministry of Education (2019) will help the students *“acquire language and knowledge of culture and society”*. However, *House Rules* (2010) have not yet been included in the Norwegian Curriculum, nor in the Norwegian nor the English subject. On the other hand, novels such as Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) are already widely known and often used in the classroom. Nevertheless, and as explained above, Haddon’s novel is more suitable for the pupil’s learning outcome, whilst Picoult’s novel is more suitable for the adult’s learning outcome.

In conclusion, what the teacher learns is crucial when the goal is to give the pupil the learning environment they deserve. Since the autism spectrum diagnosis characteristics are often triggered by something in the individuals' surroundings, it is particularly important to know the wherefore, what for, and in what way. Why are these issues occurring, what is triggering them, and how can we work around them? Since this thesis will be researching how the correspondence of one main character in a novel diagnosed with Asperger's can help teachers gain insight into the autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this chapter will be structured thematically – corresponding with the findings that have been categorized and presented in appendix 7.1.

Children with autism spectrum disorder can easily be regarded as non-cooperative in the classroom due to their lack of concentration, attention, and interest in different school subjects. However, Moyes (2002) argues that poor attention may be due to their difficulties in processing language, hypersensitivity problems, or their need for alternative methods of presenting added information (p.34), which are all triggers mentioned above. Furthermore, Moyes (2002) explains that teachers feel uncomfortable and perhaps incompetent when working with children on the autism spectrum due to their lack of knowledge regarding both the diagnosis and the process of working around the pupil's triggers in the classroom.

In addition to the book *Asperger Syndrome* (Klin et al., 2000), an approach to help teachers feel more comfortable working with the diagnosis is to present them with Jodi Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010). The novel introduces us to a young adult male, Jacob Hunt, who is diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Jacob is accused of murder, and the story follows the struggle between Jacob, his family, the law, and Jacob's disability. The chapters below contain research on the different symptoms, or hallmarks, of Asperger's Syndrome, as well as some examples from the book that illustrates how difficult Asperger's Syndrome can be in a "neurotypical" world.

### **3.3 CLOSE READING**

*"Literary theory is the field of study concerned with the principles underlying the analysis and understanding of literary works"* (Oxford Languages, 2022). It helps the reader to gain a better and deeper understanding whilst reading by connecting lines between the text



itself and critical theory. Reading a text through the lens of different theories offers a different perception of understanding the literature better. Thus, this thesis will be using close reading as a method in order to unpack the deep, embedded meanings found in the primary literature, as well as a better comprehension of how Asperger's Syndrome is illustrated both in academic textbooks, as well as fictionally.

Joshua Gang (2011) argues that close reading has origins in psychological behaviourism, a psychological approach founded by John Watson (1878-1958) and B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), among others, in the 1900s. "*Building on these ideas (literary criticism reflects behaviorist advances in psychology and neurology), Richards theorized a model of literary criticism that would do two things.*" (Gang, 2011). He explains further that the model would treat literary texts as behaviours: as external phenomena exclusive of reference to mental states, as well as recording how stimuli e.g., poems affected readers physiologically, and use the results from this to analyse the meaning and genre (p.1)

Nevertheless, both Gang (2011) and Nolan (1999) agree that the close reading technique is becoming less used when analysing complex texts. "*In these postmodern, post-structuralist days, it may seem critically naïve to use a methodology that has fallen out of favor*" (Nolan, 1999, p.45). Furthermore, Nolan (1999) emphasises that "We would be poorer, less aware of how multiple perspectives can enrich our understanding of a complex text" (p.46).

Michelle Giambrone has addressed the effectiveness of close reading strategies for students with learning disabilities (2018). She refers to Johns & Puig (2015), explaining that "CR (close reading) has been found to be a motivating and engaging tool for reading comprehension (...) and shows potential for improving higher order thinking skills for students with LD (learning disabilities)" (p.26). However, this does not only apply to students with learning and / or reading difficulties. Since the techniques used during a close reading analysis have been used for over a hundred years, it has to have shown to be efficient amongst students, or else they would have been discarded.

Due to the primary literature of this thesis being a novel, close reading and analysis have been deemed the appropriate method of analysis. This is not only to analyse the content

of the text but also to encourage the reader to examine the text, keeping in mind the meaning of the story as well as taking us beyond the plot summary. In paying close attention to what we are reading, we can make an argument about how a small fragment of the text illuminates something about the whole.

According to The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC, 2011): “Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining its meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately...[It] entails the careful gathering of observations about a text and careful consideration about what those observations taken together add up to” (p.6).

However, the present thesis was conducted as a mixed methods research (MMR). As discussed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), mixed methods can involve data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, analysis and interpretation, with the purpose of “*giving a richer and more reliable understanding (broader and deeper) of a phenomenon than a single approach would yield*” (p.32). Thus, to ensure a more reliable result for this thesis, the methods used to collect data were both close reading of Picoult’s novel *House Rules* (2010) as well as conducting a focus group interview with three teachers in upper secondary school.

Cohen et al. (2018) emphasise that using mixed methods during research ensures a more comprehensive and complete understanding of phenomena rather than single methods approaches (p.33). Defending the reason for using MMR as a method, Cohen et al. explain that “... *MMR can yield insights into, and explanations of, the process at work in a phenomenon and the multiple views of the phenomenon*” (p.33) as well as increasing the accuracy of the data’s reliability through triangulation, a method used to increase the credibility and validity of research findings, reduce bias in the research, and provide a practical research approach.

### **3.3.1 Preparation**

When working with such a complex disorder as Asperger’s Syndrome, it is necessary to have some background knowledge regarding the different triggers and symptoms.

Therefore, as preparation before analysing the novel, research is necessary. This forces you to engage with the disorder as well as get a better comprehension of what is “neurotypical” (a term used to describe individuals without neurological deficits or difficulties) and what is hallmarks of Asperger’s Syndrome are.

As discussed in chapter two, a colour-coordinated chart was made prior to reading so the observations were easier to manoeuvre later in the writing process. In addition, categorizing the observations by their particular colour made me only more aware of what I was analysing to make sure I put the observations in their rightful place. In other words, as the reading process began, I was not sure of what categories I would find in the novel, so this was a “write-as-you-go”-chart. Eventually, when I discovered all the distinct categories of the diagnosis in the novel, it became easy to determine where the different findings belonged. Subsequently, only the most prominent features in the novel were chosen to be presented in the thesis.

The importance of the findings e.g., hypersensitivity, was based on how often they were mentioned in different literature, to what degree other theorists believed it affected the patient, and to what degree they were illustrated in the novel. Features such as hyper fixation on an interest or topic are one of the hallmarks shown first when meeting someone diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, whilst hypersensitivity and linguistic impediments are more in the background. Therefore, it would be more interesting to do research on the other hallmarks not so noticeable, e.g., repetitive behaviour, hypersensitivity, and linguistic difficulties.

### **3.3.2 Justifying the process**

According to Schur (1998), “The straightforward reader proceeds in a linear manner, seeking uniform, superficial meanings; the close reader becomes convinced that here there is more than first meets the eye.” (p.3). Furthermore, Schur explains that the goal of straightforward reading, in this case reading without further analysis or research, is to extract uniform answers, while a descriptive analysis contains constant decision-making. Which decisions the reader chooses to emphasize, e.g., focusing on linguistics, varies depending on what the goal of the reading is but will ideally develop a coherent interpretive viewpoint as a result. What we choose to emphasize, dissect and which elements we notice all contribute to

an intellectual exercise where we use the human capacity to choose between different elements (Schur, 1998, p.7).

### **3.3.3 Relevancy**

By using this literary theory, close reading, we eliminate the “linear manner” and redirect our focus on what is written between the lines. Furthermore, paying attention to the choice of words, punctuation, and how the author uses figurative language also provides the reader with a broader comprehension of the text, i.e., what the author emphasizes, what elements to pay attention to, and in this case, what patterns are being displayed. These language devices help the reader to question the text’s purpose and meaning. Using close reading as a method to analyse a novel, such as *House Rules* (2010) concerning a difficult diagnosis, gives the reader a deeper understanding of what is being said regarding the diagnosis, rather than *this is the diagnosis*.

