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Connecting the Dots between Academic and Social-Emotional Learning with Literacy

by Allison Phillippe

One year in my fourth-grade class, I had a student named Eric (pseudonym). Eric's previous teachers would say things like: "Just wait till you have Eric," and "When Eric gets to fourth grade...good luck." Eric was behind academically and needed additional support from school interventionists in reading. Eric had also previously lost his dad to suicide, and his mom was working hard to make ends meet. Eric would often get frustrated with learning and resort to anger and acting out in class. When Eric walked into school on his first day of fourth grade, he assumed I had already given up on him. I will not argue that Eric wasn't challenging to teach; he definitely was. Because of these challenges, I knew he needed me the most.



Allison Phillippe

In this article, I discuss how social-emotional learning (SEL) can be incorporated into commonly-used literacy instructional practices to help meet the needs of all students, especially those like Eric, who have had "adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, the death of a parent, or witnessing community violence" (Price & Ellis, 2018, p. 18). A report from the National Survey on Children's Health found that 47% of all children in the US have had at least one ACE, which increases a student's need for trauma-informed instructional practices that support the child's overall success (Price & Ellis, 2018). Today, these numbers are likely to be higher as our nation copes with a global pandemic, racial unrest, and overall political turmoil (Shafer, 2020). Price and Ellis (2018) also explain that the greater number of ACEs children experience, the greater the probability that they will "struggle academically and disengage from school" (p. 18). Supporting SEL is one trauma-informed approach

that provides students with safe strategies for managing their feelings to cope with emotional stress, be mentally prepared to learn, and become active and engaged citizens (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017; Gulbrandson, 2018; Shafer, 2020). Supporting students' SEL teaches students to express their feelings in a healthy way and to learn safe strategies for managing their feelings (Gulbrandson, 2018).

Implementing trauma-informed practices, such as SEL, and working to build a positive relationship with Eric, are what guided him towards success. At the same time, it can be challenging to find time within the school day to implement trauma-informed practice to support a student's SEL. One option is integrating SEL into literacy instruction with interactive read-alouds, small group instruction, and class discussions (Britt et al., 2016). While supporting SEL with literacy instruction *alone* is insufficient to meet *all* the needs of students who have endured many ACEs, it offers possibilities to support students like Eric during a typical school day.

Did Eric continue to struggle with academics and behavior? Yes. However, by supporting his SEL through literacy, he grew in his willingness to participate, his overall motivation in class, and his self-confidence. He allowed himself to trust that as his teacher I was not going to give up on him. He also made academic and behavioral growth throughout fourth grade. The purpose of this

article is to provide teachers with suggestions to support SEL through literacy instruction to help students apply social-emotional themes from text to their own lives.

What is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

SEL is defined as “the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors” (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017, p. 220). SEL is an important part of a child’s education because it goes beyond teaching students the skills they need to be successful in the classroom. SEL helps teach students the skills they need to be successful in life (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). SEL is also an important component of trauma-informed practice, but there is limited understanding of how literacy can directly impact the development of students’ social-emotional skills (Britt et al., 2016; Gulbrandson, 2018).

Connection between Social-Emotional and Academic Learning

SEL and literacy instruction can work together to benefit students’ academic and social-emotional well-being (Britt et al., 2016). However, Britt et al. (2016) also explain that while a curriculum specifically designed with SEL in mind is beneficial, it can be expensive or require training, which makes it difficult for teachers to implement. Instead, I am suggesting that one way teachers can support SEL is with their current literacy instruction. Teachers are regularly using important practices that can build literacy skills while simultaneously building social-emotional skills as well.

Additionally, supporting SEL with literacy instruction aligns to the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For example, in the second-grade standard, RL.2.3, students are expected to “describe how characters change in a story and respond to major events and challenges,” which can be enhanced when students understand how a character’s emotions and abilities to handle conflict relate to their own (McTigue et al., 2015, p. 93). In order for SEL and literacy instruction to work together

to benefit students’ overall well-being, I will explain which literacy instructional practices can support SEL and how teachers can easily include these components in their everyday teaching.

Supporting SEL with Literacy Instruction

To support SEL with literacy instruction, I suggest providing students access to texts that contain social-emotional content that they can apply to their own lives through interactive read-alouds, small group instruction, and class discussion focused on character analysis. These suggestions are also aligned with the *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K to 3* and *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades 4 and 5* (2016a), which researchers created to focus instruction on a set of evidence-based practices to improve children’s literacy in Michigan. In fact, some of the essential literacy practices that are already in place can be used to support SEL. Incorporating SEL into these areas of literacy instruction can benefit the academic and emotional success of the whole child.

