

Fostering Social-Emotional Learning in Children's Books: An Analysis of Content and Quality

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is increasingly recognized as essential to children's development, equipping them with tools for emotional regulation, positive relationships, and responsible decision-making. This quantitative study explores how SEL is represented in contemporary children's literature, drawing on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework to analyze the frequency and quality of SEL themes across five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The study focuses on two primary research questions: (1) Which SEL themes appear most frequently in children's books based on rubric scores? and (2) How do literary and artistic rubric ratings relate to the effectiveness of SEL content? The study differentiates between the presence of SEL themes and the quality of their delivery. Findings highlight how children's books can serve as powerful tools for modeling empathy and social understanding, offering valuable insights for educators, parents, and publishers seeking to support holistic child development through literature.

KEYWORDS

children's literature; social development; social relationships

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a crucial component of children's development, emphasizing the importance of helping young learners acquire the skills needed to manage emotions, build healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. In an increasingly complex world, the ability to navigate social and emotional challenges is essential for both personal well-being and academic success. SEL provides children with the tools they need to understand and manage their emotions, show empathy toward others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible choices.

Children's literature plays a significant role in fostering these skills. Books that are rich in SEL content can serve as valuable resources for parents, educators, and children themselves. Through engaging stories and relatable characters, children's books have the potential to introduce and reinforce SEL concepts in accessible and developmentally appropriate ways. Research suggests that when these texts are intentionally selected and used, they can model behaviors that support emotional growth, empathy, and social understanding (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Ludwig, 2012; Shechtman, 2008). The narratives found in these books often model positive behaviors and provide children with examples of how to handle various social and emotional situations. As such,

the intentional incorporation of SEL themes into children's literature is a critical component in promoting holistic development.

While social-emotional learning (SEL) is widely regarded as a foundational component of student development, much of the existing research has focused on SEL implementation in school-based programs and curricula (Devaney et al., 2005; Greenberg, 2023). Fewer studies have examined how SEL competencies are represented in children's literature, particularly in terms of how narrative and artistic elements reinforce SEL messages. Because children's books are frequently used in early education settings as both literacy and life-skills tools, there is a need to understand how effectively these books present SEL content—not only in terms of frequency, but in the quality and clarity of those messages (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Mondy & Reynolds, 2020).

This study addresses this gap by exploring not just how often SEL themes appear in children's literature, but also how the literary and artistic quality of the books may contribute to the effectiveness of SEL communication.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore both the presence and the quality of SEL content in contemporary children's books. Specifically, it investigates the frequency with which key SEL themes appear and examines whether literary and artistic quality influences the perceived effectiveness of these themes. These are treated as two distinct areas of inquiry: representation does not imply effectiveness. Instead, the study seeks to better understand how often SEL themes appear and whether the way they are presented enhances their developmental impact on young readers. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. Which SEL themes appear most frequently in children's books based on rubric scores?
2. How do rubric ratings of literary and artistic qualities correlate with the effectiveness of SEL content in children's books?

By addressing these questions, the study endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of the intersection between SEL content and the overall quality of children's literature.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the existing literature on SEL by offering an in-depth analysis of its representation in children's books. While previous studies have focused on the role of SEL in educational settings (Devaney et al., 2005; Greenberg, 2023), there is a growing need to understand how children's literature can serve as an additional resource for promoting social-emotional learning skills. Children's books that model emotional regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making have the potential to shape not only how young readers understand emotions but also how they relate to others in meaningful ways (Ludwig, 2012; Shechtman, 2008).

Previous studies suggest that high-quality picturebooks can positively influence children's SEL development by presenting relatable characters and situations that reflect real-world social dynamics (Mondy & Reynolds, 2020; Ursache et al., 2020). Moreover, integrating SEL themes through engaging narratives can support emotional growth, improve behavior, and enhance literacy outcomes (Deliman et al., 2024; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). This study extends those findings by providing a quantitative analysis of both SEL content and literary/artistic quality, offering educators and publishers specific guidance on what constitutes effective SEL integration in children's literature.

The findings of this study will have practical implications for educators, parents, and publishers, offering guidelines on selecting and creating high-quality SEL-themed books that effectively support children’s social and emotional growth. Ultimately, this research underscores the potential of children’s literature as a powerful tool for fostering SEL and enhancing the emotional well-being of young readers.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, which identifies five core competencies essential for social-emotional learning (SEL). These competencies (Table 1), social awareness, relationship skills, self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, are critical for the holistic development of children and serve as the guiding principles for evaluating and promoting SEL through children’s literature.

Table 1: CASEL Core Competency Terms

Term	Definition
Social Awareness	CASEL (2020) defines social awareness as the ability “to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts” (p. 2).
Relationship Skills	CASEL (2020) defines relationship skills as the ability “to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups” (p. 2).
Self-Awareness	CASEL (2020) defines self-awareness as the ability to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts (p. 2).
Self-Management	CASEL (2020) defines self-management as the ability “to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations” (p. 2).
Responsible Decision-Making	CASEL (2020) defines responsible decision-making as the ability “to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations” (p. 2).

The Role of Literature in Promoting SEL

The Importance of SEL in Education

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is one of the crucial aspects of the whole child learning process. However, it receives little or no attention in schools because the emphasis is on grades and the overall academic situation. The core of the “whole child” method is SEL, such that students are able to recognize and control their feelings, become empathetic and care about those in need, build relationships, make sound judgments, and solve difficult situations (Devaney et al., 2005).

How Literature Supports SEL Competencies

The five core competencies of social and emotional learning (SEL) outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2019) can all be meaningfully supported through the integration of high-quality children’s literature. Extensive research has demonstrated that fostering these competencies leads to a range of positive student outcomes, including improved academic achievement, stronger interpersonal skills, enhanced school climate, and

reduced emotional stress (CASEL, 2019; Devaney et al., 2005). Greenberg (2023) reinforces these findings by highlighting SEL's long-term impact on student success, while Ursache et al. (2020) link early emotional understanding with later academic performance, especially in under-resourced communities. Furthermore, classroom-based SEL initiatives have been shown to strengthen students' empathy, behavior, and overall emotional literacy (Kaur & Sharma, 2022). Collectively, these findings support the role of literature as a powerful tool for promoting SEL in developmentally appropriate and impactful ways.