To compare, when reading the novel for enjoyment, or in a “linear matter”, small details such as the choice of words or punctuation are easily missed or not noticed, whilst when close reading, these details become more apparent, resulting in an understanding of the why what and how of, in this case, the diagnosis. Since these elements are the focus of this thesis, close reading is thus a useful method for the present study. Furthermore, and to put things into perspective, a focus group interview was conducted with three teachers at an upper secondary school. Here, excerpts from the novel were discussed to let the participants speak freely regarding their thoughts on the distinctive characteristics of the syndrome, and how they would tackle the different situations in the classroom.

## **3.4 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW**

The idea of conducting a group interview came to mind two months after the writing process started. Analysing Asperger’s Syndrome was still the primary focus of the thesis; however, the discussion would only add to the collection of data, serving as a supporting argument for analysis as well as my research question. Thus, the goal of this group discussion was to see how teachers would react to the situation without knowing the specific background of the protagonist Jacob, encouraging them to use their pedagogical knowledge in a sudden happening.

### **3.4.1 Overview of the interview**

#### **Preparations**

Firstly, approval from NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) was needed to conduct this interview. This was due to the discussion being recorded and the data stored on a private computer until the project is finished, and the thesis submitted. The following compulsory criteria were satisfied: information explaining where you were going to collect the data, whether you were going to include sensitive information in your thesis, as well as where and how the data were to be stored.

Going back to the categorised chart (see appendix 7.1), excerpts from *House Rules* (2010) were chosen from these different examples; one excerpt from each focus category (hypersensitivity, linguistic impediments, and repetitive behaviour), as well as a bonus excerpt from the category concerning routines. These excerpts were chosen with care, to ensure the situations were relatable to the classroom and / or the school environment.

#### **Hand-outs and formalities**

The idea for the discussion was to hand out the excerpts, containing a brief background of the situation from the book to the participants prior to the interview. This was to encourage the participants to reflect and form questions beforehand. In addition to this, a consent form was also handed out for the participants to become familiar with the project and their rights as informants (see appendix 7.2). The consent form contained information regarding the interview process, the use of a tape recorder, as well as their rights to withdraw their consent at any time.

The participants were then informed of the discussion's train of thought: read the excerpt, ask questions, and discuss the situation as well as possible outcomes. Since this research was conducted in Norway, the participants were allowed to discuss in Norwegian if English was uncomfortable for one or more in the party. However, if the discussion were to be done in English, the participants would then be informed that I would not pay attention to either their pronunciation or any mistakes they might make, due to the recording being transcribed regardless of language use after the discussion is finished. The participants would

also be informed that if they are to forget an English term, they were more than welcome to use the Norwegian term in its place. The participants chose to conduct the interview in Norwegian, ensuring the quality of their discussion due to it being their native language.

The excerpts and discussion will be presented and analysed in chapter four.

### **3.4.2 The discussion**

The timeframe for this discussion was set at 45 minutes, where each excerpt was to be discussed for fifteen minutes. This was to prevent the conversation from subsiding too quickly. However, if it did, there were relevant, important questions (see point.3.5.3) that could be asked if needed. A fifteen-minute discussion should, however, contribute to adequate and equal participation amongst the three teachers.

However, the discussion went so smoothly that the participants were allowed to finish their discussion without disruption on my part. The interview, therefore, ended after fifty-three minutes.

### **3.4.3 Choosing the participants**

The idea for this discussion was to locate a teacher at an upper secondary school with some background knowledge regarding Asperger's Syndrome – this teacher will hereby go by the term “expert-teacher”. The expert-teacher would then choose two of her/his co-workers whom he/she felt comfortable with and were willing to participate in the project. These teachers were not required to have any background knowledge of the syndrome, in fact, they were encouraged to not have any background knowledge of the syndrome. The role of the expert-teacher was to be the “leader” of the discussion, enlightening the other two participants, answering their questions, and acting as a basis for discussion.

These participants would also be someone I was comfortable with as the project took place at the school at which I am currently working. The reason for this was on account of the staff knew who I was, which made it easier to keep a conversation going without the participants “walking on eggshells” in fear of saying something wrong or breaking the code of conduct. The code of conduct would therefore not be broken since teachers are allowed to discuss situations regarding different pupils amongst each other (staff members).

### **3.4.4 Possible issues regarding interviewing**

When conducting a focus group interview, there are several elements which could fail to work out as originally planned, such as technical issues, lack of participants, or loss of data.

Therefore, a back-up plan was made in case any of the elements failed during the process of writing this thesis.

Firstly, the issue of recording the interview. If the specific app I used as a tape recorder did not work, I had the option of choosing another app in its place. If I was to be so unfortunate that neither of those two recording-apps did not work, I would then have taken notes digitally. That would provide me with three options to collect data from the interview. Furthermore, since the recording device was a digital app, it is automatically synchronised with my cloud-account – making it accessible on every device I have linked to said account. It is then possible for me to access this recording on another device if, for instance, my phone was to delete the recording.

Furthermore, there is always a chance that the participants have to re-schedule the interview due to unexpected circumstances. I would then have asked the two other participants if they had time to conduct the interview at the originally planned date and time, and later had the exact same interview with the last participant whenever possible. However, if the lacking participant were to be the expert-teacher, who was the key participant of this particular interview, I would have suggested another date and time where all three participants were available. It was also a possibility to conduct the interview digitally through a safe platform, such as Microsoft Teams, although this would make the interpretations of body language difficult.

Moreover, since this study did not evolve around specific participants during the interview, e.g., the author of the novel analysed, the participants could be replaced if needed. Prior to the interview taking place, the participants were given a written consent form which informed them of the scope of this research as well as their rights to withdraw consent at any time. If one or more of the participants were to withdraw their consent, it would not pose as an issue to find another teacher to take their place, including the expert-teacher.

### 3.5 CODING AND CATEGORISING DATA

This research was also conducted with a grounded theory methodology, where coding is the core process. With the two different types of coding, substantive, and theoretical coding, I initially chose to focus on the substantive, or rather open, coding throughout my research. Substantive coding involves the researcher working with the data directly, fracturing and analysing it, initially through the core categories and related concepts (Holton, 2007).

In other words, substantive coding is when the researcher starts the work with a blank sheet of paper with no preconceptions of what is going to be found in the data. All codes within this type arise directly from the data itself since there are no pre-coded sets or pre-determined theory or literature. The reason for this choice was to open-mindedly work with the novel in the means of close reading. However, due to the preparations involving some research to determine the different hallmarks of the diagnosis, the method I ended up using was a mixed coding method, both substantive and theoretical coding (Holton, 2007).

The background knowledge of the hallmarks was the theoretical coding method, while the coding itself was substantive. Another part of the substantive coding was that I could not anticipate what the data would provide, and therefore had to code as I went along.

As explained in section 3.3 **Close reading**, the work prior to the reading of the novel itself began with a table in Microsoft Word where each category had its column and colour. Figure 3 illustrates that the categories were sorted into the different hallmarks of Asperger's Syndrome.

# Organizing my findings – House rules

Yellow	Extreme focus on specific topics or interests	Theoretical coding
Pink	Challenges with empathy	
Green	Hypersensitivity to sensory "assaults"	
Blue	Difficulties with changes in routines	
Orange	Difficulties with social communication and interaction	
Purple	Engaging in stereotypical, repetitive behaviour	Substantive coding

Pg	Yellow	Pink	Green	Blue	Orange	Purple					
4	... when he is intensely focused on crime scene analysis, I think a nuclear bomb could detonate beside him and he'd never flinch.	50	I just want to know what dead feels like.	7	: a bright light in the bathroom, the sound of the UPS truck coming down the gravel driveway, the texture of his	8	Saturdays, Jacob and I go food shopping.	4	Jacob blinks at me, expressionless. He lives in a literal world; it's one of the hallmarks of his diagnosis.	6	I was the one who found him, sitting in the basement, repeatedly inserting and ejecting a VCR tape.

