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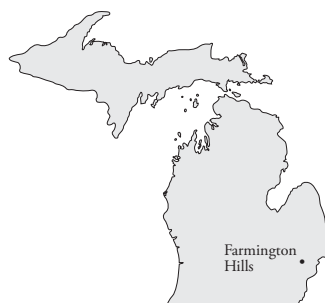
Breaking Barriers in the Post Pandemic Classroom: Integrating Social and Emotional Learning Through Persona Poetry

by Lindsay Diem

Lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have proven to be challenging for teaching and learning in middle school classrooms. Teachers are struggling to engage their students. Material that has been implemented successfully for years by seasoned teachers with decades of experience is now being met with resistance. Personally, I know first-hand what that feels like. As an educator for the last sixteen years in both public and charter schools, I am still trying to wrap my head around the “new normal” in my 7th grade Language Arts classroom. In my experience, part of that new normal in Farmington Public Schools has been finding ways to connect with students who have been severely impacted by the isolation and trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have been embracing the social and emotional learning (SEL) framework as a basis for structuring my units and lessons and using themes of grief and reflection as tools to process the experiences each of these young adults endured. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines SEL as:

How children and adults learn to understand and manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. CASEL’s framework identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, cited in Walker, 2020).

When I initially began integrating SEL in my lessons, I experienced many barriers. The biggest one was competing with the digital autonomy that these students have had for the last two years during lockdowns and school closures. Twenge & Campbell (2018) argue that time spent on devices is linked to “lower self-control, more distractibility, less emotional stability, and more difficulty making friends” (p. 271”). I have seen evidence of these effects in my classroom. For example,



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when students did return from remote instruction, one of the first assignments I gave was a hard copy of an SEL screener. It was essentially a twelve-question quiz with questions such as: “When things go wrong for you, how calm are you able to stay? Or during the past 30 days, to what extent were you able to disagree with others without starting an argument?” I wanted to have some baseline knowledge about the students in my classroom. I noticed the students had a hard time completing this. Many complained they didn’t want to write the answers and asked if it could be filled out digitally instead, while the rest seemed to disregard it completely and immediately began browsing for a game to play on the internet. Although it was important data for me to collect as a teacher, the students found it boring, and there was very little engagement in the activity.

In fact, even before the pandemic, there seemed to be a large disconnect happening between middle grade writers, engagement, and traditional units like personal narrative units. Sometimes it can be difficult to define exactly what we mean by engagement, so it helps to turn to the experts. Sousa, quoted in Toth, defines student engagement as, “the amount of attention, interest, curiosity, and positive emotional connections

that students have when they are learning, whether in the classroom or on their own” (2016, p. 17). Sousa’s additional points about engagement include benefits to class participation, enjoyment, persistence, and intrinsic motivation and these all demonstrate how important social-emotional learning is for students. (Toth, 2021).

Background

I was not alone in identifying a need for more engaging curricula. During the 2018-2019 school year, the Michigan Department of Education endorsed the use of the EQUIP Rubric from Achieve the Core (available: <https://bit.ly/3HsC585> or by scanning the QR Code in Figure 1) to aid in review of English Language Arts curriculum. Oakland Schools Secondary Literacy Consultants and secondary English Language Art teachers began a review of the middle school MAISA ELA units using this rubric. MAISA, which stands for Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, is a collaborative group that supports educational projects across the state of Michigan, including the creation of a “comprehensive K-12 ELA curricula that are aligned not only to the standards, but also across grades” (Oakland Schools Literacy, 2014). Once all the feedback was collected, it was obvious that the units needed to undergo revision to be more effective. Through a multi-year process, the previous units were fully revised to better align to the Michigan ELA standards, the Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, culturally responsive approaches, and educational research. I was not a part of the creation of these newer units; however, I fully support the changes made.



Figure 1. QR Code to access the EQUIP Rubric from Achieve the Core

One shift in the revised units was the embedding of reading, writing, speaking, and listening and language standards together in one unit. Instead of having one unit focused on reading and a second unit focused on writing, writers decided to focus on these skills within one unit. In most cases, the first few weeks of a unit are intended to immerse students in reading multiple mentor texts for the genre of focus. The next few weeks of instruction are focused on supporting students in authentic writing experiences within the genre of focus. These changes helped make the particular unit I am going to describe in this article so successful.

When I personally had the chance to pilot the curriculum, I seized the opportunity wholeheartedly. I could see the adjustments right away and found these changes to be impactful in my teaching, and even more so on a new unit that focused on persona poetry. By definition,

The word *persona* is derived from the Latin word for *mask*. The writer is putting on a mask of a person, place, or object and writes from that perspective. Writing in persona encourages empathy, as a student must walk in someone else’s shoes; they must see the world differently. When writing in persona, subject matter, grammar, form, imagery, and point of view must all be considered (Redmond, 2020).