Literature as a Classroom SEL Tool. One effective way to incorporate social-emotional learning in the classroom is through the use of children's literature. Children's books can become great resources for educators because they can be both enjoyable to read and very useful in teaching, reviewing, or reinforcing SEL themes. In addition, the length of many children's books allows educators the opportunity to read multiple texts or reread previous texts without requiring a large time commitment.

Instructional Strategies for SEL Through Literature. High-quality children's books can serve as valuable tools to model, reinforce, and review SEL components within a literacy curriculum. When thoughtfully selected, these texts provide opportunities for students to engage with SEL themes through relatable characters and meaningful narratives. Educators can enhance this experience through instructional strategies such as interactive read-alouds and repeated readings, which not only support oral language development and reading fluency but also foster social-emotional growth (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Research by Gunn et al. (2022) further suggests that engaging with multicultural picturebooks that emphasize SEL can increase student motivation and improve literacy outcomes. These approaches help students internalize SEL concepts while simultaneously developing essential literacy skills, making children's literature a powerful dual-purpose tool in early education.

Extending SEL Themes Beyond Early Grades. The use of picturebooks to teach SEL is not limited to elementary-aged students. "Middle school students need consistent opportunities to learn about, practice, and discuss social emotional skills. These skills aid students in their behavioral and academic growth" (Short, 2022, para. 1). Most picturebooks can be read quicker than a novel as they are shorter in length, which allows the educator additional time to concentrate on the literary elements or the SEL components. Through the imaginative process that reading involves, children have the opportunity to do what they often cannot do in real life, become thoroughly involved in the inner lives of others, better understand them, and eventually become more aware of themselves (Shechtman, 2008). "The more competent children are in their SEL skills, the more successful they will be in school and in life" (Ludwig, 2012, para. 4).

SEL Themes Reflected in Children's Literature

The importance of social-emotional learning in early childhood has led to a growing interest in understanding how these themes are being reflected in the books and stories that young children encounter. Several studies have examined how social-emotional skills and competencies are portrayed in children's literature, highlighting how stories and characters support, or at times overlook, these critical developmental areas (Campagnaro & Ferrari, 2024; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Health et al., 2017; Morton & Akram, 2022) Through their plots, conflicts, and character

arcs, these books help shape how young readers understand emotions, relationships, and their own social environments.

In the educational world, social and emotional learning (SEL) has reached high importance, showing persistent growth. Numerous studies have linked the development of SEL competencies to improvements in children's well-being, academic performance, and long-term success (Devaney et al., 2005; Greenberg, 2023; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Ursache et al., 2020). By integrating relevant themes and characters that model important SEL topics, children's literature sources, such as picturebooks, have the potential to serve as a valuable tool for the development of the "whole child."

Key Findings from SEL Literature Research. One area of research has focused on evaluating the extent to which children's literature features the themes associated with the concepts of emotional management, empathy, and positive social connections. The studies of many children's books pointed out that many books present the same fundamental skills related to the SEL process, such as emotional management, role-switching, and social relationship navigation (Devaney et al., 2005; Mondì et al., 2021; Mondì & Reynolds, 2020; Ursache et al., 2020).

High-quality children's literature offers educators a practical means of integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into literacy instruction, particularly through intentional strategies such as read-alouds and repeated readings. These practices not only reinforce key SEL competencies by allowing students to engage with characters' emotions and decisions but also promote oral language development and literacy growth (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Gonsalves et al., 2018). Read-alouds have been shown to increase student motivation and foster meaningful conversations about emotional experiences, especially when supported by engaging and inclusive texts (Gunn et al., 2022). Moreover, repeated exposure to SEL-themed literature enhances vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills, while follow-up discussions and reflection activities deepen both reading and writing outcomes through dialogic engagement (Deliman et al., 2024; Gonsalves et al., 2018). Together, these strategies demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of using high-quality literature to support both literacy development and social-emotional growth in early childhood settings.

Connecting SEL with the Science of Reading

The quality of children's books has long been a topic of debate, with many factors contributing to the overall excellence of these crucial educational and entertainment resources. One of the main factors of children's books that is gaining attention is the role of the science of reading; this element has produced great strides in the comprehension of the cognitive processes involved in learning to read over the years.

Cognitive and Linguistic Foundations in Literature. The field of research in the science of reading revealed that different linguistic and cognitive factors are necessary in the process of reading, such as phonological awareness, orthographic knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension. The basic components of reading ability are currently the main focus of the kids' books' making and checking processes, as the authors, illustrators, and publishers are demonstrating a trend to create materials that readers can fully enjoy and that will drive their literacy growth.

Story Structure and Comprehension Strategy Use. Good readers can use their knowledge of story elements (text features) to combine and activate additional comprehension strategies, to ask and answer questions, monitor story comprehension, predict and preview, connect to world knowledge, construct mental images, and summarize or retell (Honig et al., 2018). Recognizing the story structure is a prerequisite to effective strategy use; therefore, having story elements and plots organized in a predictable format promotes reading comprehension.

Selecting High-Quality Books for SEL Instruction

As educators strive to nurture the essential SEL competencies, the selection of high-quality children’s books that integrate SEL principles has become a crucial consideration. It is just as important for educators to have a clear purpose for selecting a book to read to the students. A book could be selected to support an academic standard or skill, aligned to a thematic unit, used to motivate students to read similar texts, or support soft skills, including SEL (Weih, 2015).

Criteria for Evaluating SEL Books. When evaluating the quality of SEL children’s books, several key factors should be considered. *Everyday Speech for Educators* (2024) identified five key criteria for educators to consider when selecting SEL books, which are explained in Table 2.