Figure 3 - Draft of colour-chart



Coding is a method used to analyse data by identifying themes or codes that appear in qualitative data and then assigning intersections of data to those codes, in this case by assigned colours. Once we have sorted our findings into said categories, it is then easier to find specific results later as well as see how items in one category vary. Since the findings from the novel were to be used during a focus group interview, it was important that finding back to specific examples or quotations was easily done.

By sorting the findings or the analysis in this way, it makes it easy to quickly find a quotation or a statement to support another statement. As will be explained below in the results chapter, every statement made will be accompanied by either a quotation or statement retrieved from the colour chart (see appendix 7.1), which are colour coded data from the primary literature *House Rules* (2010). In addition to this, supporting facts from various literature could also be coded in the same way, via colour-coding. As an example, many quotations from Moyes (2002) were colour-coded in the same manner as Picoult's novel, e.g., statements regarding hypersensitivity in Moyes' book were colour-coded green, so connecting literature to the findings went smoothly.

Miles & Huberman (1994) exemplify in *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* that: "*Codes usually are attached to "chunks" of varying size – words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs*" (p.53). Examples from Picoult's novel were first coded and put into their assigned categories based on keywords or specific elements. Then, these examples were analysed with the help of close reading, where the main focus was to find situations that somehow could be related to the classroom, as well as triggers and / or solutions to different triggers to prevent outbursts in the classroom.

One aspect of close reading in this thesis is the use of figurative language, such as metaphors and similes. Here we see how the pupils with Asperger's Syndrome live in a literal world, making the use of for example metaphors a stressful element for these pupils. An example of a literal answer from someone diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome could be as follows: "*What is in your pockets?*" "*My hands*" (House Rules, 2010, p.241).

These examples were during the focus group interview (see results chapter) discussed with the following questions in mind: *How can teachers use these excerpts to gain knowledge*

*regarding Asperger's Syndrome, and how can Picoult's novel benefit teachers when working with pupils diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome?* Due to the method approach being colour coding and close reading, these questions were important to consider when researching how Picoult portrays Asperger's Syndrome, and how teachers can use these findings. To gain knowledge regarding the diagnosis, you have to understand the various categories of the diagnosis – the hallmarks. When the knowledge regarding the different hallmarks is in place, the coding enables the reader to interpret the different ideas and principles of the novel.

Picoult illuminated the diagnosis with a variety of whole paragraphs, as well as individual sentences, which made the findings of the novel easier to close read and code. *House Rules* (2010) were colour coded by themes – hyper fixation (yellow), linguistics (orange), empathy (pink), routines (blue), hypersensitivity (green), and repetitive behaviour (purple). Bear in mind that these assorted colours do not have any significant meaning behind them: they were only used to distinguish the different themes of Asperger's Syndrome. Since this thesis has put its main focus on linguistics, hypersensitivity and repetitive behaviour, certain keywords throughout the book were searched for.

### **3.5.1 Linguistics**

When Picoult presented the protagonists' linguistic deficits, such as living in a literal world, the words *word*, *social*, *communicate* / *communication*, *language*, *expression*, and *literal* were kept in mind when categorising. These keywords, written from the five different perspectives in the novel explain how difficult it can be for someone diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome to communicate or socialise with their peers. One of the themes is linguistic impediments combined with repetitive behaviour, and therefore are overlapping each other, and is shown in the novel with the following statement: *When he (Jacob) cannot find the words for how he feels, he borrows someone else's* (p.5).

In this particular situation, Emma, the protagonist's mother, explains both the difficulties communicating with others, as well as repetitive behaviour, since this is one of Jacob's hallmarks. Jacob uses words and phrases he has seen or heard either on the television or the radio when he feels like he lacks words to express himself and does this repeatedly. Such examples will be explained further in chapter four. Thus, the two themes, linguistic

impediments (Jacob lacking words to express himself) and repetitive behaviour (borrowing someone else's words), overlap, meaning they cover each other partly.

However, this particular example was categorised under linguistic impediments as it focuses on the situation, rather than the message itself. Here, the mother explains that the protagonist has difficulties communicating, and therefore feels the need to find different alternatives to convey his message, whereas the phrases themselves are categorised in the repetitive behaviour section.

### **3.6 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**

As already suggested, there are several advantages of the focus group interview technique as a part of mixed methods research (MMR), including a more reliable understanding of a phenomenon, discussing of several views of the phenomenon and increased accuracy of the data. At the same time, it is important to identify the limitations of this research method. Furthermore, Opdenakker (2006) illuminates that social cues, such as voice, intonation, and body language, can give the interviewer extra information that can be added to the verbal answer the participant gives. Body language tells the recipient more than what is being said verbally, for instance if the person you are conversing with is disengaged, interested or confident. One limitation to this interview, however, is that this interview was conducted in a sitting position, which makes the reading of body language difficult. On the other hand, facial expressions and hand gestures were visible.

Opdenakker (2006) continues with explaining that in face-to-face interviews, there are no time delays – the interviewer and participants can react directly on what one or the other says or does. As a result of reacting directly to an answer, Kendall (2008) explain that it is then an option to ask follow-up questions that enable the researcher to see issues from different perspectives (p.134), since this is a natural part of dialogue. This enables the interviewee to, for example, ask for clarification if the participant uses foreign terminology or re-ask the question if anything was unclear.

According to Dilshad & Latif (2013), there are also several limitations associated with the focus group interview, such as having the participants come on time to the interview,

vocal domination from different participants, and the participants e.g., confirming a statement even though they may not agree (p.197).

The interview was conducted in the participant's first language: Norwegian. This proved to be an advantage for the participants as they felt uncomfortable speaking in English. Furthermore, interviewing in their first language enabled the participants to speak more freely and naturally as they did not have to pause in the dialogue to find a fitting, English word to what they wanted to convey.

The fact that the interview was conducted in Norwegian rather than English could also prove to be a disadvantage. Regardless of how valuable the information provided from the participants may be, some words would be lost in translation due to the difficulties of finding the right translation of, for instance, Norwegian sayings. However, the quotations that will be presented in chapter four are translated in a way that the message does not, under any circumstances, lose its meaning.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the participants on the focus group interviews were my colleagues, an element which proved to be of both advantage and disadvantage. The advantage of interviewing my own colleagues was that the threshold for asking them to participate was low. Furthermore, since we are acquainted, the dialogue went naturally with lots of room for a relaxed atmosphere, including coffee and laughter. However, one disadvantage for the participants being my colleagues, is running the risk of not considering the situation to be as important as it is. This could result in the answers given by the participants not being as detailed or honest as they would be with someone unfamiliar.

In conclusion, the three interviews were sufficient to show some of the advantages of using a fictional text to elucidate some of the issues involved in teaching classes where one or more pupils have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The disadvantages will be taken into consideration when and if I wish to write another thesis.

## 4 FICTION AND INTERVIEW: AN ANALYSIS

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During the focus group interview, the participants were given four excerpts from Picoult's novel. The participants were asked to discuss this concerning the school environment and draw their own conclusions about different situations pupils might encounter during a school day. The participants were also asked to keep in mind the following research question: *How is Asperger's Syndrome portrayed in Picoult's novel, and how can this help teachers understand the special challenges for pupils with Asperger's Syndrome in school?* This method aimed to establish whether the teachers had any insight into how one can use a novel either in the teacher education or in their workplace, regardless of previous knowledge regarding the diagnosis.

As stated in the methods chapter, the three participants have different levels of experience, ranging from the expert-teacher with 17 years of experience (both as a teacher as well as working with diagnosed pupils including Asperger's syndrome), to teacher 1, who has only been working as a teacher for three years. Teacher 2 has been working as a teacher for just over two years. The expert-teacher was responsible for answering the questions asked by Teachers 1 and 2. The examples below are taken from their own, free discussion of the excerpts.

This chapter aims to both present and analyses the findings from Picoult's novel, as well as the focus group interview. The findings will be presented thematically: each theme will have a presentation of its excerpt from Picoult's novel, the results from the focus group discussion, and then a brief presentation of figurative language. The presentation of figurative language in the novel will serve as the foundation for a better understanding of the novel, as well as explain how to focus on the details of the novel. In addition to this, all the major findings from the literature review be connected to their respective themes. The chapter will be finished with a presentation of the overall findings.

