Capturing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Through
Children's Literature

By Tami Morton and Sarah Akram

Tami Morton is an Associate Professor in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University–Commerce. Her research interests include reading foundations, preservice teachers, multicultural children's and young adult literature, and cultural pedagogy. She can be reached at Tami.Morton@tamuc.edu.

Sarah Akram is a teacher at Mansfield ISD and a doctoral student at Texas A&M University–Commerce. Her research interests include social-emotional learning and elementary education. She can be reached at sakram2@leomail-tamuc.edu.

Abstract: Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, young children did not attend school in the traditional setting. However, many teachers, schools, and districts conducted online instruction to allow students to still learn despite the restrictions. After two years, teachers and students returned to the classrooms and schools. However, the time away from school resulted in several issues. One, children's learning practices were atypical due to the great amount of time online. The second issue reinvigorated the need for social-emotional learning (SEL) for students. This article traces the use of SEL by a first-grade teacher who incorporated children's books that focused on the SEL competencies as described by the well-known Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional (CASEL) program (CASEL, 2019a)—including mental health conditions, substance abuse, skills to manage emotions, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and responsible decision-making. The first-grade teacher shows her strength as a teacher to support her students during this time of transition.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, elementary, social-emotional learning, children's books

In 2020, people all over the world were familiarized with COVID-19. In effort to keep more citizens safe, every public place from stadiums to schools closed. Initially, the time that everything was closed was designed as a temporary closure. However, that was not the case, and the time extended for almost two years. Though the break from the classroom was very unexpected, the pandemic provided time for reflection and growth for today's classroom teachers. When students had to initially stay home and attend school digitally, all in-service educators knew that this unique form of instruction would be challenging to manage with young children. Elementary children primarily used computers to play games or add clip art to their papers and projects. Before remote instruction could even occur, students had to gain new knowledge and skills by focusing on their teachers (who were often beginners to computer software themselves) online. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2021) insightfully explain that the pandemic teaching of 2020 was not distance learning. It was also not homeschooling, which is a choice parents make for particular reasons (e.g., religious, safety, dissatisfaction with their public schools). This was "crisis teaching" (Fisher et al., 2021, p. 1). Teachers had to be astute, intentional, and purposeful with their remote teaching more so than ever before.

Nonetheless, elementary teachers met the challenge and were essentially in the forefront in finding the best ways to provide distance learning to their diverse students. Elementary teachers were working hard to first learn how to use and manipulate computer programs, like the various learning management systems (LMS) and available appropriate resources for the different elementary grades. It was essential for teachers to become proficient immediately because they needed to understand the computer programs well enough to teach content to children and teach parents how to provide support. All this required information

needed to be transferred to students and parents before instruction of new knowledge could even occur. Teachers held video conference meetings to share guidelines and rules for the online class. For example, computer users know and expect that there will be times when the computer has technical issues. The computer may need to be rebooted or restarted to work. Primary-level students are not yet able to fix their computers, so parents or guardians must be present in the classroom to be the "help desk" attendants and address any of these computer errors. All of these issues impacted teachers but also their students and parents.

By the 2021 school year, a majority of Texas teachers and students were back in the classrooms for traditional in-person learning. A vaccine was available for adults, and protocols had been established to try to ensure that all educators and students could feel safe. However, the return to the classroom did come with a cost. The impact of the pandemic was eye-opening. "The crisis had an impact on not just academics but also the broader health and well-being of students, with more than 35 percent of parents very or extremely concerned about their children's mental health" (Dorn et al., 2021).

As the students returned to classrooms after the mandated COVID-19 protocols lifted, teachers not only saw a considerable decrease in academic abilities, but social-emotional issues in students were evident. These students were very different from students in previous years, especially in lower elementary grade levels. In previous years, first-grade students had already undergone one to two years of schooling; however, this was the first time being in a classroom for many students. This was also the first year that teachers had to teach students to maintain six feet of separation because of social distancing protocols that were prescribed by the CDC. With knowledge of this instruction, teachers recognized characteristics of students with separation anxiety, those who were troubled by noise, and those who were uncomfortable being around other people. While young students may not understand the pandemic, they do understand that their parents and other adults are concerned. Sadly, many students had suffered significant personal losses like deaths of one or more members in their families.