Table 2: Five Key Criteria Considerations When Selecting SEL Books

Criteria	Explanation
Age-appropriate content	The books should be developmentally appropriate, with language, themes, and content that align with the cognitive, emotional, and social abilities of the target age group. The students’ reading abilities, emotional maturity, and complexity of the text should be suitable. The book should address the content that is especially suitable for the targeted child group. In addition, educators should check that the manner, topics, and concepts are clear so that children can grasp the meaning.
Relevance to students’ experiences and challenges	Utilizing books that address similar topics or challenges that are relevant to the students will help them make a connection to the text. Additionally, the message is conveyed in a positive manner and supports emotional development.
Engaging and interactive elements	Books that are engaging with images or include interactive elements like questions, activities, or reflections may motivate students to engage with the text. The artwork within the book should fit the written text well and provide proper ideas and emotions respectively. The story should be child-friendly and have a thoughtful plot structure.
Diversity and inclusivity representation	Books should present characters and storylines that resonate with the diverse experiences and identities of the children. Representation and inclusivity are paramount in ensuring that all children can see themselves reflected in the narratives and characters. Characters should be well-realized and exhibit character growth as the story progresses.
Alignment with SEL competencies and goals	Books should effectively model and reinforce SEL competencies and goals that an educator wants to address in their classroom, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The narratives and illustrations should provide opportunities for children to engage with and internalize these crucial skills.

Katie Cunningham (2016) included additional key elements (Table 3) to consider when deciding whether a book is a new must-have for classroom bookshelves.

Table 3: Additional Key Elements for Consideration When Selecting SEL Books

Criteria	Prompt/Explanation
Text Selection to Engage Literacy Learners	Will the book engage multiple learners?
Curriculum Connections	Are there direct connections to the curricular contexts or skills?
Authentic Representation	There should be authentic representation regarding diverse populations and perspectives, as well as issues of diversity relating to gender, socioeconomic class, religion, etc.
The Value of Social-Emotional Connections	The values of the social-emotional connection should strengthen a reader's capacity to empathize or understand what others are thinking and feeling.

Educators should “select books that include characters from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds authored and illustrated by culturally and linguistically diverse authors” (Cunningham, 2016, para. 3) to support children’s sense of belonging or connectedness at school.

In addition, the varied types of texts should each have individual elements that are considered. Narrative books should have a clear setting, problem or conflict, plot or events within the story, and characters (Weih, 2015). Informational books should include a background perspective highlighting the importance of the topic, creatively encourage students to want to read the text, include high quality graphics, demonstrate a logical and clear organization, and include a print size or style that serves a purpose, such as headings, explanations, and captions (Weih, 2015).

The National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness (2011) includes four criteria to review when evaluating culturally and socially diverse children’s books. First, the educator should consider the context for the text, including the author’s background, copyright date, and content. If the content is outdated or inaccurate, this text should not be utilized. Secondly, the educator should take the time to examine the illustrations to ensure there is diversity with characters and that those illustrations are accurately illustrated and match the story. Thirdly, the educator should analyze the message to ensure there is a clear, positive self-image from diverse backgrounds while also ensuring that the message promotes respect for all characters and cultures within the book. Finally, the educator should review the words used in the text to ensure dialects are used appropriately and respectfully, and the text is free of problematic words or offensive terms.

The Multifaceted Impact of SEL Literature

The evaluation of children’s books is a process that is made up of many parts. Some of the aspects to be addressed include the representation of a large group of different perspectives, the depth of the materials, the connectedness to the curriculum, and the promotion of the social and emotional learning themes.

The Educator’s Role in Delivering SEL Content. The relationship between social and emotional learning (SEL) and children’s literature is a complex one that involves various factors,

such as the quality of the content, the effectiveness of the themes, and the impact on the readers. In addition, if the children's literature is presented in a read-aloud format by an educator, consideration must also be given to the effectiveness of the lesson and the ability of the educator to deliver engaging reading with excellent fluency and prosody factors.

Long-Term Benefits of SEL Literature Integration. Researchers have consistently found that the development of social-emotional skills, such as emotion recognition, empathy, and responsible decision-making, can significantly affect a child's academic performance, motivation, and overall well-being (Devaney et al., 2005; Greenberg, 2023; Matsumura et al., 2008; Ursache et al., 2020). Moreover, research has revealed that these programs also increase academic performance, in that they equip children with the essential skills of school and daily life success (Devaney et al., 2005; Greenberg, 2023).

The Power of High-Quality Literature in SEL Instruction. An important factor that can support the success of social emotional learning in schools is the novelty and the quality of children's literature that is utilized for teaching SEL themes. High-quality children's books that authentically and thoughtfully address topics related to SEL themes can serve as powerful resources for educators to engage students and support essential life skills. Studies show that when social-emotional learning is strategically integrated into well-crafted children's narratives, it can increase the overall effect and retention of these life skills (Greenberg, 2023). In addition, research has shown that a sense of school community and positive social interactions in the classroom are associated with higher levels of reading comprehension and motivation, particularly among disadvantaged students (Matsumura et al., 2008).

Applying SEL Concepts Through Literature. Utilizing high-quality children's literature to teach, review, or reinforce SEL themes can provide engaging and relatable contexts for children to explore and practice these essential skills (Devaney et al., 2005; Matsumura et al., 2008; Greenberg, 2023; Ursache et al., 2020). An important aspect of this relationship is the ability of quality children's literature to capture the emotional experiences and social dynamics of the characters. Thus, they can help children gain a deeper insight into their emotions (Matsumura et al., 2008). Integration of SEL themes into high-quality children's literature, such as picturebooks, can serve not only as powerful tools for the development of students and enhancement of academic excellence, but also help them prepare to confront future hurdles. Thus, books that feature characters and stories that resonate with learners can be used as platforms through which students can apply their learning in real settings. High-quality children's literature can develop the "whole child" and provide students with the necessary skills and dispositions to follow challenges that may unfold around them (Greenberg, 2023).