## 4.1 REPETITIVE BEHAVIOUR

As presented in the literature review, repetitive behaviour is abnormal behaviour that is characterised by repetition, either with movements or words, and is one of the hallmarks of Asperger's Syndrome Disorder. The repetitive behaviour in the means of Asperger's Syndrome can be movements such as hand-flapping (stimming), fidgeting with objects, body rocking, repeating words or phrases, and grunting. Picoult presents a variety of repetitive behaviour in her novel, where repetitive movements (stimming) and echolalia (repeating words or phrases) are the most conspicuous.

What I remember about hospitals is that they smell white and stale, the lights are too bright, and every time I've been in one I've either been in pain or been ashamed or maybe both.

This makes my fingers start to flutter on my leg, and I stare at them as if they are disconnected from my body. For the past three days, I've been doing better. I'm taking all my supplements again and my shots, and it hasn't felt quite as much as if I'm constantly swimming in a bubble of water that makes it harder to understand what people say or to focus on them.

Believe me, I know it's not normal to flap my hands or walk in circles or repeat words over and over, but sometimes it's the easiest way to make myself feel better.

*Figure 4 - Excerpt  
from p.292 in  
House Rules  
(2010) by Picoult*

This excerpt combines the two categories *repetitive behaviour* and *hypersensitivity*. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, stimming is an involuntary repetitive behaviour where a child or adult with Asperger's Syndrome engages in repetitive physical movement, sounds, or words. Since stimming is common for children on the autism spectrum, there is a chance that this will happen in the classroom. The major question for teachers is whether this is appropriate behaviour in the classroom - whether this should be left alone or if the teacher needs to find other solutions for the pupil.

Before discussing the excerpt with the participants, they were provided with some background information regarding Jacob's situation at the time. This explained that the psychologist Jacob had an appointment which was located at a hospital where Jacob only had bad experiences. As a result, this causes him to start stimming. To emphasise what the goal for this excerpt discussion was, the only question asked by the researcher was: *What are your*

*thoughts regarding stimming, and could it affect the pupil's learning outcome in class?* It is important to consider whether the repetitive behaviour, especially repetitive movements, will affect either the learning outcome for the pupil with Asperger's Syndrome or the other attending pupils in the classroom.

Whilst some pupils are not bothered by movements or speech in class, others might lose focus on their tasks if interrupted. Repetitive movements, such as flapping hands, snapping fingers and fidgeting with toys could be such interruptions. However, some factors have to be taken into consideration when addressing repetitive behaviour on the autism spectrum disorder. As discussed during the focus group interview, Teacher 2 contemplated *whether* the type of stimming had a role to play in the classroom: *"As long as it's not disturbing for the other pupils, I believe that we should allow it if it helps the student calm down or focus on the task at hand"*. Teacher 2 also mentions several toys that could prove to be helpful but do not disturb the classroom, such as a stress ball or a fidget spinner.

As exemplified by Moyes (2002), *"Behavior modification only takes into consideration those behaviors that are observable and measurable"* (p.13). On the other hand, if a pupil is exhibiting self-stimulatory behaviour caused by either trauma or stress, an overcorrection of this behaviour may merely result in the student replacing one self-stimulatory behaviour with another (Moyes, 2002, p.14), for example switching from flapping hands to grunting or humming. Taking into consideration the reason for the specific behaviour is therefore important. Moyes (2002) therefore justifies this by stating that: *"The process of effectively addressing challenging behaviors comes from understanding why they are occurring"* (p.16).

Another issue with repetitive behaviour is when and whether it becomes inappropriate. The expert-teacher describes the chances of experiencing behavioural issues in the classroom as sexualised, violent, or quite simply inappropriate behaviour. Tony Attwood (2007/2008) dedicated a section in his book *Asperger Syndrome* to explaining commonly asked questions, including the question: *"Is there a greater likelihood that people with Asperger's Syndrome will be involved in crime?"* (p.418). It is further explained that people diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome can be convicted of sexual offences due to the deficits following the Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis (Attwood, 2007/2008, p.421).

The hallmarks of Asperger's Syndrome, as explained in the review chapter, can lead to a pupil or adult diagnosed acting inappropriately. First and foremost, repetitive behaviour can be removing clothes, touching themselves, or repeating offensive words or phrases (either their own or from movies, television, or the radio). Secondly, the linguistic impediments that follow the Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis can lead the individual to not understand the social cues and let them believe that sexual feelings are mutual between themselves and others, and not understand rejection (Attwood, 2007/2008, p.421). Lastly, the hyper fixation on specific topics of interest can also be a hyper fixation towards people, which can be interpreted as inappropriate and result in stalking.

As mentioned in chapter two, Theory of Mind (ToM) deficits are central to autistic spectrum disorders, including Asperger's Syndrome (Blackshaw, Kinderman, Hare & Hatton, 2001). Since this theory is based on the lacked ability to understand another human being's thoughts, beliefs, intentions and wishes, it can be concluded that inappropriate behaviour, such as the one explained above, is due to the lack of ToM. When one does not understand the hidden meaning behind body language or facial expressions, which is another hallmark of the Asperger's Syndrome, one person's message can be interpreted as something completely different than the person intended.

Teacher 1 suggests that a pupil with Asperger's Syndrome might have an assistant or a paraprofessional aide available, who can help correct troublesome behaviour. Moyes (2002) suggests that teachers ask themselves the following questions when such types of behaviours occur: *What happened to the student prior to the misbehaviour? Who was with or near the child when the behaviour occurred? What skills does the student lack that would enable him to refrain from using the behaviour? Is the student using the behaviour to get something or escape something?* (p.26).

However, if the pupil diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome are accompanied by a paraprofessional aide, this can also become a difficult situation. Moyes (2002) explains that *"They may become angry when their deficits are exposed to their classmates and for this reason resent when someone tries to help them (tutor, aides, etc.)"* (p.32). This could also be



connected to ToM, where the pupil does not understand the good intentions of the paraprofessional aide.

These questions suggest that the troublesome behaviour does not occur without a reason. It is therefore crucial that the teachers or teaching assistants try to understand the reasons for the occurrence. To understand the reason for such behaviour, it is also important to understand the core deficits of the children on the autism spectrum disorder, which is one of the research aims of this thesis.

#### **4.1.1 Figurative language regarding repetitive behaviour**

The phrase: “*Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get*” is widely used in informal language. Jacob uses this phrase to convey a message to his mom from the inside of a holding cell (p.224). Echolalia, as explained in chapter two, is the repetition of words or phrases. The novel mentions several times throughout that when Jacob lacks the words needed to converse with his family, he uses the words of someone else, in this case from the movie *Forrest Gump* (1994), wherein fact the main character also demonstrated autistic traits. In this case, the reference to another character with the syndrome could indicate that Jacob relates to Forrest Gump with his autistic qualities.

The phrase means that life is full of surprises, but you can never be certain of what surprises are coming. When opening a box of chocolates, there is a variety of shapes and flavours. However, since there are so many different pieces of chocolate in the box, you cannot be sure of which flavour you will get. You won’t know what flavour you picked until you take a bite, and then it’s done – regardless of whether you like it or not, you try it.

In the situation Jacob finds himself locked up and accused of murder. His mother finds it frustrating that neither the law enforcement officer nor the courtroom will acknowledge Jacob’s diagnosis and take it into consideration. However, Emma also mentions when she gets the message from Jacob that Forrest Gump is one of his favourites. This illustrates the hope of a solution at the end of the trial. From Jacob’s perspective, the message can also mean that he has a plan for what to do to get out of the current situation. In addition, the box of chocolates Forrest Gump is holding in the movie does not contain any colour orange, not the box itself nor any wrapping paper. As explained in the introduction chapter, orange is Jacob’s

least favourite colour, resulting in being one of his triggers. Therefore, it makes sense that Picoult (2010) chose this specific scene from *Forrest Gump* (1996) considering Jacob's peculiarities.

