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More than Words: Using Children's Literature to Promote Self-Awareness in the Primary Grades

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In 1986, a book of short essays entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things* was published. Written by Robert Fulghum, it became a best seller and sold millions of copies throughout the United States and internationally. The first essay, for which the book is named, tells of life lessons that are learned at the commencement of formal education. Play nicely. Share. Respect others. Be kind (Fulghum, 1986). Such lessons parallel the concept that social interactions are paramount to learning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, while these were, and still are, pivotal aspects of social interactions in both childhood and adulthood, the primary classroom of today looks vastly different than that from four decades ago, and this difference has been manifested through ways that reading and language arts are now taught in the primary grades.

Fulghum's (1986) reflections seem to be but a distant memory in the history of public education, as the often-idealized world of naptimes and play has been replaced with more structured, assessment-focused learning environments. Wohlwend (2022) posits that the loss of play and less-structured learning within primary classrooms is a direct result of the notion that literacy learning should be more serious and thoughtful in nature. Other researchers have long recognized a heightened emphasis on high-stakes accountability in our literacy instruction (e.g. Bassok et al., 2016; Meens & Howe, 2015). Yet while the educational landscape has changed, literacy events should still be socially constructed and fostered (Diehl, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Connecting literacy with elements of social and emotional skillsets enhances both language development and social understandings (Bennett et al., 2016). Data show the connectivity between linguistic and socioemotional fundamentals; such foundational skills are paramount for higher-level competencies in English language arts (Barber & Klauda, 2020).

While many psychologists and educators have long recognized the benefits of implementing social and emotional learning in classrooms (Taylor et al., 2017), the pandemic has thrust its importance into the forefront of many academic discussions. Recognition of the necessity for socioemotional learning may now be even more critical due to the ramifications of COVID-19. The negative impacts of the pandemic can be seen in P-12 students' social, emotional, and cognitive understanding. Young children in particular had limited understanding of what was occurring, making for a confusing and stressful time in their lives (Giannotti et al., 2021), and the lack of social interactions during the height of the pandemic caused feelings of isolation, separation, and anxiety in many children (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Socioemotional skills allow children to express and manage their feelings in appropriate ways in order to build and sustain relationships with others (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016), yet in a

recent national survey, 33% of teacher participants reported concern for their students' social and emotional well-being due to the effects of the pandemic (Schwartz et al., 2021).

There have been a large number of studies conducted on the ramifications of the pandemic. For instance, according to 2022 data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 87% of the P-12 public school administrators who participated in the School Pulse Panel survey (n=846) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the social and emotional development of students during the 2021–2022 school year, 70% of participants reported the need for more school training to support students' socioemotional development, and 84% of survey participants either agreed or strongly agreed that students' behavioral development has been negatively impacted since the beginning of the pandemic. In another study, Bowyer-Crane et al. (2021) found that over 90% of participants expressed concern over the impact of students' language development and social development due to the pandemic. Similarly, Pizarro-Rioz and Ordóñez-Camblor have discussed the negative impact of the pandemic on the well-being of children's social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes (2021). Difficulty in expressing oneself linguistically can be linked to problematic behavior in children; this is a critical issue currently being manifested within early childhood classrooms (Chow et al., 2018).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and emotional learning is a core component of lifelong learning; such learning is critical for academic success and for college and career readiness (Common Core State Standards, 2010). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning can be categorized as one's development in the application of skills that allow for the management of emotions, achievement of goals, the forming and maintaining of relationships, and the progression into an advantageous identity of self (CASEL, 2021). Social-emotional learning centers around five interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Self-awareness is defined as "the abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts" (CASEL, 2020, p. 2). Sutton (2016) describes self-awareness as a means in which individuals can recognize inward, internal feelings of self as well as one's external interactions with others. While all five are critical in students' development, self-awareness is often seen as a most fundamental trait (Rochat, 2003).