Ultimately, the research suggests that the strategic integration of high-quality children's literature with SEL themes can serve as a powerful way to support the development of young learners. By providing children with opportunities to engage with stories that resonate with their lived experiences and foster the development of essential life skills, educators can help set them up for long-term success in school and beyond. Therefore, it is essential for educators to prioritize the selection of children's books that not only engage and captivate young readers but also foster the development of essential social-emotional and holistic competencies (Greenberg, 2023; Kaur & Sharma, 2022). When intentionally selected and thoughtfully discussed, these texts can become

catalysts for meaningful dialogue, empathy-building, and real-world application of SEL principles in the classroom and beyond.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the quality and effectiveness of social-emotional learning (SEL) content in children's literature to answer the following research questions: (1) Which SEL themes appear most frequently in children's books based on rubric scores? (2) How do rubric ratings of literary and artistic qualities correlate with the effectiveness of SEL content in children's books? It is important to emphasize that frequency of SEL themes and the effectiveness of their presentation are treated as distinct constructs in this study. While frequency offers insight into representation patterns, effectiveness is evaluated independently using a rubric designed to assess literary and artistic quality in conveying SEL principles. The primary method involves the use of a validated rubric to assess the integration and quality of SEL themes within selected books. The rubric generates numerical data based on specific criteria, which are systematically evaluated by literacy experts. This approach allows for objective measurement of how effectively SEL themes are embedded within the narrative and artistic elements of the books.

Data Collection Criteria

Children's books were selected based on their explicit or implicit inclusion of SEL themes. The selection process aimed to ensure a diverse representation of SEL competencies, following the framework established by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). These competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Book Selection Criteria

To develop a purposeful sample of children's literature focused on social-emotional learning (SEL), a multi-step selection process was used to ensure alignment with the study's goals. The initial pool of texts was generated from three primary sources: (1) curated library collections, (2) keyword searches on online bookstores, and (3) professional recommendations from educators, librarians, and SEL experts.

Curated library collections were identified by reviewing SEL booklists published by public libraries, school systems, and national literacy and education organizations (e.g., CASEL, Scholastic, American Library Association). These lists focused specifically on early childhood and elementary-aged readers and included texts known to support SEL development. Titles from these lists were compiled into the initial dataset.

To broaden the sample, additional books were located using keyword searches on Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Search terms included combinations of "social-emotional learning," "children's books," and the CASEL core competencies (e.g., "empathy," "self-regulation," "responsible decision-making"). Only books explicitly marketed or categorized under SEL-related themes were included.

The resulting pool of over 100 titles was then reviewed by a panel of researchers, education faculty, and a school librarian, each with expertise in children's literature and/or SEL. Titles were evaluated for developmental appropriateness, alignment with CASEL competencies, narrative clarity, and overall educational value. A total of 40 books were selected for the final sample based

on their demonstrated relevance to SEL themes and suitability for readers in early childhood through upper elementary grades.

Although the initial pool included a range of text types, only narrative children's books—such as picturebooks, illustrated storybooks, and SEL-themed fiction—were selected for inclusion in the final sample. Informational texts, workbooks, and nonfiction resources that lacked a narrative structure (e.g., plot, characters, or dialogue) were excluded from analysis. This decision ensured alignment with the design of the evaluation rubric, which was developed specifically to assess narrative elements such as character development and story-based SEL theme integration. As such, all books evaluated in the study were consistent in genre and structure, reducing the risk of skewed results due to mismatched text types. This list can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection Methods

Each book was evaluated by at least two independent reviewers using the validated rubric. This full rubric can be found in Appendix B. The reviewers included faculty members with expertise in SEL and children's literature and undergraduate education students trained in the use of the rubric. To ensure consistency, researchers conducted a two-hour training session for the student reviewers, which included an overview of SEL themes, rubric criteria, and guided practice using sample texts. The rubric assessed multiple dimensions of the books, including SEL theme integration, character development, narrative structure, artistic quality, cultural relevance, and overall impact on SEL learning. In addition to these scored dimensions, reviewers also identified which of CASEL's five core SEL competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—were present in each book. This identification was done using a checklist format on the rubric, and reviewers could select multiple competencies as applicable. Presence was determined based on observable elements in the narrative or illustrations (e.g., characters displaying empathy, resolving conflict, or managing emotions). These identifications informed the analysis of the frequency of SEL competencies across the dataset but were treated separately from overall effectiveness ratings.

The rubric used in this study was developed based on existing literature and best practices for evaluating children's books in the context of SEL. It includes categories that reflect core features of effective SEL instruction and messaging, such as theme integration, character development, emotional resonance, and cultural authenticity. These indicators align with CASEL's framework and related SEL research (CASEL, 2020; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Greenberg, 2023), making the rubric a valid tool for approximating the quality and potential impact of SEL content on young readers. While the rubric does not measure outcomes such as behavioral change, it serves as a proxy for how well books are likely to model or reinforce SEL principles in developmentally appropriate ways.

Data Analysis

The rubric provided a standardized framework for assessing the SEL content and overall quality of each book. Quantitative data from the rubric scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and evaluate the overall quality of the books. These descriptive statistics directly addressed the first research question by highlighting the most commonly presented SEL themes.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method to explore the incremental impact of different predictor sets (e.g., literary vs. artistic qualities) on SEL outcomes. Nine rubric criteria served as predictors: SEL theme integration, character development, plot and narrative structure, artistic quality (illustrations), language and

style, engagement and appeal, authenticity and cultural sensitivity, cover and text design, and grammar and spelling. This hierarchical approach allowed examination of how adding predictor sets influenced the overall model. Additionally, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed to identify the most influential predictors of overall SEL impact based on statistical criteria.