Though the pandemic brought students' social-emotional learning needs to the forefront, teachers have been reconnecting with the

positive effects of SEL training and instruction in K-12 classrooms introduced in the 1990s (Gimbert et al., 2021; McKay-Jackson, 2014). When social-emotional learning was initially introduced, districts used several programs for moral development, character education, and performance of character traits (Elias et al., 2008). The ideas behind these ideals of morality and character traits were further investigated and refined into a myriad of programs catered for SEL for elementary students. School districts were responsible for finding the best program match for their educators and students. The best program would provide the most suitable SEL content and pedagogy for students in their district. The state of Texas requires that all districts offer a mental health curriculum for all students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade. The curriculum covers "mental health conditions, substance abuse, skills to manage emotions, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and responsible decision-making," as stated in Texas Statutes Education Code 21.462.

The CASEL framework is popular because it is the earliest evidence-based program that provides five core competencies in SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Gimbert et al., 2021; Kaufman et al., 2021). When the district brings a program to the schools, it includes educator training for each competency. Even though the competencies are strong, there are limitations to the CASEL framework. The packaged program created is not culturally responsive, making it challenging for educators to follow, particularly when facing race or trauma (Gimbert et al., 2021). CASEL acknowledges their lack of focus on equity in the program framework and is working to incorporate the characteristics necessary to support the growth of SEL into a more inclusive perspective. Though it is understood that the CASEL program lacks equity, the framework of SEL—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2019a)—does provide a platform to understand how the core competencies lend to classroom practices that would support today's students. The authors support the decisions made at the district level in selecting appropriate SEL programs for affiliated schools and educators. Even before teachers understand and know their programs in various districts and schools, they can provide opportunities for growth for their students. After the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting school closings, teachers need assistance with approaching SEL with students. This article provides creative ideas that highlight the competencies and the corresponding instructional, culturally relevant practices that teachers may use.

This article also shares how Sarah (second author) has been able to support her young students after being isolated in their homes throughout the pandemic. She anticipated that all students would need to be exposed to social-emotional learning primarily because they lacked language and learning in a community setting. Sarah immediately integrated collaborative groups, opportunities for oral language in both academic and social settings, and exposure to children's books which stimulated engagement. As a graduate student and veteran teacher, Sarah knew the importance of research that supported oral language (Clay, 1991; Roskos et al., 2009), reading aloud (Fuhler & Walther, 2007), and working collaboratively (Harvey & Daniels, 2009) to create a strong foundation in her classroom. All these actions were crucial to incorporating social-emotional learning to make learning successful in her first-grade classroom.

Sarah teaches first grade in a small suburban city near Fort Worth,

Texas. She could not help but consider her first-grade students' behaviors before COVID-19 and make comparisons to their behaviors. The students in Sarah's current first-grade classroom often get tired quickly and want to rest. In addition, first-graders enjoyed kinesthetic activities and playing with their friends in the past. Therefore, it has become imperative to find activities for students to return them to pre-pandemic normalcy and allow them to play and learn with their peers.

Interactive Read-Alouds

To return to pre-pandemic school routines, Sarah continued to use interactive read-alouds to share books with her students. An interactive read-aloud is an instructional practice used with students. The teacher reads a children's book and encourages interaction, questioning, and oral language in a whole-class setting. As students listen to stories selected by their teacher, they are encouraged to comment on the illustrations, make personal connections, and even retell the story (Tompkins et al., 2022). The interactive read-aloud is an impactful procedure to use that encourages oral language. Roskos et al. (2009) further justify the significance of oral language because it provides the foundation for literacy learning for young learners. Furthermore, Doyle and Bramwell (2006) explain that teachers should integrate social-emotional learning with interactive read-alouds of children's literature in order to weave in these significant concepts seamlessly.