Access to Text with Social-Emotional Content

The *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K to 3* (2016a) recommend incorporating books that reflect children’s backgrounds and cultural experiences (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network [MAISA] Early Literacy Task Force, 2016a). Similarly, it is important to give students access to texts with social-emotional content that they can connect to the experiences and challenges in their own lives (Britt et al., 2016). However, it can be difficult for teachers to find time to locate texts and plan how to successfully fit them into their instruction. Britt et al. (2016) identified texts with social-emotional content that address common classroom behaviors. Their recommendations are based on experiences in kindergarten, first, and third grade classrooms. (See Figure 1). Teachers can use these texts with students based on their social-emotional needs within the following instructional practices: interactive read-alouds, small group instruction and classroom discussion focused on character analysis. The books included in Figure 1 will also be included as examples throughout this section.

Book	Content	When to use	In Context
<i>Calm Down Time</i> By: Elizabeth Verdick	Explores calm down strategies such as deep breathing and asking for help from others.	When teachers notice students becoming frustrated, teachers can prompt students to use one of the strategies described in the book.	Kindergarten students identified and discussed things they could do to calm themselves down: find a quiet space, tell the teacher you're upset, think of things that make you happy.
<i>The Energy Bus</i> By: Jon Gordon	Provides strategies for focusing on the positive, and how to deal with challenging situations in a kind and positive way.	When teachers notice students struggling with a challenge, teachers can prompt students to adopt a positive mindset towards themselves and others.	Third grade students emphasized the importance of not being a bully and demonstrated that a positive mindset will allow you to act kindly towards others.
<i>How Full is your Bucket?</i> By: Tom Rath	Outlines the importance of treating others in a positive way and helps students understand ways they can demonstrate care and acts of kindness towards others.	When teachers observe students expressing negative emotions and acting inconsiderately towards others, teachers can encourage students to pay attention to their own state of mind and demonstrate thoughtful actions towards others.	A kindergarten student stated that after she was mean to someone, she felt ashamed, indicating that she was developing appropriate emotions in response to her own negative behaviors.
<i>The Invisible Boy</i> By: Trudy Ludwig	Explores how children feel when they are not included. Students learn the importance of developing relationships outside their immediate group of friends.	When certain students are not included in group activities, teachers can encourage students to include children who are not part of their social circle.	First grade students were able to empathize with the main character who was being ignored. They said this would make them feel sad and expressed negative sentiments about the classmates who were ignoring him.
<i>Zach Gets Frustrated</i> By: William Mulcahy	Provides children with suggestions for positive reframing to employ an optimistic outlook when faced with negative situations.	When teachers notice children focusing on experiences that could affect them in a negative way, teachers can encourage students to consider alternative ways of viewing situations.	First grade students were able to identify situations in which they got frustrated and were able to describe strategies they could use to calm themselves down in negative situations.

Figure 1. Book Descriptions and Classroom Implementation (based on Britt et al., 2016)

Interactive Read-Alouds

Teachers can use interactive read-alouds to guide students in their understanding of how a book's theme can connect to desired classroom behaviors and components of SEL. Wright (2019) describes interactive read-alouds as an “incredibly effective method for supporting children's literacy learning where adults read text to children and facilitate discussion of the text” (p. 4). Read-alouds are considered interactive when students are actively involved in thinking and talking about the text (Wright, 2019). Similarly, interactive read-alouds also offer opportunities to learn from text that students cannot yet experience independently and allow for enhanced discussions (MAISA Early Literacy Task Force, 2016a). When combined with strategic questioning, interactive read-alouds provide a way teachers can incorporate SEL into the regular school day (Britt et al., 2016).

For example, I incorporated texts into my interactive read-alouds that dealt with themes of loss and grief such as *One Wave at a Time* by Holly Thompson or *The Memory Box: A Book About Grief* by Joanna Rowland. While this topic benefited the whole class, Eric, specifically, could connect to what the characters were experiencing. Texts with social-emotional themes can benefit all students' well-being but choosing a text with the emotional needs of specific students in mind can help them feel valued, while providing opportunities for the students to connect with characters to explore their own emotions. The following are four components of interactive read-alouds that can support SEL.

Selecting Texts and Establishing a Purpose. When selecting a book with social-emotional content, the teacher's choice will depend on the emotional needs of the students in their classroom. For example, if the teacher notices certain students are not being included in group activities, they may choose to read *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig. The teacher should convey the purpose of the interactive read-aloud to the class, while being cautious not to call out any individual students with those specific social-emotional needs. Instead, teachers can describe the purpose more generally. For example, they could say: “Today we are going to read *The Invisible Boy*. Pay close attention to

the colors in the illustrations to show how the character is feeling as we read.”