A Pearson correlation analysis was also conducted to assess the strength and direction of linear relationships between individual rubric categories and overall SEL effectiveness. The correlation matrix provided a comprehensive view of the interrelationships between literary, artistic, and SEL effectiveness scores. Together, these regression and correlation analyses offered detailed insights into how literary and artistic qualities influence SEL outcomes, addressing the second research question.

Reliability and Validity

To enhance validity, the rubric was reviewed by three content experts with backgrounds in SEL, literacy education, and children's literature. Their feedback guided revisions to clarify rubric categories, refine language, and ensure alignment with developmentally appropriate SEL competencies. This expert review process provided face and content validity for the rubric, consistent with qualitative validation approaches in educational research (Brookhart, 2013). The rubric was designed to evaluate narrative children's books for SEL theme integration, character development, narrative structure, artistic quality, cultural relevance, and overall SEL impact.

A two-hour training session was conducted with undergraduate student reviewers prior to data collection. During this session, researchers introduced the CASEL framework, discussed the purpose and scoring of each rubric category, and engaged participants in collaborative scoring exercises using sample texts. This calibration helped establish consistency in scoring practices and minimized interpretive discrepancies. In addition to the initial training, reviewers also had access to a rubric guide with definitions and sample annotations to support consistent interpretation of scoring criteria.

Each book was independently evaluated by at least two reviewers. The review team consisted of four total evaluators: two faculty members with expertise in SEL and children's literature, and two trained undergraduate education students. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa and yielded a score of 0.74, indicating substantial agreement among reviewers (Landis & Koch, 1977). These reliability results support the consistency and trustworthiness of the scoring process.

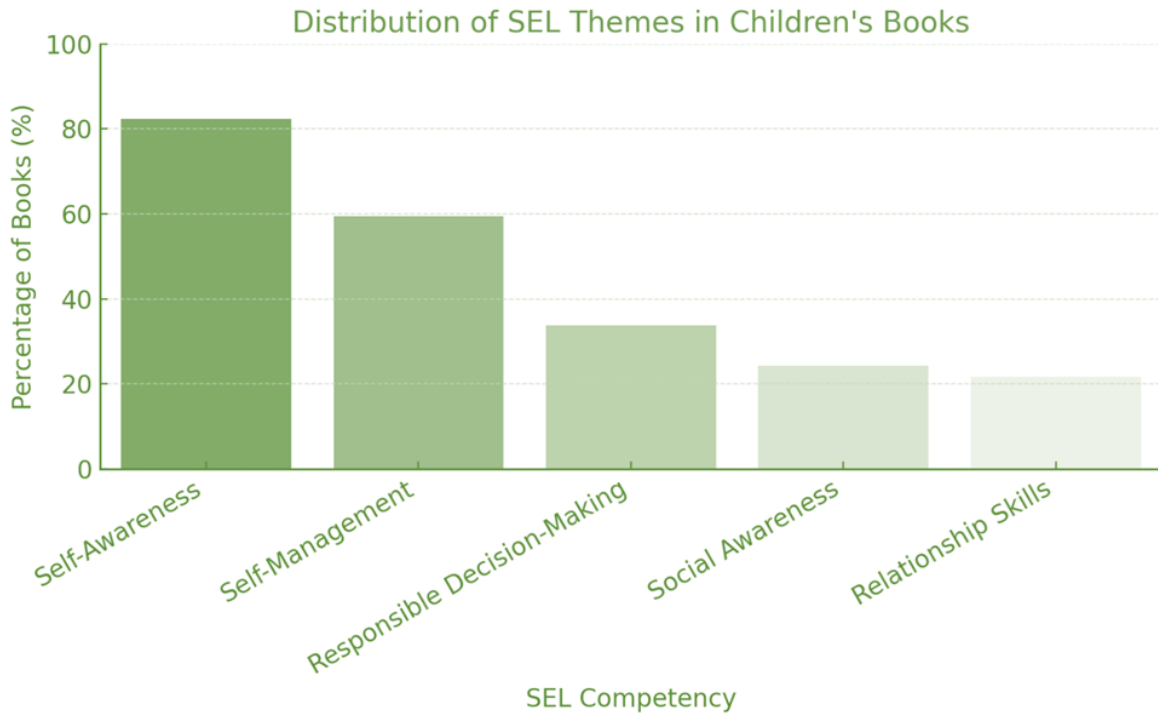
Results

This study examined the prevalence of social-emotional learning (SEL) themes in children's literature and analyzed the impact of literary and artistic qualities on overall SEL outcomes. To ensure consistency in evaluations, inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa. The analysis produced a Kappa value of 0.74, indicating a substantial level of agreement between evaluators. This result reflects strong consistency across all paired evaluations, supporting the reliability of the coding process.

Descriptive statistics provided insights into the distribution of SEL themes within the children's books analyzed. Among the five core SEL competencies, self-awareness was the most frequently represented theme, appearing in 82.4% of the books. This was followed by self-management (59.5%), responsible decision-making (33.8%), social awareness (24.3%), and relationship skills (21.6%). Additionally, the analysis of SEL theme integration scores indicated

that 48.6% of the books received an “Excellent” rating, while 26.7% were rated as “Good,” meaning that over 75% of the books demonstrated strong SEL representation. These descriptive findings highlight the prevalence of key SEL themes in children’s literature and the overall quality of their integration.

Figure 1: Distribution of SEL Themes in Children’s Books



To further explore the relationship between literary and artistic qualities and overall SEL outcomes, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method was conducted. The regression model was statistically significant ($F(9, 64) = 9.780, p < .001$), with an R-squared value of 0.579, indicating that the model explained 57.9% of the variance in overall SEL outcomes. The hierarchical approach identified SEL theme integration ($\beta = 0.292, p = 0.032$) as a significant predictor of SEL outcomes, underscoring the critical role of how well SEL themes are embedded in children’s literature.