Self-Awareness and Students

Self-awareness is often the first competency discussed, as it is through such cognizance that one can truly learn and grow. Therefore, “increased awareness of the self is both a tool and a goal” (Fenigstein et al., 1975, p. 522). It is through self-awareness that children are able to recognize their emotions, gain confidence in their abilities, and build self-efficacy. The development of self-awareness allows students to recognize their capabilities and learn who they are and what they can be. In such mindfulness, students learn about themselves as social beings, and by increasing such traits, students are able to become more involved in their own learning processes while enhancing reading skills (Ennis et al., 2018). As reading abilities become enhanced, text complexity strengthens, and as children learn to read, they must be aware of characters’ thoughts and feelings by using their own theories and thought processes. The readers’ “theory of mind is what allows them to draw inferences about intents, goals, and emotions” (Shanahan, 2020, p. S241). However, it begs to question whether children will truly be able to comprehend characters’ “intents, goals, and emotions” if they are unable to recognize and analyze their own (p. S241).

Therefore, developing an understanding of emotions, behaviors, and self-regulation must begin early in a child’s life (Bockmann & Yu, 2022). Today’s young students may not even remember life pre-pandemic, so it is imperative that educators look at the social and emotional toll that this has had on young learners. One way that pre-kindergarten through second grade teachers can represent self-awareness is through the use of picture books appropriate for the grade levels and age groups.

Self-Awareness in Texts

Books are more than words. They serve as a reflection into the world around and into ourselves, as texts can serve as mirrors if “the reader sees some aspect of themselves reflected” (Heineke et al., 2022, p. 277). Just as it is critical for students to see themselves through literature (Bishop, 1990), it is equally important for students to gain self-awareness for them to see themselves as identifiable reflections of who they are and what they can become (Rochat, 2003). While literacy reflections can help children to recognize aspects of themselves through physical representations and culture, family, and community, children’s literature can also show emotional characteristics, allowing students to recognize emotional aspects of both the characters and themselves. Literature can help students to connect with characters and can support students’ engagement and efficacy, as “emotional reflections inspire readers to connect with characters and classmates in various ways” (Heineke et al., 2022, p. 277).

Children’s literature is a gateway into an appreciation of the reading process, yet it can sometimes be easy to forget how books make children feel. Engaging stories can be used to help young children engage in reflective practices and critical understandings in a safe and efficient environment. As children begin their years in formal education, they must be able to learn about who they are and how they individually fit into the “big picture” of school. Each child is unique, and the primary grades are a time for students’ personalities to unfold. Therefore, allowing students opportunities to see themselves in high-quality literature (Bishop, 1990) allows students to love—and live—their identities. At this age and stage, children’s books should be read-aloud daily, and the implication of social-emotional themes, including self-awareness skills, should be discussed (Alberton Gunn et al., 2022). According to Kozak and Recchia (2018), the reading of fictional texts can give children sociocognitive learning opportunities; this is critical for primary-grade students as they are simultaneously learning to navigate academics and social and emotional constructs.

There are a large number of high-quality children’s literature selections that can be used to teach self-awareness components while simultaneously teaching important literacy components. Additionally, such books can be used as a vessel for comprehension, reflection, and discussion.

The following is a brief list of literature that can be used to teach self-awareness components for children. This is in no way an exhaustive list of all of the high-quality selections that can be used to explore self-awareness. These books were selected based on the content, age-and grade-level appropriateness, and suitability for read-aloud purposes. While some of these were written decades ago, many were published more recently.

| Name of Book | Name of Author/Illustrator | Components |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Chrysanthemum</i> (1991) | Kevin Henkes | Self-confidence, self-esteem, bullying, self-love |
| <i>Enemy Pie</i> (2000) | Derek Munson; Tara Calahan King | Showing kindness, being a friend, not judging others |
| <i>Grumpy Monkey</i> (2018) | Suzanne Lang; Max Lang | Feeling blue and mad, having bad days, being able to express emotions |