Sarah was confident that using interactive read-alouds of children's books would be a critical means to support social-emotional learning in her first-grade classroom. Through literature, students will also build self-efficacy and agency. These benefits impact the core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. What follows are suggestions for children's books and classroom activities that could be used to assist in the development of the core competencies for social-emotional learning.

Core Competency 1: Self-Awareness

In the elementary classroom, self-awareness is an attribute that is essential to success in learning. Learners must understand themselves to grow in both mind and spirit. Self-awareness can also link to identity and agency. All students' identities are multifaceted, so teachers must have purposeful instructional practices that aid in students' understanding of themselves and the development of their agency (Jagers, et al., 2016). These conversations can also help teachers understand diverse students' identities and help transform pedagogy.

School and Classroom Connections: Literature Suggestions and Instructional Practices

Self-Awareness Children's Literature

Students must be able to understand their identity. Therefore, children's literature in Sarah's classroom is carefully selected to help students identify their strengths and implement them into their learning and other aspects of life.

I Like Me! by Nancy Carlson (1990) helps students identify their strengths when they read how easy it is for the pig to find her talents. In the first-person narrative, the main character describes herself as her own best friend and talks about things she likes to do, such as drawing and bike riding. The character also discusses what she does when she makes mistakes. This book helps students identify their

positive attributes. In Figures 1 and 2, these first-grade students identify the excellent qualities and activities they enjoy doing.
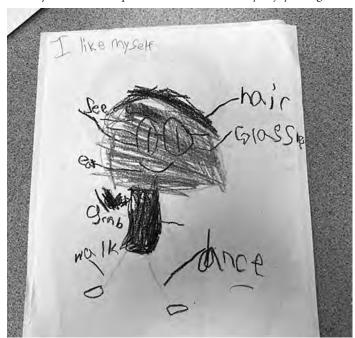

Figure 1. I like to dance.

Figure 2. I like to watch tv. I like to eat. I like to right. I like to run.

I Am Enough by Grace Byers (2018) is a story about a girl who focuses on her strengths and highlights positive things about herself. Sarah's first-grade students listen to this story as it helps them see the best versions of themselves.

Communicating With Classmates

Another instructional practice that supports self-awareness is using grand conversations. A grand conversation is a discussion

where teachers encourage oral language and response from young students (Tompkins et al., 2021). Students and teachers should have grand conversations accompanying these books. The teacher models how to have conversations by posing questions, such as How can you identify your strengths?, What makes you unique and amazing?, and How can you use your strengths to help you achieve a growth mindset?

Core Competency 2: Self-Management

Self-management refers to students in the educational setting who can effectively manage their social-emotional and self-administering skills to work collaboratively in a group. The skills include classroom directions, such as asking for help when needed and knowing when to wait in line for a turn.

School and Classroom Connections: Literature Suggestions and Instructional Practices

Self-Management Children's Books

My Mouth Is a Volcano by Julia Cook (2005) provides excellent examples for students to learn how not to interrupt others while talking. This picture book helps them realize that there should be a rule about interrupting others and listening.

What If Everybody Did That? by Ellen Javernick (2010) is a story where the characters make poor choices, such as not reading signs like "Do not feed animals at a zoo." The author emphasizes the phrase "What if everybody did that?" and the illustrations highlight disastrous situations if everybody made the same mistake. This book helps students realize the importance of following all the rules. The phrase "What if everybody did that?" is repeated in the classroom when students have just broken a rule so that all the students can reflect on what would happen if they all made the same mistake.