Table 4: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Overall SEL Outcomes

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
SEL Theme Integration	0.292	0.131	0.292	2.23	.032
Engagement and Appeal	0.265	0.115	0.278	2.30	.026
Plot and Narrative	0.189	0.102	0.215	1.85	.069

Model Summary: $R^2 = .579, F(9, 64) = 9.780, p < .001$

Note. This table displays the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

A stepwise multiple regression analysis provided further clarity regarding the relative importance of predictors. This analysis confirmed that SEL theme integration was the strongest predictor of overall SEL outcomes. Additionally, engagement/appeal and plot/narrative structure emerged as secondary contributors, further emphasizing the importance of literary elements in promoting SEL competencies.

Table 5: Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Overall SEL Outcomes

Step	Predictor	B	EB	β	t	p
1	SEL Theme Integration	0.295	0.125	0.312	2.36	.021
2	Engagement and Appeal	0.267	0.118	0.281	2.26	.027
3	Plot and Narrative	0.193	0.104	0.219	1.87	.065

Model Summary: $R^2 = .564, p < .001$

Note. This table displays the results of the stepwise multiple regression analysis.

The findings from the Pearson correlation analysis aligned with the regression results, demonstrating significant positive relationships between overall SEL outcomes and key predictors. Specifically, strong correlations were observed with SEL theme integration ($r = 0.674$), engagement and appeal ($r = 0.748$), and plot and narrative structure ($r = 0.601$). These correlations reinforce the importance of both content quality and narrative structure in influencing SEL outcomes.

Table 6: Pearson Correlations Between Predictors and Overall SEL Outcomes

Variable	SEL Integration	Engagement	Plot & Narrative
Overall SEL Outcomes	.674**	.748**	.601**

Note: ** $p < .01$ for all correlations.

In summary, the results of this study consistently highlight SEL theme integration as the most significant predictor of overall SEL outcomes, with engagement, appeal, and plot and narrative structure serving as important supporting factors. The alignment between the descriptive statistics, hierarchical regression, stepwise regression, and correlation analyses provides a comprehensive understanding of how literary and artistic elements contribute to the effectiveness of children's literature in fostering SEL competencies.

Discussion

Overview of SEL Representation in Children's Literature

The findings of this study underscore the crucial role that social-emotional learning (SEL) content plays in children's literature. The analysis revealed that self-awareness was the most frequently represented SEL theme, followed by self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. This distribution suggests that while there is broad

representation of the core SEL competencies, some areas, such as social awareness and relationship skills, are less prevalent. The prominence of self-awareness and self-management may reflect the tendency of children's literature to focus on individual emotional growth and regulation, which are foundational for personal development.

Quality and Consistency of SEL Integration. Furthermore, the strong SEL theme integration across most of the books, with over 75% receiving "Excellent" or "Good" ratings, suggests that a significant number of books integrate SEL themes effectively. This indicates a growing recognition among authors, publishers, and educators regarding the importance of embedding SEL principles within stories for children. Given the consistent and substantial agreement among evaluators (as reflected in the Cohen's Kappa value of 0.74), we can confidently conclude that the quality of SEL content is not only widely present but also well-implemented across the sample. This alignment of content quality with the SEL themes also suggests that children's literature serves as a powerful tool for promoting SEL competencies when these themes are seamlessly integrated into narratives and characters.

Implications for Narrative Integration of SEL

The results from this study suggest several important implications for the promotion of SEL through children's literature. First, the significant role of SEL theme integration in predicting overall SEL outcomes ($\beta = 0.292, p = 0.032$) underscores the importance of how well SEL concepts are embedded within the narrative. Stories that incorporate SEL themes in a meaningful and authentic way are more likely to foster SEL competencies in young readers. Therefore, educators, authors, and publishers should prioritize the seamless inclusion of SEL themes into the fabric of the narrative, ensuring that these themes are not superficial or didactic but integrated into the plot, character development, and conflict resolution.

Aesthetic Qualities and SEL Impact. The finding that engagement and appeal, along with plot and narrative structure, also contribute to SEL outcomes highlights the role of artistic qualities in enhancing the effectiveness of SEL content. Books that engage readers through compelling plots and relatable characters are more likely to stimulate emotional and social learning. For instance, a well-crafted narrative can create opportunities for young readers to relate to the characters' emotions and experiences, fostering empathy and emotional regulation. These elements support the idea that the aesthetic quality of children's literature is as important as the SEL content itself in promoting social-emotional development.

Storytelling Engagement and SEL Outcomes. The correlation analyses reinforce the value of both content and narrative structure. With significant positive relationships between overall SEL outcomes and both SEL theme integration ($r = 0.674$) and engagement and appeal ($r = 0.748$), the findings indicate that the effectiveness of children's literature in promoting SEL is not solely dependent on the presence of SEL content but also on the quality of the storytelling and emotional engagement it fosters. This suggests that books that capture the reader's attention and resonate emotionally are more likely to result in positive SEL outcomes.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and integration of SEL themes in children's literature, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in the methodology

employed. Although the study used rigorous inter-rater reliability measures, the evaluation of SEL content and literary qualities is still subjective to some extent. Evaluators may have different interpretations of the elements that constitute effective SEL integration or may prioritize certain themes over others, leading to variability in the assessments. Furthermore, the coding process is reliable; however, it still relies on the evaluators' judgment in identifying and categorizing SEL themes, which may be influenced by their personal experiences, biases, or theoretical orientations. While the findings are robust, these constraints could reflect a particular interpretative lens and may not fully capture the nuances of all children's literature or the diversity of approaches to SEL integration.

Additionally, the focus on literary and artistic qualities as predictors of SEL outcomes may have overlooked other potential factors influencing SEL development, such as the socioeconomic context of readers or the manner in which books are used in educational settings. The methodology's reliance on specific evaluative criteria may not account for the broad range of contexts in which children's literature is encountered, such as family reading versus classroom discussions, which could affect the way SEL themes are perceived and internalized.