Planning and Practicing. The most effective interactive read-alouds are purposeful and planned (Wright, 2019). Planning an interactive read-aloud ahead of time includes “the types of questions, ideas and words that will be discussed” (Wright, 2019, p. 5). To help the interactive read-aloud be successful, the teacher should plan specific stopping points and questions to ask that will explore the story's connection to SEL. For example, when reading *The Invisible Boy*, the teacher could pause when the main character, Brian, is not chosen to play, left out during lunch, or seemingly ignored by his classmates and teacher. When the teacher stops, they can ask their students: “What do you notice about Brian during this part of the story? How do you think Brian is feeling? Why?”

Connecting and Extending. When reading aloud a book with the purpose of exploring social-emotional content, questions should be open-ended. They should emphasize how the character is feeling and allow students to make connections to their own emotions (Britt et al., 2016). Depending on the grade level, the teacher may also want to provide students with a writing or drawing prompt related to the aspect of SEL addressed in the book to assess and extend learning. Using the example of *The Invisible Boy*, the teacher could discuss connections between how Brian is feeling and a time when the students in the class felt left out. The teacher could extend this thinking with a writing or drawing prompt for students to reflect on the story in relation to their own emotions. Similarly, students could participate in role-playing scenarios connected to the theme of the text to extend their learning and benefit their social-emotional development. Role-playing is fun, engaging, and an important participatory element in the practice of SEL (Gfroerer & Nelsen, 2021).

Using Expression and Tone. Another consideration is tone of voice while reading the text aloud. If the purpose of the book is to teach calming strategies for students, the teacher could read the book in a calm voice. The expression and tone of the interactive

read-aloud should match how the character feels (Britt et al., 2016). If the character in the book is feeling sad or upset, like Brian in *The Invisible Boy*, the teacher's tone should match the character's emotions. Expression and tone not only help engage students with the text, but can assist students in identifying how the character is feeling, which can support students in identifying their own emotions to support their SEL.

Small Group Instruction

Small group instruction is another literacy practice that can support SEL. Small group instruction “provides and supports opportunities for small group discussion of literature and disciplinary text so that students can draw on their own knowledge and the knowledge of their peers to co-construct the meaning of text” (MAISA Early Literacy Task Force, 2016b, p. 3). Small group instruction is differentiated and responsive to individual student needs (Berne & Degener, 2010). Similarly, Tyner (2019) explains that in order to differentiate literacy instruction, teachers can group their students strategically and deliver instruction to meet their needs. The grouping of students is also flexible in that the groups can shift based on the changing academic, social, and emotional needs of each student (Cox, 2014).

Using text that features social-emotional content and creating small groups based on students' social-emotional needs can help teachers focus on developing understanding of social skills and helping students connect emotionally to make meaning of the text (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). In the small group setting, children can benefit from the social experience of “practicing taking turns, listening to others, and using language in socially acceptable ways” while learning important literacy skills (Doyle & Bramwell, p. 558). Additionally, the small group setting could be a safer space to help students feel comfortable reading and discussing social-emotional content (Cox, 2014). Literature circles, book clubs, and instructional conversations can also support SEL and be facilitated within small group instruction to help students work together to develop a deeper meaning of the text.

In addition to interactive read-alouds, the small group setting allowed Eric the opportunity to read, connect,

and discuss text with social-emotional content in a safe space with peers he felt comfortable with. For example, we focused on how characters in texts handle their big emotions and safely express themselves. Discussing these ideas in a small group setting offered Eric an opportunity to share his thoughts, which he might not have felt safe doing with the whole group. The following components of small group instruction can support SEL.

Establishing the Purpose. Consider the following example. Students in the class are feeling upset because of continuing social conflicts on the playground. The teacher notices that these students are friends who are becoming frustrated while playing games during recess, causing them not to treat each other kindly. These social conflicts on the playground could escalate and cause the students involved to feel upset, worried, or anxious during class, impacting their readiness to learn during class. This is just one example of a situation a teacher might witness that could be positively impacted by SEL. However, the teacher might feel like they don't have enough instructional time in the day to address it, but they care about their students' well-being and want to guide them through this challenging social conflict in a positive way. One way the teacher could support these students is through small group instruction during their literacy block. This offers an opportunity for teachers to support the students' SEL by providing strategies for social conflicts in a productive setting that also benefits their academic learning.

Addressing a social conflict in this way can prevent students from feeling called out or in trouble. To help the students' experience be a positive one, the teacher should explain the purpose of their small group time in a way that assures students that they are not in trouble. During the literacy block, the teacher could begin their small group by saying: “Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I pulled you together to discuss this book with me. I think it could help you find a positive way to address the conflict you have been having on the playground. You are all great students and good friends, and I want to help you have more fun on the playground. I think reading about and discussing the characters in this book and how they work to solve

their problems might give you some ideas to use when you are feeling frustrated by a friend's behavior.”