Social Contract

Another classroom connection for teachers and students is discussing a social contract for the classroom. The social contract is an agreement made by the students about their behavior during the school day. For example, teachers may begin the conversation by

asking questions such as How should a leader be treated?, How do you want a leader (teacher) to treat you?, How do you want to be treated by one another?, and How do you want to treat each other when there is conflict? When students answer these questions with concepts like paying attention, listening quietly, and being kind to others, respect emerges, and these words create the class promise to add to the social contract. Writing a social contract together is significant because everyone who signs the contract abides by these rules and holds each other accountable. See Figure 3 for an example of a contract written in Sarah's first-grade class.
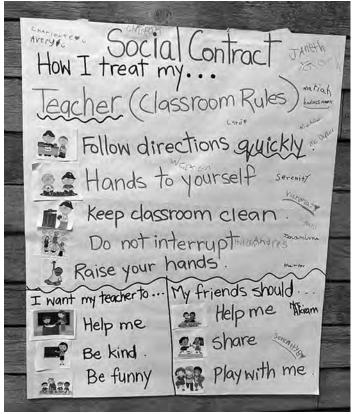

Figure 3. Social Contract

Core Competency 3: Social Awareness

The social awareness competency has become of great significance recently in light of the racial inequities prevalent in school settings nationwide. When teachers consider social-emotional learning and specifically social awareness, the core topics found on the subject are establishing a safe school climate and investigating bullying (Yang et al., 2020).

School and Classroom Connections: Literature Suggestions and Instructional Practices

Research has found that schools with positive school climates are beneficial to the social-emotional learning within a school. Understanding and condemning bullying at elementary, middle, and secondary levels is also helpful (Yang et al., 2020).

Social Awareness Children's Books

Children often worry about how others perceive them. They want to be well-liked and accepted by their peers and others; however, at times, that is not the case. These books are two great examples of showing characters who are okay with being different than their friends.

The Bad Case of Stripes by David Shannon (1998) is a story about a girl who worries about what others think of her, and each worry adds color to her face giving her stripes; this book helps students understand why they should not worry about others' opinions.

The Rainbow Fish by Marcus Pfister (1992) is an example of how one's bad attitude can affect others' perceptions of them regardless of how beautiful they are on the outside.

Cooperative Learning

In Sarah's classroom, cooperative learning strategies are incorporated in various lessons throughout the day primarily because it helps create a positive learning environment. Students work in groups to solve problems, where the teacher facilitates discussions by modeling using conversation stems. Students help one another as well as learn from one another. Lyman (1981) explains the "think pair share" strategy, which is an excellent way to incorporate cooperative learning.

Core Competency 4: Relationship Skills

Healthy relationship skills are imperative for students when interacting with peers, adults, and family members. Young people must have the emotional intelligence to read others' feelings to work collaboratively. Students build relationship skills and strengthen them when students interact with the community at large. Young students who can participate in field trips, meet community helpers, and engage in community service learn how to build relationships with diverse people in their neighborhoods and communities (McKay-Jackson, 2014).

School and Classroom Connections: Literature Suggestions and Instructional Practices

Teachers should include interactions with community leaders in their lessons. Police officers and other officials should be invited into classrooms to interact with students. Teachers invite parents to read to the classrooms, discuss their jobs, and participate in other learning activities. Field trips to meet community leaders at their workplaces should also be offered to students.

Community Helper Children's Literature

A Hero Like You by Nikki Rogers (2020) is a story about community heroes, such as police officers, firefighters, and lifeguards. This nonfiction book highlights the characteristics of heroes and how they help encourage students to adopt these qualities and be helpful to their communities.

My Principal Is a Superhero by Joey and Melanie Acker (2019) is a story about a school principal named Mr. Clarkson. Mr. Clarkson makes the school a better place by helping the students and families. Mr. Clarkson pushes cars if needed, fixes the copier, greets students every day on the speaker where his voice saying "good morning" is heard all over the school. The teacher in the story believes that Mr. Clarkson is always saving the day. The school is a safe learning environment for teachers and students because of their "Super Principal."

Field Trips and Zoom Interviews

Teachers should introduce their students to community helpers. Distance learning, which became prominent during the pandemic, depends heavily upon video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams, and these tools enable teachers to bring these heroes into their classrooms. Skype a Scientist (skypeascientist.com) is a free website that connects scientists with schoolteachers. Teachers can invite scientists from different fields into classrooms.