Many of the hallmarks of Asperger's Syndrome are not visual, but verbal. However, **repetitive movements**, or stimming, are present in the diagnosis criteria of the DSM-5. DSM-5 used the term "simple motor stereotypies" in their diagnosis criteria. In Jacob's case, this refers to the repetitive movement of flapping his hands. Picoult compares the flapping to birds twice during her novel: "*I stand up, both of my hands fluttering in front of my chest like hummingbirds, but I don't even care anymore about trying to stop them*" (p.208) and "*Jacob is sitting in the corner of his cell, one hand flapping like a bird, his shoulders hunched, his voice thready and singing Bob Marley*" (p.224).

According to Collins Dictionary (2022), "thready" (adj.) is a synonym to *thin, weak, and feeble*. Describing Jacob's voice as thready illuminates his discomfort as he finds himself in a holding cell after being accused of murdering his social skills tutor. As mentioned in the literary review chapter, echolalia is the repetition of phrases or words, where in this example Jacob is reciting Bob Marley, which is one of Jacob's peculiarities when he is feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated.

Picoult also refers to a specific type of bird once, a hummingbird, symbolising the speed of the flapping. Smaller species of hummingbirds beat their wings faster than the larger species, but the rate varies from about 25-80 beats per second (Greij, 2019). By contrast, other flying birds beat their wings less than five times per second (Greij, 2019).

Furthermore, Picoult also compares Jacob's repetitive movements to other animals: "*His knuckles are scraped raw, and he is stimming like crazy – his hand twitching at his side like a small animal.*" (p.255). What animal the author had in mind when writing this simile remains unknown, but it could also be a reference to Jacob's childhood comfort-toy: "... *tucked beneath his arm is the old Jemima Puddle-duck toy he used to carry as a child (...) It was a ritual piece – something Jacob could hold to calm himself down*" (p.132). As explained in both in the review chapter and results chapter, some repetitive movements calm down the

individual with Asperger's Syndrome. Therefore, a connection between this fact and the simile from page 132 in *House Rules* (2010) can be established.

When a teacher chooses how the classroom environment should be, the possible occurrence of repetitive behaviour should be taken into consideration. Questions, such as *“is this disturbing the other pupils?”*, *“Does this affect the learning outcome of the pupil?”* and *“could this have a calming effect on the pupil?”*, which were all discussed during the focus group interview, are all questions that should be asked by either the teacher, the paraprofessional aide or psychological support when the behaviour occurs.

Stimming is often regarded as a way for neurodivergents to calm themselves down, grounding their thoughts and sorting their minds. Therefore, the behaviour should not be restricted unless it becomes a disturbance for the other pupils. Furthermore, Education Law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, 1999) suggests a basic rule of thumb: *the types of behaviour that need to be addressed, are those that interfere with the students or that of the other student's ability to learn* (Moyes, 2002, p.16).

## **4.2   HYPERSENSITIVITY**

As mentioned in the introduction, a triggered pupil can experience an incident not only as traumatic but can also lead to violent behaviour in the classroom which can be seen as threatening to other pupils and staff members. The excerpt below illustrates the incident where Jacob is touched by Detective Matson during the process of being arrested, and Jacob reacts by punching the detective.

The minute after I arrest Jacob Hunt, all hell breaks loose. His mother cries out and starts shouting at the same moment that I put my hand on Jacob's shoulder to lead him back to the room where we do our fingerprints and mug shots – but from his reaction, you would have thought I'd just run him through with a sword. He takes a swing at me, which sets off his lawyer, who – being a lawyer – is no doubt already wondering how to keep his client from being charged for assault on an officer as well. "Jacob!" his mother shrieks, and then she grabs my arm. "Don't touch him. He doesn't like to be touched."

Figure 5 -  
Excerpt  
from p.213  
in *House  
Rules*  
(2010) by  
Picoult

During the focus group interview, the excerpt above (*see figure 5*) was discussed in terms of hypersensitivity. As mentioned in the methods chapter, the participants were encouraged to speak freely without interruption from the researcher, where the expert-teacher was responsible for answering Teachers' 1 and 2 questions. When discussing the excerpt regarding hypersensitivity in Picoult's novel *House Rules* (2010), the participants immediately drew connections between the excerpt situations and the school at which they work.

In *Addressing the challenging behavior of children with high-functioning autism/Asperger Syndrome in the classroom: A guide for teachers and parents*, Moyes (2002) emphasises that "*Restraints can be defined as techniques, appliances, etc. that restrain or 'hold back' a student from doing something dangerous to him/herself or others*" (p.13). There have been numerous discussions in teaching practice placement and in the teaching education whether a teacher is allowed to put a hand on students, especially in situations such as the excerpt above, without risking losing their teaching position.

Teacher 2 immediately notices that Jacob acted, attempting to punch the detective, and connected this to the probability of losing the relationship one might have with the involved pupil diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. "*If this situation were to take place in the classroom, you might have to intervene physically yourself, to avoid the pupil getting hurt or even hurting someone else. At that moment, you could end up making things worse*". With

this, Teacher 2 is referring to the established relationship one teacher may have with a pupil diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Teacher 2 continues the discussion by questioning how the teacher might go into this fight with good intentions of stopping someone from getting hurt but end up by triggering the pupil – which results in broken trust. *“How do you do that? What happens to the relationship afterwards? Do you end up...”* Teacher 2 asks, before the expert-teacher answers the question without hesitation: *“going back to square one? Yes”*.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training explains in their article *The use of coercion and force in school* (2019) that: *“a teacher must use physical force to avoid the student to hurt him/herself or others or disrupting property and movables. It can, for example, be necessary to use physical force to stop a fight, protect a student or oneself against a student behaving threatening or violent, or stop a student from breaking property valuables”*. Here, the Directorate emphasizes the word “must”, showing that the teacher is obligated to act if a threatening situation occurs.

Furthermore, the Directorate (2019) illuminate the difference between intrusive and nonintrusive measures. Under point 2.2.2 in the report, it is explained that nonintrusive measures are aiding methods, giving support e.g., wheelchair users. Examples of these actions could be the use of a supportive belt around the pupils' stomach to support the individual when standing upright. Intrusive measures, on the other hand, are explained in the rapport to be *“a certain access to use force or other intrusive measures when it is necessary. It is first and foremost the criminal code's regulations regarding self-defence and principle of necessity, informed consent and regulations in the health legislation that provides a legal basis for such measures”* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p.16).

After a moment of silence during the interview, the participants discussed whether it is acceptable to intervene physically in a situation to that described in excerpt 4.2, given the information above by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. They agreed that it depended on *how* you approached the pupil, and whether you have a well-established relationship with the pupil concerned or not. Teacher 2 concludes with: *“It depends whether your intentions are to be aggressive or neutralizing in the situation. Also, you have to be aware if you are gripping the pupil too hard, if they have any sensitive areas, and your*

*position – if you are to stand directly above them, you can seem very dominant and scary for the pupil.”*

Furthermore, the participants discussed how size can be a factor regarding difficult intrusive measures: (Teacher 2) *“I am 190cm tall, and when standing beside some of the male pupils, even I feel tiny. I could only imagine what it would be like for a female teacher. Having **teacher 1**, for instance, try to grab a hold of one of these pupils if they become aggressive – that just won’t work”*.

The participants ended the second discussion session with debating whether they considered themselves competent enough to manage demanding situations in school. The expert-teacher mentioned that the teacher education does not have much focus on these types of aggressive situations in school, and little to no education regarding how to intervene in these types of situations. *“... a programme teaching us how to intervene correctly in violent situations is something that could be of good use in the teacher education where you can learn how to act if someone is on the ground, being punched or kicked repeatedly, so you know what to do”* (Teacher 2). *“Even though we are not ‘required’ to act in violent situations, especially if it is a chance of getting harmed yourself, it is something that you just do – on impulse – in most cases”* (The expert-teacher).

However, according to the *Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training* (Ministry of Education and Research, 1998), all staff must *“keep an eye on the pupils to ensure they have a good psychosocial school environment, and if possible, intervene against violations such as bullying, violence, discrimination and harassment”* (§9 A-4). In other words, teachers are required by law to intervene when possible. On the other hand, the law does not require the teachers to receive proper training to intervene in such situations.