The opportunity to teach this concept couldn’t have come at a better time. The students I had in my classroom were lacking self-awareness, emotional sensitivity and the ability to find connectedness with their peers.

The assignments in this unit were to view a variety of slam and persona poetry mentor pieces, identify figurative language devices, and analyze the impact of perspective on poetry. Final assessments asked students to write a persona poem from the voice of the main character in the novel they were reading. Part of the appeal for middle learners came from our district’s approach of reading a choice novel rather than a class text set. Students were able to select books that interested them, ranging from graphic novels to audiobooks. As I looked over all the suggestions for how I could structure these lessons, I thought back to all the research I did on SEL

during the early days of the pandemic. In this unit, I saw an ideal opportunity to weave together my goals for ELA with goals for SLE.

Getting Started

I began this new unit by reviewing figurative language and the basic definition of poetry. In order to demonstrate knowledge and application of the devices and also pique student interest, I carefully selected each poem in the unit. The first poem we read was “Broken English” by Rupi Kaur (2015). I chose this particular poet because she is modern, and I knew a lot of the students had read her book *Milk and Honey*. They read the words,

“i think about the way my father/ pulled the family out of poverty/ without knowing what a vowel was/ and my mother raised four children/ without being able to construct/ a perfect sentence in english/ a discombobulated couple/ who landed in the new world with hopes/ that left the bitter taste of rejection in their mouths/ no family/ no friends/ just man and wife/ two university degrees that meant nothing/ one mother tongue that was broken now/ one swollen belly with a baby inside/ a father worrying about jobs and rent/ cause no matter what this baby was coming.”

The way that she recounts her parents’ immigration experience is raw and powerful in a way I knew the kids would understand, some more personally than others. This poem really hooked them in identifying devices and exploring meaning. We spent time analyzing similes, metaphors, mood, and tone. Based on teacher observations made during a case study in New York,

Asking a student to reflect on tone and mood during this time has opened great conversations about what it feels like to be stuck inside, to be powerless, and to be scared. We’re giving them another outlet to express themselves—and the results have been mind-blowing. Students have delved deep into themselves. (Moskovitz, 2020)

This is a stark contrast from the students I encountered during the early days of quarantine and online schooling. Many refused to turn on cameras, go to breakout rooms or even answer questions. Once these same children returned to the physical classroom, it was clear

there were underlying emotions that needed to be dealt with, and many did so through writing and making connections with an author or specific characters.

Increasing Engagement

Then, we began slam poetry. Traditionally, one might not consider using this type of poetry to teach persona, but it is all about segue. Many of the kids had never heard or seen a slam poem before and were blown away at how much meaning was conveyed just by the tone of a person’s voice. I showed them “Touchscreen” (2012) by Marshall Jones, “Rigged Game” (2013) by Dylan Garrity and “OCD” (2020) by Neil Hilborne on the ELMO in my classroom. All three touched upon current issues in society with a large focus on mental health. Neil Hilborne’s poem read,

Usually, when I obsess over things, I see germs sneaking into my skin/ I see myself crushed by an endless succession of cars/ And she was the first beautiful thing I ever got stuck on/ I want to wake up every morning thinking about the way she holds her steering wheel/ How she turns shower knobs like she is opening a safe/ How she blows out candles/blows out candles/blows out candles.

He ends his poem with “She told me that she shouldn’t have let me get so attached to her; that this whole thing was a mistake but/ How can it be a mistake that I don’t have to wash my hands after I touch her?” I used this particular poem to provide them the opportunity to make personal connections and reflect on Hilborne’s emotional state when he wrote this. “In Social Emotional Learning Frameworks we create a classroom space in which we encourage students to get curious about their emotions and explore them in a safe way” (Monti, 2021). It is interesting because, upon further analysis, many of these kids can articulate Hilborne’s feelings of anxiety, grief and loss but have a hard time making the connection between their own experiences and trauma. Students do several reflective activities to identify and write about similarities in their life that are shared with the poem and how it impacted them. This is an important skill that helps students start to take ownership of their emotions—which is an important component of Social and Emotional Learning.