Core Competency 5: Responsible Decision-Making

The last core competency, responsible decision-making, provides a connection to ways of making constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions to realistically evaluate the consequences of various actions in the classroom and the community (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2020). Through student reflection and planning for future events, teachers can guide responsible decision-making.

School and Classroom Connections: Literature Suggestions and Instructional Practices

Benson (2022), in his booklet *Building SEL Skills Into Your Lesson Plans*, emphasizes the benefits of integrating social-emotional learning into lesson plans. Teachers should incorporate SEL through cooperative learning strategies. Students should be allowed to work with other students, and every activity should have options to collaborate and communicate with one another. Teachers execute lesson plans that provide opportunities to discuss the text and work on projects collaboratively through lesson plans. Teachers should model and teach proper ways to communicate. Teachers should help students set learning goals and then include them in the lesson planning while teaching them how to achieve these goals.

Responsible Decision-Making Children's Literature

The Magical Yet by Angela DiTerlizzi (2020) encourages children to not give up. To understand that they cannot perform a difficult task

yet, and by working hard and setting goals, they would be able to achieve what they cannot accomplish "yet."

The Dot by Peter H. Reynolds (2003) is a story about Vashti, a girl who does not know what to draw during her art class; her teacher encourages her to create a dot, which was framed and displayed. This gesture inspires Vashti to create more dots. This book is a story about motivation to help students focus on their strengths and set their learning and life goals.

Personal and Learning Goals

In Sarah's classroom, students set goals during the year, and once they have met the goal, they move on to the next learning goal. The teacher holds one-on-one goal meetings where students look at their scores on various assessments and identify their strengths and weaknesses, and they then create a learning plan with the teacher. Figure 5 shows one example of a student's reading goals in Sarah's class. The young learners create a to-do list at the end of the day for the next day. They write down what they need to do to prepare them for learning as well as create a list of materials they will need for all the classes. Students then bookmark pages in their books and gather the materials for the next day. See Figure 4 for an example of daily to-do lists and Figure 5 for an example of student goals.
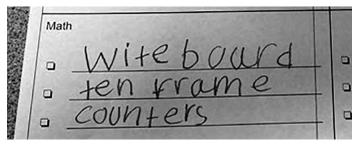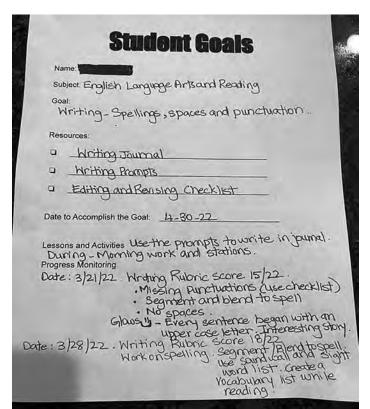
Figure 4. Daily to-do lists.

Figure 5. Student goals.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic forced classroom teachers nationwide to stop, think, and reflect on how to proceed. Teachers had to provide strength, even when they were fearful about their safety and their family's safety. In addition to providing stability through the unknown for students, the pandemic brought forth new demanding challenges to address. Initially beginning instruction online during this chaotic time, teachers were able to regroup and return to the classroom. Once children returned, it was apparent that there were learning gaps. Inevitably, teachers had to plan to teach the standards and review all the concepts lost. Elementary teachers also are the first to notice evidence of mental health issues (https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/educators). Teachers are resilient and strong, so many are willing to accept the challenge. Sarah is an example of a strong, resilient teacher who incorporated children's books and research-based activities into her classroom to help her students academically and mentally. The recommendations that align with the CASEL core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making are just that. Though not a comprehensive list of books, it provides a starting place for other classroom teachers who are juggling the integration of mental skills and academic skills.

Conclusion

Daniel Goleman (1995) was one of the first authors to write a book focused on social-emotional learning. Goleman explains that emotional intelligence can matter more than IQ. He describes how fear from traumatic experiences can alter behavior and cause issues in people's social-emotional well-being. However, if the fear has not turned into a mental illness such as PTSD, it can be counteracted by relearning. Eventually, this fear can subside with time or with favorable conditions.