In conclusion, the participants agreed that conflict training is something that is highly requested in the teaching occupation to ensure a safe environment for all pupils. The Norwegian school system evolves around the *Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training* (abbr. The Education Act) from 1998, where chapter 9 A is often discussed amongst teachers. Chapter 9 A concerns the pupils’ school environment, explaining that all pupils attending Norwegian schools are *“entitled to a good physical and psychosocial*

*environment conducive to health, well-being and learning*” (Ministry of Education and Research, 1998, §9A).

#### 4.2.1 Figurative language regarding hypersensitivity

When looking at the categorizing chart (see appendix 7.1), similes occur in several of the categories, apart from the empathic category. The first draft of the book is written from Emma’s, the mother, perspective, where she explains that the reason for Jacob’s father leaving the family was the different triggers that could set Jacob off: “a bright light in the bathroom, the sound of the UPS truck coming down the gravel driveway, the texture of his breakfast cereal” (p.7). This example belongs to the subcategories explained in chapter two – auditory and tactile **hypersensitivity**.

When the categorizing of this thesis started in December 2021, the most noticeable hallmark of the diagnosis was, and still is, hypersensitivity. This was not only due to the lack of emphasis in the research field, as explained in the methods chapter, but also because the author chose to describe it so closely it sometimes “hit too close to home”, in other words, a description so well-structured the reader can form a relation to it. Here, Picoult used the rhetorical appeal of *pathos*, appealing to emotion. In Brinton’s article *Pathos and the “Appeal to Emotion”*: *An Aristotelian Analysis* (1988) he explains Aristotle’s definition of *pathē* (emotions) as “*feelings which influence human judgement or decision-making and which are accompanied by pleasure or pain*” (p.208).

Lastly, Picoult (2010), in this specific excerpt (see figure 5), uses direct speech, which brings extra life to the text and reveals the tone and mood of the character. In this excerpt, you can see that Emma, the narrator, is screaming by the use of exclamation marks. Furthermore, the excerpt above also uses the word “don’t”, which can be interpreted as harsh or make a negative statement. The sentence “Don’t touch him” is also an order, which Emma gives to Detective Matson, a law enforcement officer.

Also, as mentioned earlier, in chapter two, Picoult starts the novel off quite early in the story by describing the sensation of using a nasal spray for someone with tactile hypersensitivity: “(Emma’s perspective) ... for a kid with sensory issues, using a nasal spray is like waterboarding” (p.48).” Here, Picoult describes what is undoubtedly a cruel torture

method used to interrogate prisoners and compares it to neurotypicals (without tactile hypersensitivity) used for the common cold.

Since the common cold occurs frequently in the classroom during the autumn and winter season, teachers and staff must be aware of the different triggers one pupil with Asperger's Syndrome might have, as well as converse across school staff members to make sure of an equivalent approach. Moyes (2002) explains "*Once methods are put in place to address this behaviour, they must be adopted and used by everyone who works with the student*" (p.17) when addressing methods that can be used against repetitive behaviour.

However, this rule can also be adopted when the pupil is experiences hypersensitivity. Moyes (2002) also refers to parents reporting that children on the autism spectrum can shift from a calm state of mind to heightened anxiety in a relatively short period of time (p.33) which is a situation that needs a consistent approach of action, as well as knowledge of how to keep calm when the situation arises.

Furthermore, Picoult describes the sensory assault of fluorescent lighting which, as discussed earlier, negatively affects people with Asperger's Syndrome. "There are fluorescent lights on the ceiling, like they have at Walmart. I don't enjoy going to Walmart for this very reason – the lights spit and hiss sometimes due to their transformers and I worry that the ceiling will collapse on me" (p.240). Here, Picoult compares the flickering lights to a hissing snake. Snakes are considered a dangerous species due to some being venomous – this in spite of, their cultural symbolism: representing rebirth, healing, fertility, and transformation.

### **4.3 LINGUISTIC IMPEDIMENTS**

Asking rapid questions orally in the classroom is something teachers use to start a discussion and reflection in the classroom – and it usually works for neurotypical students. However, is there another way of doing this without overstimulating pupils on the spectrum? *Framework for basic skills* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training) defines oral skills as:

"Oral skills relate to creating meaning through listening and speaking. This involves mastering different linguistic and communicative activities and coordinating verbal and other



partial skills. It includes being able to listen to others, to respond to others and to be conscious of the interlocutor while speaking”.

I have never been a big fan of *I love Lucy*. That said, every time I see the episode when Lucy and Ethel are working at the candy factory and get behind on the packaging, it makes me laugh. The way they stuff the candy into their mouths and inside their uniforms – well, you know it’s going to end with Lucy wailing her famous wail.

Having detective Matson ask me these questions makes me feel like Lucy at the candy factory. At first – I can keep up – especially after I realize that he is not angry with me for coming to the hypothermic man’s crime scene. But then it begins to get more complicated. The questions stack up like the candy, and I am still trying to wrap the last one when he sends the next one my way. All I want to do is take his words and stuff them somewhere where I don’t have to hear them anymore.

Figure 6 - Excerpt  
from p.147 in  
*House Rules*  
(2010) by Picoult

Moyes (2002) illuminates that many teachers complain about their Asperger’s pupils not paying attention in class. They appear uninterested or non-focused on the activities at hand. However, it has also been explained earlier in the report that this can be due to their language processing abilities, their need for an alternative method of presentation (such as illustrations or visual aids), or their sensory processing problems. In the same way, Flick (1996) discusses the several types of attention issues that Asperger’s children may exhibit. Flick differentiates between *focused attention* (the individual’s ability to focus on a single topic) and *divided attention* (the individual’s ability to focus on two or more topics) (p.2).

The last sentence of the excerpt above (see figure 6) emphasises that Jacob is becoming over-stimulated by the questions asked by detective Matson and wants to ignore them completely. After detective Matson promises that there would only be a few more questions while the television is airing a commercial, Jacob sets his mind on not speaking to the detective until his episode of CrimeBusters is over (House Rules, 2010, p.149). As will be explained below, Moyes (2002) suggests that after asking a question, the child diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome should be granted a few seconds to process the question before asking it again – which is the opposite of what detective Matson did.

However, whether the excerpt above (see figure 6) is the definition of focused attention or divided attention can be discussed. From reading the book, Jacob has the cognitive abilities to watch his favourite television show CrimeBusters, take notes in his notepad, and talk to detective Matson at the same time – resulting in divided attention. On the other hand, when Jacob becomes overstimulated, he chooses to shut out one of the attention seekers, in this case, detective Matson. Since both CrimeBusters and the scribbling in the notepad is hobbies that Jacob enjoys doing, the least interesting topic would therefore be the first one to lose Jacob's attention.

Teacher 2, in accordance with Moyes' (2002) statement regarding pupils not paying attention in class, that teachers quickly notice if the students are uninterested in the topic or task at hand and suggests a discrete signal to the pupil diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome to regain focus. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, Flick (1996) suggested nonverbal cues, for instance tugging your earlobe or using a flash card, to let the pupil know when he or she is not paying attention in class. This is to eliminate the embarrassment of calling out their names in class (Moyes, 2002, p.50). These cues have to be established with the pupil beforehand to ensure that they know what the different cues mean.

On the other hand, Moyes (2002) mentions that children with Asperger's Syndrome may have difficulties regarding nonverbal cues and gestures (p.29), which is something to take into consideration when establishing these cues. One measure that can be made is to agree on the different gestures *with* the pupil, letting *them* decide whether "not paying attention" should be on a card that the teacher can point to when necessary, a gesture, or a verbal cue. This ensures the inclusion of pupil participation, as well as making it easier for the pupil to remember the meaning behind each cue.

Opposing to Flick (1996), Attwood (2007/2008) explains that children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome does not necessarily *notice* the discrete gestures given by an adult or other child, signaling that the person is getting annoyed by the dominant behaviour or conversation from the child diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome (p.146). It is therefore important to take these facts into consideration if a pupil diagnosed with Asperger's

Syndrome, in collaboration with their teacher, agrees on different gestures to communicate discretely.