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| <i>How Do Dinosaurs Say I'm Mad?</i> (2013) | Jane Yolen; Mark Teague | Anger, learning how to calm down after being upset |
| <i>I am Enough</i> (2018) | Grace Byers; Keturah A. Bobo (2018) | Being kind, respecting self and others |
| <i>I am OK to Feel</i> (2022) | Karamo Brown and Jason "Rachel" Brown; Diobelle Cerna | Identifying emotions such as anxiety and fear, expressing emotions appropriately |
| <i>I Believe I Can</i> (2020) | Grace Byers; Keturah A. Bobo | Self-confidence, self-esteem, self-acceptance |
| <i>I'm Happy-Sad Today</i> (2019) | Lory Britain; Matthew Rivera | Emotions can change; feelings can be mixed |
| <i>I Need a Hug</i> (2015) | Aaron Blabey | Kindness, friendship, respect of others, judging others |
| <i>Linus the Little Yellow Pencil</i> (2019) | Scott Magoon | Sharing, working together, collaboration |
| <i>Madeline Finn and the Library Dog</i> (2016) | Lisa Papp | Building self-confidence (in learning to read), friendship, developing patience |
| <i>Madeline Finn and the Shelter Dog</i> (2019) | Lisa Papp | Working together, kindness, empathy |
| <i>Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog</i> (2020) | Lisa Papp | Friendship, empathy, perseverance, helping others |
| <i>Most Perfect You</i> (2022) | Jazmyn Simon; Tamisha Anthony | Self-acceptance, self-confidence |
| <i>Perfect</i> (2019) | Max Amato (2019) | Fear of making errors, working together, acceptance of self and others |
| <i>Ruby Finds a Worry</i> (2021) | Tom Percival | Feelings of worry and stress, identifying and |

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| | | recognizing causes of worry |
| <i>Scaredy Squirrel</i> (first in series); 2008 | Mélanie Watt (2008) | Fear of the unknown, feeling afraid of new situations, stress and worry |
| <i>Speak Up, Molly Lou Melon</i> (2020) | Patty Lovell; David Catrow | Speaking up for others and for self, friendship, self-esteem |
| <i>Thank You, Omu!</i> (2018) | Oge Mora | Sharing, being thankful, showing kindness, cultural appreciation |
| <i>That Rule Doesn't Apply to Me!</i> (2016) | Julia Cook; Anita DuFalla | Recognizing the need for rules, showing respect for others and for self |
| <i>The Bad Seed</i> (2017) | Jory John; Pete Oswald | Self-acceptance, having a better attitude, recognizing emotions, behaviors |
| <i>The Boy with Big, Big Feelings</i> (2019) | Britney Winn Lee; Jacob Souva | Anxiety, sensitivity, strong emotions |
| <i>The Day You Begin</i> (2018) | Jacqueline Woodson; Rafael Lopez | Self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-love, feeling different |
| <i>The Girl with Big, Big Questions</i> (2021) | Britney Winn Lee; Jacob Souva | Persistence, curiosity, self-motivation, a desire to learn |
| <i>The Good Egg</i> (2019) | Jory John; Pete Oswald | Self-care, acceptance of self and others, behaviors |
| <i>The Good Egg and the Talent Show</i> (an "I Can Read" leveled book); 2022 | Jory John; Pete Oswald | Self-acceptance, kindness, friendship, helping others |
| <i>The Invisible Boy</i> (2013) | Trudy Ludwig; Patrice Barton | Friendship, kindness, feelings of inclusivity and exclusivity, |

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|--|---------------------------|---|
| | | differences in personalities |
| <i>Thelma the Unicorn</i> (2015) | Aaron Blabey | Self-acceptance, friendship, self-love |
| <i>The Name Jar</i> (2003) | Yangsook Choi | Self-acceptance, cultural appreciation, respect of self and others, belonging |
| <i>The Smart Cookie</i> (2021) | Jory John; Pete Oswald | Self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect |
| <i>The Sour Grape</i> (2022) | Jory John; Pete Oswald | Forgiving others, friendship, learning to not hold grudges |
| <i>The Way I Feel</i> (2005) | Janan Cain | Recognizing feelings and emotions, learning how to appropriately express emotions |
| <i>Wemberly Worried</i> (2010) | Kevin Henkes | Stress, worry, managing fears |
| <i>When Sophie's Feelings are Really, Really Hurt</i> (2015) | Molly Bang | Being made fun of and criticized, feelings of sadness, self-esteem |
| <i>When Sophie Gets Angry...Really, Really Angry...</i> (1999) | Molly Bang | Managing anger, recognizing emotions |
| <i>When Sophie Thinks She Can't</i> (2018) | Molly Bang | Feelings of inadequacies (in math skills), self-confidence, self-efficacy |
| <i>Wilma Jean, the Worry Machine</i> (2012) | Julia Cook; Anita DuFalla | Learning to cope with anxiety and fear |
| <i>Yoko</i> (1998) | Rosemary Wells | Respecting others and self, cultural appreciation, friendship, self-acceptance |