Sample size and potential biases in the selection of books is another limitation to this study. While the analysis covered a significant number of children's books, the sample may not be fully representative of all available literature. The selection criteria for the books analyzed may have inadvertently excluded certain genres, publishers, or authors that present different approaches to SEL. For example, the study may have overrepresented books from popular publishers or those that are already well-established in educational settings, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives on SEL.

Lastly, the book selection process could have introduced bias by favoring books that explicitly address SEL themes, while those that subtly incorporate SEL concepts or offer more complex, nuanced portrayals of social-emotional development may have been underrepresented. The reliance on a set of pre-selected texts may have also resulted in an overrepresentation of books that align with certain pedagogical frameworks or theoretical perspectives on SEL, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings to a wider range of children's literature.

Recommendations

Authors, Educators, and Publishers

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for authors, educators, and publishers seeking to create or select effective SEL-focused children's books. First, it is crucial to integrate SEL themes seamlessly into the narrative. As highlighted by the study, the most significant predictor of positive SEL outcomes was the integration of SEL themes. Authors and publishers should aim to embed these themes naturally within the storyline, ensuring that they emerge organically from the characters' experiences, plot developments, and resolutions. SEL concepts should not feel forced but rather reflect the real-life challenges and growth children may encounter. Additionally, fostering emotional engagement and appeal is essential. The findings suggest that books that engage readers emotionally may enhance the impact of SEL themes by fostering deeper personal connection and reflection. Authors should create compelling, relatable characters and plots that resonate with children's lived experiences. The emotional depth and vibrant illustrations of these stories can help capture the attention of young readers, thus enhancing their connection to the SEL themes presented.

Furthermore, a balance between narrative structure and SEL themes is important. The study identified the plot and narrative structure as important contributors to SEL outcomes, suggesting

that well-paced narratives with strong character development and conflict resolution are key. Authors should construct stories that not only teach SEL principles but also offer clear, engaging plots. Publishers should focus on selecting stories that balance artistic and educational elements, providing an enriching experience for young readers. Another recommendation is to provide diverse SEL representation in children's literature. While themes such as self-awareness and self-management were prominently represented, other competencies, like social awareness and relationship skills, were less frequent. To ensure comprehensive SEL development, authors and publishers should include a broad range of SEL themes in their books, promoting a more holistic emotional and social growth for children. Lastly, educators should be provided with resources that highlight SEL themes in children's literature. These resources could include discussion prompts, activities, and reflection exercises designed to enhance the SEL potential of books. Educators should also be encouraged to use these books in ways that foster active engagement, such as group discussions or role-playing, to deepen students' understanding of the SEL themes explored.

Future Research

Several areas warrant further exploration to expand our understanding of how children's literature supports SEL. One important area for future study is conducting longitudinal research to examine the long-term effects of reading SEL-focused books on children's emotional and social development. This would provide deeper insights into how repeated exposure to SEL themes influences children's behavior and emotional regulation over time. Additionally, future studies could explore how SEL is represented in literature across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. Understanding how SEL themes resonate with children from various demographics will ensure that literature reflects the needs and experiences of a broader range of readers. Another direction for future research is to conduct comparative studies of different literary genres, such as fantasy, historical fiction, and realistic fiction, to determine how each genre incorporates and promotes SEL themes. This would offer insight into whether certain genres are more effective in fostering social-emotional learning than others. Moreover, since illustrations play a vital role in children's literature, future research could investigate how visual elements, such as artwork and design, contribute to SEL outcomes and emotional engagement. This would offer a more holistic understanding of how both literary and artistic qualities together can support children's social-emotional growth. Lastly, research could explore how teachers and parents perceive and implement SEL-focused books in their classrooms and homes. Understanding how adults facilitate the discussion of SEL themes would offer valuable insights into how these resources can be used most effectively in educational settings.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the prevalence of social-emotional learning (SEL) themes in children's literature and highlights the importance of both literary content and artistic qualities in fostering SEL outcomes. The analysis revealed that self-awareness was the most frequently represented SEL theme, followed by self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. Over 75% of the books analyzed demonstrated strong integration of SEL themes, suggesting a widespread recognition of the importance of these competencies in children's literature. Moreover, the study found that SEL theme integration was the most significant predictor of overall SEL outcomes, with engagement and appeal, as well as plot and narrative structure, also contributing to positive SEL results. These findings underscore

the critical role of the content of children's literature and the way the story is conveyed through compelling narratives and engaging artistic elements.

The importance of SEL in children's literature cannot be overstated. SEL competencies are essential for children's emotional and social development, helping them navigate complex interpersonal relationships, regulate their emotions, and make responsible decisions. Children's literature offers a unique and accessible platform for introducing these concepts in an engaging and relatable way. By integrating SEL themes into stories, authors can help children understand and practice these skills in a context they can connect with, thereby fostering a positive impact on their overall development.

These findings build on earlier research suggesting that narrative quality and reader engagement play a vital role in SEL learning through literature. For example, Doyle and Bramwell (2006) highlighted how dialogic reading of emotionally rich texts supports emergent SEL skills, while Gunn et al. (2022) demonstrated that multicultural picturebooks can promote both motivation and empathy. Similarly, Ludwig (2012) and Deliman et al. (2024) emphasized that high-quality stories with well-developed characters offer opportunities for emotional connection and social-emotional reflection. This study extends their work by offering quantitative support for the value of narrative structure, engagement, and theme integration in shaping SEL impact.

The potential impact of SEL-themed books on children's emotional and social development is profound. Books that effectively integrate SEL themes can provide children with valuable tools for emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship-building, laying the foundation for healthier social interactions and personal growth. As this study demonstrates, when SEL is embedded seamlessly within a narrative, accompanied by engaging plots and relatable characters, it can enhance children's ability to understand and manage their emotions and behaviors. The study emphasizes that well-crafted children's books with strong SEL content and artistic qualities can serve as a powerful tool for educators, parents, and children alike in promoting social-emotional learning and contributing to the development of emotionally intelligent and socially responsible individuals.