During the focus group interview, teacher 1 also emphasises that asking questions to a pupil with Asperger's Syndrome has to be thought through. *"What will they achieve by me tossing out a bunch of questions at the same time. I think the outcome would be better if I asked the question once, and then give the pupils some time to process the question"*. Similarly, Moyes (2002) suggests that we *«do not re-ask the question unless you have allowed at least ten seconds to pass. Doing so may disrupt the student's thinking process"* (p.38). The participants continue with stating that they have experienced themselves in situations where you do not necessarily have a pre-written script to read from, resulting in needing more time to find the right words.

The participants then agree on suggesting an alternative approach to asking several questions in class: *"If you divide the classroom into sections, then each section would be responsible for answering one question each"*. If you then have six sections, you will then get six answers without overwhelming the pupils. Furthermore, teacher 2 suggests that the section involving the pupil with Asperger's Syndrome would receive a question that interests the individual, and their specific topic of interest. This way, you adapt the lesson plan in a discrete manner, as well as ensure that all pupils are included in the discussion.

#### **4.3.1 Figurative language in linguistic impediments**

As mentioned in chapter two, figurative language should be avoided when speaking with children or adults diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, since they are living in a literal world (Moyes, 2002, p.38). This is also emphasised in Picoult's novel, where she explains that one of Asperger's Syndrome's hallmarks is for the child to be very literal (House Rules, 2010, p.4).

*"When I was younger and I was asked to take a seat, I'd lift it up. Now I know that is means I am supposed to sit down"* (House Rules, 2010, p.295). As mentioned in chapter two, three and four, children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome live in a literal world, and this example retrieved from Picoult's novel shows exactly that. This example also shows that by

living in a literal world, understanding figurative language, such as idioms, can be complicated for someone with Asperger's Syndrome.

Furthermore, Jacob explains that: *"People are always saying things that aren't true. Like when Theo tells me to get a grip. It doesn't mean hold something, it means calm down"* (p.423). Neurotypicals, defined in the introduction, use figurative language in their speech to give their sentences more detail, or a better understanding of what we are trying to describe. However, for someone diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, taking everything literally, figurative language can be interpreted as lying or not telling the entire truth.

Attwood (2007/2008) explains that children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome tends to not understand or become confused when others use figurative language, irony, hints, and sarcasm. An example, presented in Attwood's book (2207/2008), is the question *"Can you make a pot of tea?"* (p.270), where the child with Asperger's Syndrome would make a pot of tea, but not understand that the question also requested for the tea to be served. The person with Asperger's Syndrome should not be regarded as lazy, stupid, or reluctant. We just have to understand that they react to the literal meaning, and not the implicit meaning (Attwood, 2007/2008, p.270).

Similar situations can occur in the classroom. A teacher can ask the pupils if they know the answer to a specific question. Indeed, the pupil diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome might know the answer to the question, but you as a teacher run the risk of not *getting* an answer, due to you not *asking* for the answer. In addition to being a direct retelling, detective Matson states to Jacob that: *"You didn't tell me about the backpack, either"* where Jacob nods agreeingly and answers: *"You didn't ask"* (House Rules, 2010, p.157)

Another aspect of living in a literal world is saying exactly what is on your mind, without considering whether the information will be regarded as rude or inappropriate. The title of Picoult's novel, House Rules, refers to the Hunt-family's rules: clean up your messes, tell the truth, brush your teeth twice a day, don't be late for school, and take care of your brother; he's the only one you've got.

However, rule number two confuses Jacob: *“Telling the truth was supposed to set you free, wasn’t it? SO how come it got me in trouble when I told a new mother that her baby looked like a monkey? Or when I read another kid’s paper in class during a peer edit and said it was abysmal? Or when I told my mother that I felt like an alien who’d been sent down to analyze families, since I never really seemed to be a part of ours”* (House Rules, 2010, p.207).

In the paragraph above, Picoult emphasises Jacob’s strong feelings by using the rhetorical device anaphora. Anaphora is widely used in songs, movies, political speeches, and poetry. As mentioned in chapter one, by ‘poetry’, Aristotle meant all imaginative literature, including fiction (Oatley, 2012, p.425). In this case, the emphasis on Jacob’s repetition of the word “or” in the beginning of every sentence expresses his feelings regarding the different situations where he felt like he ‘did not belong’. As explained numerous times throughout the present thesis, children diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome live in a literal world.

The emphasis put on the repetition of the word “or” does a number of things: it creates rhythm in the text, it gives structure to a lengthy list and long sentences, and it makes the paragraph memorable for the reader. In addition to this, the last sentence of the example also illuminates how Jacob feels regarding him being the only one that is ‘different’ in his family. Speaking of rhetoric, as explained in section 4.2.1, Picoult also uses pathos, the appeal to emotion, convincing the reader of an argument.

#### **4.4 OVERALL RESULTS**

The last question of the focus group interview asked the participants how Picoult’s novel *House Rules* (2010) can be used to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers can work with pupils diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. The overall results from the discussion show that the participants of the focus group interview gained, from only a fifty-three-minute discussion, a better understanding of how the diagnosis works, as well as different approaches to difficult situations.

Teacher 2 points out that *“even though I have not read the book, but only seen the excerpts given to us, I feel like I have gotten a deeper insight into different types of situations,*

*such as hypersensitivity*". Furthermore, teacher 1 emphasises that it is not the long list of diagnostic criteria the teachers need to gain information, but rather situations, such as the excerpts, to gain perspective and discuss how teachers can approach the pupil safely. By reading excerpts, instead of diagnostic criteria provided by the DSM-5, teachers can keep focus throughout the situations presented.

The expert-teacher also concluded that excerpts from Picoult's novel can be relevant in the teacher education, especially in the subject of pedagogy, for the teacher students to discuss during a case study. The expert-teacher continues with stating that *"situations where we could use this information does indeed occur. It's just that we don't have the knowledge to neither prevent this from happening nor the knowledge to avert it"*. Moreover, teacher 1 stresses that the current curriculum for the teacher education does not address the challenging behaviour a teacher will encounter in the degree it should be addressed. Even though the University Curriculum for the teacher education teaches classroom management, it is only taught for one out of ten semesters.

Furthermore, teacher 2 emphasises the extreme difference between learning how to become a teacher during the teacher education and participating in practice placement. Teacher 2 continues with: *"It is one thing to sit in a lecture hall and be taught how to act like a teacher. However, no one ever taught me how to handle such situations that we have read from the excerpts"*.

There is indeed a major difference in what you learn during lectures, and what you learn from experiencing. Schank, Berman & Macpherson (1999) emphasise that *"Schools are currently in need of radical change. We exist in a culture in which fact-based knowledge dominates traditional instruction"* (p.164). By this, the authors are referring to the concept of **learning-by-doing** – a simulation in which students (in this case both upper secondary school and Universities) pursue an aim by exercising target skills and using relevant subject knowledge to help them achieve said aim. It can therefore be concluded that to gain experience regarding situations as mentioned above, a practical approach is favourable to a theoretical approach.

## 5 THESIS CONCLUSION

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This chapter will conclude the present study by summarising the key research findings in relation to the research aims and research questions, as well as the value and contribution thereof. It will also propose opportunities and suggestions for future research.

After extensive research on the subject, Picoult created a character whose traits and characteristics are consistent with those diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. By depicting Jacob as the intelligent, resourceful, and compassionate person he is, the novel enforces a positive perspective on the Asperger's diagnosis. This research aimed to identify how fiction, specifically *House Rules* (2010) by Jodi Picoult, portrays Asperger's Syndrome and how this information can help teachers understand the special challenges for school pupils with Asperger's Syndrome. By analysing figurative language, colour coding, and excerpts from the novel as a basis for discussion among three teachers, it can be concluded that there is indeed a knowledge gap regarding different diagnoses among teachers. This thesis has shown how much more focus this diagnosis, as well as other diagnoses, should have both in the teacher education as well as the everyday work of teachers.