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| <i>Yoko Finds Her Way</i> (2014) | Rosemary Wells | Feelings of anxiousness, cultural appreciation, kindness |
| <i>Yoko Writes Her Name</i> (1998) | Rosemary Wells | Friendship, cultural appreciation, self-efficacy |
| <i>You are Your Strong</i> (2019) | Danielle Dufayet; Jennifer Zivojin | Self-confidence, self-esteem, recognizing emotions |

Through such texts, children can recognize and discuss attributes of appropriate behavior, emotions, and values that are applicable to both the characters and to themselves. Students can also reflect on how they are similar to a particular character, how they differ from a particular character, if they have ever felt the way a character feels, if they would react the way a character reacts to a situation or problem, positive attributes of a particular character, positive attributes of themselves, what lesson a particular character may have learned by going through an experience, and lessons they might learn from the characters, among many others.

Self-Awareness and Teachers

No discussion of self-awareness in the primary grades would truly be complete if we fail to discuss its importance for the teacher as well as for students. Over the past several years, there has been much discussion and debate concerning the science of reading (e.g. Duke et al., 2021; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). The science of reading is founded on the knowledge of reading development and research-based instructional processes (Petscher et al., 2020; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2022). However, while this is critical, it is also important that teachers not forget about the “science of self.” Social-emotional components should be recognized within the contexts of the science of reading, as socioemotional factors determine reading development and motivation (Duke et al., 2021; Petscher et al., 2020). It would be a travesty to forget the reader in the reading equation; therefore, teachers must create learning environments that allow for social and emotional supports as well as academic supports. Quality reading instructors must look at learning holistically; just as “many fields contribute to knowledge for the teaching of reading (e.g., education, psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, sociology, biology),” many elements go into the complex feelings and socioemotional paradigms associated with reading (Gabriel, 2020, p. 12).

Though self-awareness is a journey of discovery for each person, positive self-awareness must be modeled, particularly in language arts instruction. When we, as adults, are aware of our own emotions, our own feelings of frustrations,

successes, and accomplishments, we can be more reflective in our teaching practices. Teachers in the primary grades can help students begin to recognize emotions being felt during reading. Not only can this be done when students are listening to books being read aloud, this can also be done when students themselves are learning to read. Helping students to recognize the emotions that occur while reading allows for deeper connections, comprehension, and awareness. This permits students to learn to honestly reflect and to assess feelings of frustration, confusion, excitement, understanding, and recognition when reading (Graesser & D’Mello, 2012). Not only can students learn to focus the social and emotional attributes of characters, they can also learn to become aware of who they are and want to be within this literacy space.

Additionally, it is important to note that self-awareness is one of the most evolutionary aspects of child development. Although such mindfulness must be shaped in the early years, one’s self-awareness evolves throughout life (Rochat, 2003). Having a growth mindset is a critical aspect of self-awareness (CASEL, 2021). Educators can, and do, face enormous challenges and stress, and emotions can rapidly and vastly differ throughout a day; however, Kwon et al. (2019) found that the perceived and expressed anxiety and negative moods of adults greatly influence the quality of emotions in children. When distress and angst are constant representations of adult emotions, it often leads to adverse behaviors in children (Kwon et al., 2019). Thus, we do not help students develop the ability to understand their own emotions and thoughts if we do not model this for them (CASEL, 2021).

Conclusion: Perhaps Everything Old Should Be New Again

It is impossible to truly say how much of an impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the social, emotional, and cognitive well-being of children. However, perhaps this time in history has served a valuable lesson for us. While we will probably never go back to Robert Fulghum’s view of kindergarten, this may be the time to go back to some older ways of thinking and complete a “reset” for the young children in our care. Clark (2020) encourages teachers to think in a slower manner; instead of hurrying to ensure that all tasks are completed and all standards met, Clark (2020) posits that we may have to go at a slower pace at this point in time. Though reading instruction of today may look different due to our hurried curricula and heightened accountability, our students’ developmental needs must remain a top priority. As Egan and colleagues so wisely state, early childhood teachers must “listen deeply, observe deeply, and connect deeply with children” (Egan et al., 2021, p. 932). Bringing self-awareness to the forefront of our literacy instruction, through thoughtful processes, can give students a strong start in their academic journey.

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