Selecting Texts and Offering Instruction. After establishing the purpose with students, the teacher could introduce the book *The Energy Bus* by Jon Gordon. Depending on the grade level, the teacher could decide to have their students read the text independently or read it together. This is a book that focuses on the importance of being kind and developing a positive attitude during a challenging situation with friends. During the small group instruction, which could be broken up into numerous meetings over multiple days, the teacher could guide students in determining the theme, connecting the theme to their own social-emotional learning, and developing solutions to apply the ideas in this story to their own situation. By doing so, the teacher is addressing the students' individual needs both emotionally and academically. The small group addresses the social-emotional conflicts in a positive way, but students are also being provided with an opportunity to “draw on their own knowledge and the knowledge of their peers to co-construct the meaning of the text” (MAISA Early Literacy Task Force, 2016b, p. 3).

Connecting students' ideas, extending student thinking, and supporting claims with ideas in the text can all be accomplished during classroom discussions (MAISA Early Literacy Task Force, 2016b). Highlighting the connection between what characters think and feel allows students to analyze how the character's feelings are driving the plot and can connect the feelings of the characters to their own (McTigue et al., 2015). Classroom discussions focused on characters and students' emotional connections with those characters “fosters defensible insights and better understanding” (Roser et al., 2007, p. 558). One way to emphasize the social-emotional connections to characters is by the teacher supporting their classroom discussion with a graphic organizer. One such organizer is the chart for multiple perspectives (CHAMP) created by McTigue et al. (2015). I have included a modified version of CHAMP in Figure 2 that can help students understand characters motivations, describe how the characters are feeling, and connect their own emotions to the characters in the story.

This graphic organizer can be used to facilitate higher-level thinking and discussion in which students

<p>Name of Character:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>What the character is feeling.</p> <p>I know the character is feeling this way because</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>My Name:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>How this connects to my own feelings.</p> <p>What can I learn from this character?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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Figure 2. Connecting Character and Student Emotions (based on McTigue et al. 2015)

consider the feelings and emotions of the characters and how they can impact their own social and academic development. It is important to provide students with strategies that assist comprehension in structural elements (setting, plot, etc.) but also the characters' internal conflict and thoughts (McTigue et al., 2015).

Students, like Eric, coping with the emotional stress caused by ACEs may be able to identify a character's emotions in a story but may have a difficult time connecting it back to themselves. In order for Eric to apply moral lessons from a text to his own social-emotional learning, he needed to identify how the character is feeling, comprehend why they are feeling that way, then transfer that lesson back to his own situation, which can be a demanding task (Kruse, et al., 2020). This graphic organizer would help Eric organize how his own emotions connected to the character, learn from the character's experience, and apply it to his own life. The following are components of class discussion focused on character analysis that can support SEL.

Selecting Texts and Establishing the Purpose. Similar to selecting text for interactive read alouds and small group instruction, when choosing a text with social-emotional content to support class discussions, the emotional needs of the students should be taken into consideration. Additionally, McTigue et al. (2016) recommends selecting books with a plot driven by interpersonal conflict, characters that are relatable, and a text that is engaging and appropriate for the grade level. The text selection also depends on the purpose of the class discussion. For example, if the objective is to explore how to handle feelings of frustration in a positive way, the teacher may have students read the book *Zach Gets Frustrated* by William Mulcahy to their class during an interactive read-aloud.

Offering Instruction. After reading this book the teacher might use class discussion to analyze Zach's motivations, describe how Zach is feeling and why he is feeling this way, connect students' own emotions to Zach's, and discuss what lessons can be learned from the character. The graphic organizer could support the discussion in a variety of ways, depending on the grade

level. It could serve as a preliminary activity before the discussion for students to formulate their ideas, it could be used as a guide during the discussion and be filled out together as a class, or it could serve as a formative assessment and be completed following the discussion. Overall, focusing class discussions on topics connecting SEL and literacy can help students transfer ideas from characters in text to their own social-emotional growth.

Conclusion

Many students who have experienced trauma could greatly benefit from SEL (Price & Ellis, 2018). Literacy instruction and SEL can overlap to set students up for long-term success both academically and emotionally. Students, like Eric, might have great potential, but ACEs present social-emotional barriers that make academic learning challenging. The ability to incorporate SEL into existing literacy instruction is one way to ensure we are meeting the individual needs of each student. Overall, teachers need to be prepared to support their students on a social-emotional level in order to reach them on an academic level to benefit their overall success and well-being.

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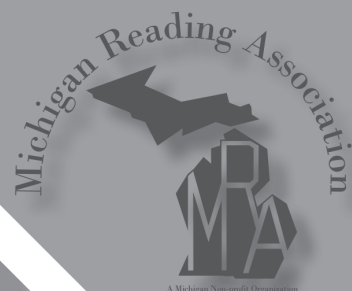
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