We dove into specific persona poetry next. I thought it would be best to start with a more obvious piece, so the task of identifying the persona would seem less daunting. While this is the direction I chose, another interesting idea would be to start with a research assignment. For example, in the article “Learning the Persona Poem,” Rebecca Hazelton writes,

Although persona poems encourage writers to consider the experiences of people with different backgrounds, it’s not unusual for students to rely on received ideas about others rather than thinking more deeply and critically. To combat this, consider incorporating a small research component into your persona assignment. For instance, by learning what someone working in a slaughterhouse actually does and what the working conditions are like, a student will be able to bring concrete details to the poem and be less tempted to lean on stereotypes or clichés. You can have students fill out detailed questionnaires about their personae, answering questions about their personalities, personal and medical histories, families, likes and dislikes, and so on” (Hazelton, 2014).

The first poem we read was titled “Love or Lack Thereof” (2015). The kids were really excited about it because the title alone makes it seem like a passionate love poem. When I asked the class to identify what voice was speaking, or “who the voice is pretending to be,” many of their answers fell into one of two categories. Some instantly recognized that this poem was being told from the perspective of a cactus, while others needed a little more coaching. I encouraged students who got it to call out clues to the class such as, “I will grow you a flower to wear in your hair” or “don’t touch me ... don’t touch me” (Callistory on DeviantArt, n.d.) We then launched into a discussion about context clues and how they can help to identify the persona of a poem.

Next, we watched the music video titled “Lost Boy” by Ruth B. (2015). Personally, I think this is the best representation of persona to show middle-to-high school-age students. It is extremely visually engaging, and many of the kids have heard the song before. There are many other good songs that employ persona as well.

In the article “Learning the Persona Poem,” Rebecca Hazelton suggests, “You can bring up examples, such as David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, Garth Brooks’s Chris Gaines, Beyonce’s Sasha Fierce, Lady Gaga’s male alter ego Jo Calderone, and the various personae employed by Nicki Minaj” (Hazelton, 2014). I tap into my students’ background knowledge of Peter Pan and ask them questions about who he was, what the movie was about, and if they remember other important characters from the film. This sets the stage for the song they are about to watch. The specific persona being represented is a lost boy in Neverland, but the video depicts Ruth B singing and playing the piano while various objects are being suspended from the air in a darkened room. I gave my students a copy of the lyrics so they could follow along with the song. Most of them easily recognized the persona, while a small percent still thought that the persona was that of Peter Pan. By encouraging students to go back and reread the text, most corrected themselves.

The annotation team on “Genius Annotations” writes, “This song is about belonging and not belonging, feeling lost and found, escaping reality and diving into one’s imagination. Though the song borrows its vocabulary from a specific story, Ruth B maintains that *Peter Pan* deals with themes that anyone can relate to” (Lost Boy, 2015). We used these themes to connect to a time in their lives when students felt like they needed to escape reality. Before we even analyzed the lyrics, I had them do a free write about this topic.

We ended the unit with the song, “King of the City” by Jennifer Nettles. The kids listened as I read aloud the words. They didn’t notice anything in particular about the poem until they heard, “I was on floor 26, when the first plane hit, and I still feel that sound in my chest” (King of the City, n.d). Even though none of my students were alive when 911 happened, many are still aware of the historic event and instantly knew what this was about. By the time I finished with, “You see I watched them fall from that building, and I prayed for all of their wives and children,” I could tell it was one of the most powerful pieces we had read. At this point they had an easier time identifying persona, although only half of the students recognized that Jose, the

window washer, is deceased and speaking from the sky. When I asked the students about what connections we could make with this text they initially said nothing. One student raised their hand and said, “We weren’t born yet. All we know is from what our parents have told us. It doesn’t relate to us.” I probed deeper, asking them if they had ever witnessed something really bad in the world, such as 911. Then, it was as if a mental lightbulb went off. These students hadn’t even realized that Covid-19 was a traumatic event until they began reading poems about devastation and loss from other people’s perspectives. By making connections, building empathy and engaging in different social and emotional activities many of my students were finally able to come to terms with their own repressed feelings that resulted from the pandemic.

Final Assessment

After my students spent a significant amount of time reading and analyzing persona poetry, I had them write their own. We began by spending some time choosing a character from the book they were currently reading and brainstorming some of the challenges they were facing in the novel. I asked them to imagine how the character felt in response to a problem and how they went about trying to resolve it, if they did. I had them list at least five external or internal conflicts they could identify in their book and the characters’ response. Then, they went back and chose one they thought they could generate the most ideas about in a poem.

I asked them to compose poems that were at least twelve lines long, written about a conflict their character encountered through that character’s voice, and include three different literary devices. I asked them to highlight and label the three devices on their final drafts. Each student got a blank template on white paper, which they mounted on construction paper. I also asked them to construct a face for their character. Some students imagined what the face would look like from details in the book, and others used the cover to replicate the face. Once their face was done, they had the option to either write their poem neatly on the poster or type it and glue it on with a title. Then, they added the characters picture and name.