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created multiple fears and given rise to many traumatic experiences in students. By incorporating SEL, the developed fears and other social-emotional issues have deepened. However, the COVID-19 pandemic can be resolved and subsided. Classroom teachers have the knowledge, understanding, strength, and resilience necessary to help their students succeed in classrooms, schools, and communities.

Children's Book References

Acker, J., & Acker, M. (2019). *My principal is a superhero*. Acker Books.

Byers, G. (2018). *I am enough*. (K. A. Bobo, Illus.). HarperCollins.

Carlson, N. (1990). *I like me!* Puffin.

Cook, J. (2005). *My mouth is a volcano*. (C. Hartman, Illus.). National Center for Youth Issues.

DiTerlizzi, A. (2020). *The magical yet*. (L. Alvarez, Illus.). Disney.

Javernick, E. (2010). *What if everybody did that?* (C. M. Madden, Illus.). Pinwheel Books.

Mayer, M. (1983). *I was so mad*. Random House.

Pfister, M. (1992). *The rainbow fish*. North South Books.

Reynolds, P. H. (2003). *The dot*. Candlewick Press.

Rogers, N. (2020). *A hero like you*. Created To Be.

Shannon, D. (1998). *The bad case of stripes*. The Blue Sky Press.

References

Benson, J. (2022). *Building SEL skills into your lesson plans*. ASCD.

Clay, M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Heinemann.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2019a). Ohio Department of Education. https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Socialand-Emotional-Learning/Collaborative-for-Academic-Social-and-Emotional

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2019b). Insights from the 2019 SEL exchange. https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Insights-from-the-2019-SELExchange.html?soid=1102502724018&aid=GsG05Z162OA

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2020). SEL is… https://casel.org/what-is-sel

Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021, July). COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning

Doyle, B. G., & Bramwell, W. (2006, March). Promoting emergent literacy and social-emotional learning through dialogic reading. *The Reading Teacher*, *59*(6), 554-564.

Elias, M. J., Parker, S. J., Kash, V. M., Weissberg, R. P., & O'Brien, M. U. (2008). Social and emotional learning, moral education, and character education: A comparative analysis and a view toward convergence. In L. P. Nucci & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 248-266). Routledge.

Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Hattie, J. (2021). *Teaching for engagement & impact in any setting: The distance learning playbook grades K-12*. Corwin.

Fuhler, C. J. & Walther, M. P. (2007). *Literature is back: Using the best books for teaching reading and writings across genres*. Scholastic.

Gimbert, Miller, D., Herman, E., Breedlove, M., & Molina, C. E. (2021). Social emotional learning in schools: The importance of educator competence. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751211014920

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence, why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.

Hannigan, J., & Hannigan, J. E. (2020). *SEL from a distance: Tools and processes for anytime, anywhere*. SAGE Publications.

Harvey, S., & Daniels, H. (2009). *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action*. Heinemann.

Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning: Toward SEL in service of educational quity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(3), 162-184. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032

Kaufman, N., Kaufman, L., & Black, D. L. (2021). *Essentials of social emotional learning: The complete guide for schools and practitioners*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Lyman, F. (1981). The responsive classroom discussion. In Anderson, A. S. (Ed.), *Mainstreaming Digest*. University of Maryland College of Education.

McKay-Jackson, C. (2014). A critical approach to social emotional learning instruction through community-based service learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *12*(3), 292-312. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614543191

Roskos, K. A., Tabors, P. O., & Lenhart, L. A. (2009). *Oral language and early literacy in preschool* (2nd ed.). International Reading Association.

Tompkins, G., Rodgers, E., & Rodgers, A. (2022). *Literacy for the 21st century: Balancing reading and writing instruction* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.

Yang, C., Yang, M.-K., & Ma, T.-L. (2020). School-wide social emotional learning (SEL) and Bullying victimization: Moderating role of school climate in elementary, middle, and high schools. *Journal of School Psychology*, *82*, 49-69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.08.002