Diagnoses, such as Asperger's Syndrome, are not included in the University Curriculum for the teacher education as of 2022. They are, however, present in school. Through the work of researching, as well as understanding the different criteria, or hallmarks, teachers can become more aware of the needs in regards of the pupil diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. This work could not only ease the workload of the teacher and paraprofessional aides but also avoid the diagnosed pupil from experiencing traumatic events in an environment that is supposed to be a safe place. Not addressing the hallmarks of Asperger's Syndrome, such as hypersensitivity, can also result in the pupil not being motivated to engage in schoolwork, and ultimately ruin their chances of being accepted into universities in the future.

Throughout this work, I have not only stated the clinical facts about the syndrome, such as the misdiagnosis between Asperger's Syndrome and Schizophrenic Psychosis, but also suggested how the hallmarks of the syndrome should be addressed in school, such as with a

predictable timetable, good relations with the teachers, and self-stimulatory devices available for the pupils at all times. By conducting a focus group interview, the present thesis also gained an insight in suggestions of self-stimulatory devices for the pupil to have easily accessible, such as stress balls or fidget spinners.

The focus group interview has indeed provided this thesis with valuable information regarding the knowledge level of different diagnoses present in school, and how the knowledge gap should be addressed in the future. The interview did not only enlighten the participants of the diagnosis's different triggers and hallmarks, but also showed the lack of knowledge regarding Asperger's Syndrome in school. The discussion among the teachers also emphasizes the fact that even with a wide range of experience, the common knowledge regarding intervening in demanding situations is scarce, especially when it involves a vulnerable group of pupils.

Writing in and of itself is a process based upon decisions. In this thesis I decided to analyse Picoult's novel in the search of discovering how the different hallmarks of the diagnosis can be portrayed and connect this to the upper secondary school. However, if I were

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*“Life itself is a spectrum disorder, where each of us vibrated at some unique frequency in the continuous rainbow”*      *Richard Powers, 2021*

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to write another research paper in the field of unfolding diagnoses in fiction, I would have compared two or more fictional texts with different diagnoses, for instance Asperger's Syndrome versus ADHD. Another approach to this type of research is to let the pupils read the fiction by making it a research project in school. This way, the pupils can learn about different diagnoses directly. It would then be possible to include questions that the pupils have to answer during their reading sessions, write a reading-log, have book discussions and so forth.



This project challenged unconventional situations in the school environment among upper secondary school pupils by unfolding tough questions in a safe place with their teachers. In doing so, this thesis revises the way both case studies should be prioritised for all staff members in a pedagogical field of work. Even so, Asperger's Syndrome is only the beginning of an extensive line of diagnoses present in school in the need of our attention.

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## 7 APPENDICES

### 7.1 HOUSE RULES

#### Organizing my findings – House rules

**Yellow** Extreme focus on specific topics or interests

**Pink** Challenges with empathy

**Green** Hypersensitivity to sensory "assaults"

**Blue** Difficulties with changes in routines

**Orange** Difficulties with social communication and interaction

**Purple** Engaging in stereotypical, repetitive behaviour

Pg	Yellow		Pink		Green		Blue		Orange		Purple
4	... when he is <u>intensely</u> focused on crime scene analysis, I think a nuclear bomb could detonate beside him and he'd never flinch.	50	I just want to know what dead feels like.	7	: a bright light in the bathroom, the sound of the UPS truck coming down the gravel driveway, the texture of his breakfast cereal.	8	Saturdays, Jacob and I go food shopping.	4	Jacob blinks at me, expressionless. He lives in a literal world; it's one of the hallmarks of his diagnosis.	6	I was the one who found him, sitting in the basement, repeatedly inserting and ejecting a VCR tape.
9	(Facts about fingerprints)	82	I think that's the attribute I miss seeing the most in my son: empath. He worries about hurting my feelings, or making me upset, but that's not the same as viscerally feeling someone else's pain.	48	... for a kid with sensory issues, using a nasal spray is like waterboarding.	10	(Free-Sample-Lady is sick)	5	When he cannot find the words for how he feels, he borrows someone else's.	9	Jacob's hand begins to flap against his leg
19	(Jacob's talents and interests)	145	'It doesn't strike you as odd that your son isn't upset by his tutor's disappearance? (...) My son didn't even get upset when his grandfather <u>died</u> .'	185	When you are already hypersensitive to the feeling of anything against your skin or to people standing close enough to touch you, there is absolutely nothing about sexual relationship that makes it an experience you look forward to	20	I get upset if plans don't work out or if something in my schedule changes, and sometimes I just can't control what happens. I go all Hulk – screaming, swearing, hitting things.	7	I made a face, and he tried to guess which emotion went with it.	96	His hands flap at his sides as he shoves me into the wall and runs up to his room.

### 7.2 CONSENT FORM – FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

## Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

*Asperger's Syndrome in Picoult's House Rules: to understand the special challenges for AS pupils in school*

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å åpne for en fri diskusjon mellom dere lærere om ulike utdrag fra boken *House Rules* (2010) av Jodi Picoult. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

## Formål

Denne masteroppgaven forsker på hvordan diagnosen Asperger Syndrom presenteres i boken *House Rules*, samt hvordan denne hovedpersonens symptomer og reaksjoner kan knyttes til elever med samme diagnose i skolehverdagen. Problemstillingen spør om hvordan denne boken kan være behjelpelig med å forstå de omfattende behovene diagnosen har, men også hvilke muligheter den åpner opp for.

### **Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?**

Høgskolen i Østfold er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

### **Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?**

Jeg har valgt å spørre akkurat dere om å delta på det grunnlag av deres annsinnet, erfaring og kunnskap som lærere. Etter å ha jobbet i skolen over lengre tid har dere utviklet en bred forståelse for hvor ulike elever kan være, hva de måtte trenge i løpet av en dag, og hvordan man håndterer uforutsette hendelser.

### **Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?**

Hvis du velger å delta i dette prosjektet vil det innebære at du deltar aktivt, og under lydopptak, i en fri samtale med andre lærere hvor dere skal:

- Lese 2-3 utdrag fra boken *House Rules*. Disse utdragene er valgt ut med omhu som veiledning til diskusjonen.
- Diskutere i 2-4 minutter om deres tanker, erfaringer, tips og triks til hvordan dere hadde løst situasjonen.

- Diskutere i 5-10 minutter om hvordan dere kan bruke disse utdragene i deres hverdag. Var det nyttig? Lærte du noe nytt? Har dette gitt deg bedre forståelse av diagnosen? Er dette noe som kan implementeres i for eksempel personalmøter hvis det er elever på deres skole med diagnosen?

Etter intervjuet er gjennomført vil lydopptaket bli transkribert, og alle deltakere vil bli anonymisert. Hvis det er ønskelig for vedkommende kan dette dokumentet sendes på en trygg plattform for godkjenning før det blir brukt.

### **Det er frivillig å delta**

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

### **Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger**

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

- Det er bare jeg som student som har tilgang til lydopptaket. Transkriberingen vil bli delt med min veileder etter at deltakere er anonymisert.
- Jeg kommer ikke til å innhente personopplysninger om dere.

Etter endt skriving vil dere ikke bli gjenkjennbare. Alle opplysninger som kan knyttes til stilling, arbeidsplass (navn på skolen) og lignende vil ikke bli innhentet.

### **Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?**

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes/oppgaven er godkjent, noe som etter planen er i midten av mai 2022. Når prosjektet er avsluttet vil både lydopptak og transkribering bli slettet.

## Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

## Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Høgskolen i Østfold har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

## Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- *Høgskolen i Østfold* ved *Simone-Anett Berg Eilertsen (student)* og / eller *Jane Mattisson Ekstam (veileder)*.
- Vårt personvernombud: Line Mostad Samuelsen  
epost: [line.m.samuelsen@hiof.no](mailto:line.m.samuelsen@hiof.no)  
tlf: +47 696 08 234

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost ([personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no)) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

*Simone-Anett Berg Eilertsen*



(Forsker/veileder)

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## Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet [*sett inn tittel*], og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- ☐ å delta i uformelt gruppeintervju
- ☐ at forsker utfører lydopptak, for å deretter anonymisere mine svar

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)