Conclusion

I am extremely happy with the outcome of this unit in my classroom. I took a very non-traditional approach to teaching poetry with my students, and the integration of SEL allowed more middle learners to connect with the content on a deeper level. Sometimes, as teachers, we need to reflect on what is not working for our students with the curriculum. Looking back at the school closures that resulted from the pandemic, it seems that students were so far removed from others in the physical classroom that they lost the ability to find empathy for each other or consider a point of view other than their own. Socially and emotionally, many of the kids regressed during that time. This persona unit allowed my students an opportunity to find those skills again and connect to pieces that are inherently human at the core—something we should all take into consideration when we are choosing mentor pieces for our lessons.

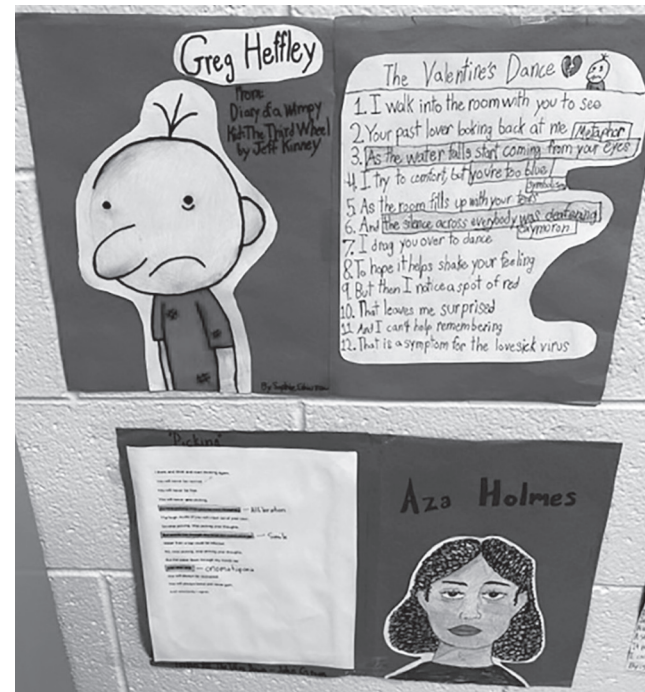
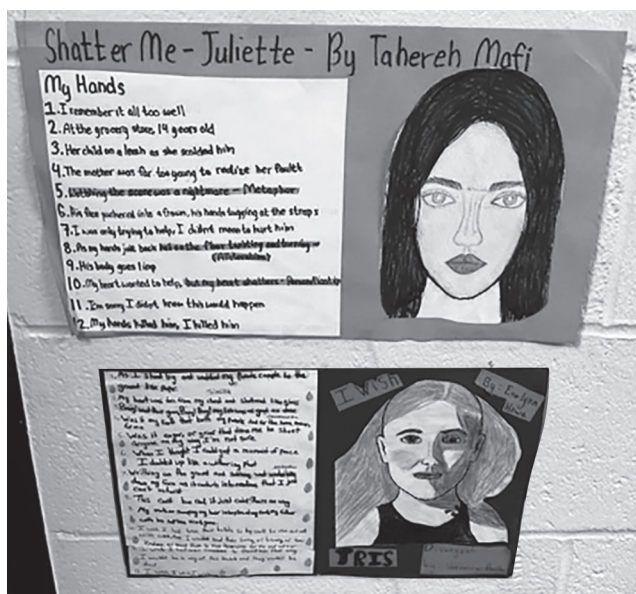
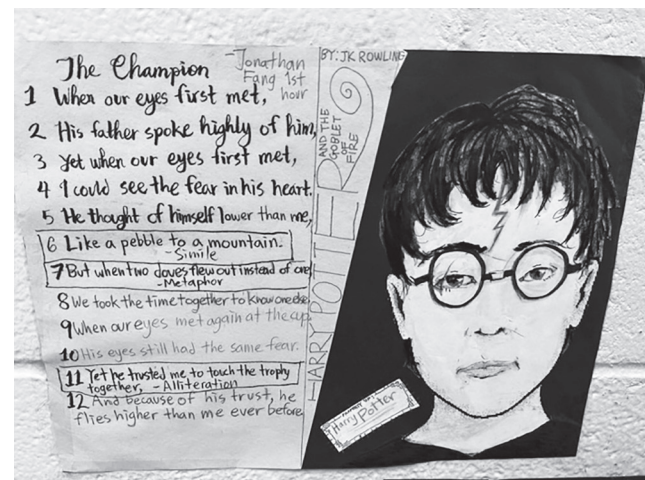
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