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Appendix A: Children's Book Used in this Research

- Acker, J., & Acker, M. (2022). *My respectful robot*. Joey and Melanie Acker.
- Blake, J. (2021). *Chiri the hummingbird: A book about empathy and kindness*. Author.
- Butler, J. (2020). *Coloring book and reflections for social emotional learning*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Cain, J. (2021). *The way I feel*. Parenting Press.
- Canada, I. N. B., (2021). *The exciting, social & emotional adventures of chatting Timmy!* Crucible Learning Network.
- Cole, E. (2021). *Our diversity makes us stronger*. Author.
- Cole, E. (2023a). *My way to good manners*. Author.
- Cole, E. (2023b). *Perseverance makes me stronger*. Author.
- Cole, E., & Kim, T. (2022). *My way to making friends*. Go2Publish LLC.
- Collier, T. J., & Vasilica, N. (2023). *Broken crayons still color*. Thomas Nelson.
- Daywalt, D., & Jeffers, O. (2021). *The crayons' book of feelings*. Philomel Books.
- Ellis, S. (2022). *Super SEL: A social emotional learning book for kids*. Author.
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- Lee, B. W., & Souva, J. (2022). *The boy with big, big feelings*. Scholastic.
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- O'Neill, P. (2019). *Sometimes I'm anxious: A child's guide to overcoming anxiety*. Sky Pony Press.
- Parr, T. (2019). *The kindness book*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Ricketts, A., & Barron, A. (2018). *Gentle hands and other sing-along songs for social-emotional learning*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Sheremet, D. (2023). *It's okay: A social emotional book for kids that helps with self-regulation*. Dynamic Kids Press.
- Teitelbaum, N. (2020). *Munchy and jumpy tales, volume 1: A social-emotional book for kids about practicing mindfulness, finding joy and getting second chances*. Empowering Education.
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- West, A. E. (2022). *Today, I feel . . . anxious: A book about managing emotions*. Puppy Dogs & Ice Cream.
- Whelan, S. M. (2017). *Don't think about purple elephants*. EK Books.

Winner, M. G., & Murphy, L. K. (2016). *Social thinking and me*. Social Thinking Publishing.

Appendix B: Children's Book Evaluation Rubric for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Integration

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Poor (1)
SEL Theme Integration	SEL themes are seamlessly woven into the narrative and central to the story, deeply resonating with the target age group.	SEL themes are well-integrated and clearly present, though not always central. Accessible to the target age group.	SEL themes are present but may feel forced or secondary. May lack clarity or development for the target age group.	SEL themes are poorly integrated, barely present, and unclear or inappropriate for the target age group.
Character Development	Characters are well-developed, relatable, and demonstrate emotional and social growth aligned with SEL themes.	Characters show development and model SEL themes, though growth may not be fully explored.	Characters exhibit limited development with inconsistent SEL modeling.	Characters are flat or stereotypical, lacking SEL-based growth.
Plot and Narrative Structure	All plot elements (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) are well-crafted, creating a coherent narrative that naturally integrates SEL themes.	Plot is well-structured, with most elements supporting SEL, though some aspects may lack full integration.	Plot structure is basic and may lack coherence or depth, with SEL elements explored inconsistently.	Plot lacks structure or coherence, not supporting SEL themes effectively.
Authenticity and Cultural Sensitivity	Portrayal of cultures and lifestyles is accurate, respectful, and avoids stereotypes, enhancing SEL content.	Cultural representation is generally respectful and avoids major inaccuracies, though depth may be limited.	Limited diversity present, with potential oversimplification or minor inaccuracies in representation.	Depictions are stereotypical, inaccurate, or disrespectful, failing to support inclusive SEL themes.
Cover and Text Design	Cover is engaging and relevant, with clear, legible text that supports the story and SEL themes without distraction.	Cover and text design are generally effective and engaging, with minor limitations in clarity or relevance.	Cover or text design may lack appeal or clarity, impacting reader engagement.	Cover or text design is ineffective, lacking relevance and legibility, distracting from the narrative.
Grammar and Spelling	Text is free from grammar or spelling errors, enhancing readability and professional quality.	Minor grammar or spelling errors present, but do not significantly affect readability.	Several grammar or spelling errors disrupt flow, affecting readability.	Frequent grammar and spelling errors interfere with comprehension.
Artistic Quality (Illustrations)	Illustrations are high-quality, visually appealing, and enhance SEL themes by effectively conveying emotions and social situations.	Illustrations support SEL themes and are visually appealing, though not always enhancing the narrative.	Illustrations are adequate but lack depth in conveying emotions or SEL themes.	Illustrations are poor quality, detract from SEL themes, and fail to convey relevant emotions.
Language and Style	Language is engaging, age-appropriate, and enhances SEL theme	Language is generally appropriate and engaging, though some areas may lack depth.	Language may be occasionally inappropriate or inconsistent,	Language is inappropriate, disengaging, or confusing, with an inconsistent style that

	comprehension, with a consistent style.		detracting from the story's message.	detracts from the narrative.
Engagement and Appeal	Book is highly engaging, capturing attention and fostering a deep connection to SEL themes.	Book is engaging and generally appealing to the target audience, with a solid connection to SEL themes.	Engagement is limited, with weaker connections to SEL themes.	Book is unengaging, failing to capture interest or foster SEL connections.
Overall Impact on SEL Learning	Book strongly promotes SEL, encouraging reflection and application of SEL concepts.	Book positively promotes SEL, with some encouragement for reflection.	Limited SEL impact, with minimal encouragement for reflection or application.	Little to no SEL impact, failing to promote reflection or learning.

Scoring Guide (total points)				
(36–40) Exceptional SEL content and quality, highly effective for SEL promotion				
(28–35) Good SEL content, effective, but with areas for improvement				
(18–27) Fair SEL content, requiring significant improvements to promote SEL effectively				
(10–17) Poor SEL content, not suitable for SEL promotion				