

Inclusion, Equality, and Educational Justice: Enhancing Social-Emotional Skills through Children's Literature in a Diverse and Segregated Society

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Abstract

Children's literature is an essential channel for providing children with social-emotional skills. This is particularly so in diverse and segregated societies where the need for enhancing awareness and acceptance of the Other is acute. Based on the content and semiotic analysis of 25 titles included in the state program "March of Books," the present study examines how, if at all, social-emotional skills are reflected in the Hebrew-language children's literature in Israel. Since the selected titles reflect all skill categories determined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the findings indicate that these selected titles can support children's social-emotional learning (SEL). Nevertheless, the selected titles lack focus on a specific category within each text. Moreover, in a manner typical of Jewish-Israeli education, the selected titles expose young readers to their specific cultures and others through translated literature that highlights gender, Jewish-ethnic, physical, and age equality. At the same time, the selected titles tend to marginalize the culture of the Arab minority. The article concludes that education programs seeking to promote SEL through children's literature must balance all SEL categories, represent the learners' social differences, expose the readers to other cultures, and inculcate pluralist values.

Keywords: children's literature; diversity; Israel; segregation; social-emotional learning (SEL)

Publication Type: research

Introduction

Education is a resource for normative social, cognitive, and emotional development (Gudovich, 2022). Social-emotional learning (SEL) is particularly important in early childhood, as it serves as a basis for the learners' development, helping them function effectively at school and in life in general (Cline, 2019). This is more so in a diverse and segregated society where the need to develop awareness of others and enhance skills for their acceptance is acute (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). While designing SEL programs, the learners' sociocultural background is important (Kopelman- Rubin, 2020). Israel is a highly diverse and segregated society. The relations between its various cultural communities are characterized by inequality, a lack of dialogue, and mutual denial (Smoha, 2010). This is particularly so regarding the Jewish majority and Palestinian-Arab minority (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). Recent recommendations from an expert committee called for

the Israeli educational system to foster SEL to address these cultural tensions (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

Given the scarce literature in this field, it is crucial to assess the effectiveness of programs based on children's literature in developing social-emotional skills in the Israeli educational system. Studying children's books that are part of government programs is crucial since they are widely available and act as essential socialization tools (Frevert et al., 2014). In this way, an intentional approach to the selection of children's literature books that contain social-emotional concepts may contribute to the development of social-emotional skills among students who read and discuss these books. Considering this, the current study examines the following question: How, if at all, are social-emotional skills reflected in Hebrew children's books included in a government educational program for Jewish schools? To answer this research question, there is a need to examine that literature, even more so given the lack of relevant studies in the context of Israeli children's literature, particularly that of books included in state educational programs.

The current study focuses on Hebrew children's books included in the educational program "March of Books" intended for Jewish schools. The program is designed to encourage students in grades 1 to 12 to read selected books, participate in related activities, and vote for their favorite book every year. The list of books for each age group is selected by a committee of experts and publicized at the beginning of each school year (Ministry of Education, n.d.). From the different grades participating in this program (first-third, fourth-sixth, seventh-ninth, and tenth-twelfth), this study will focus on the books intended for the first-third grade group for the 2020-2021 school year. The choice of the youngest age group in elementary schools was due to the fact that assimilating social-emotional skills in the early stages is more effective than assimilating them at later ages (Jones & Kahan, 2017). Therefore, this age group gains special importance in assimilating social-emotional skills.

The objective of the present study is thus to provide educational and practical suggestions for establishing social-emotional skills through children's literature, thereby helping policymakers, teachers, and authors determine the most effective way to enhance social-emotional skills in children's literature. For this purpose, I have selected the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) (2013) frequently cited theoretical framework since it focuses on educational objectives and less on explaining and predicting personality traits and psychological variables and their effects on human behavior, as proposed, for example, by the Big Five model offered by the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Sperling, 2018).

Literature Review

This literature review explores the potential of children's literature to cultivate social-emotional learning (SEL) in a complex social context like Israel. It examines the growing importance of SEL in education, its core competencies, and the effectiveness of children's literature as a tool for developing these skills. The review then delves into the specific challenges and opportunities presented by the Israeli sociocultural landscape. The deep divisions within Israeli society, particularly the Arab-Jewish conflict, necessitate a focus on SEL that promotes civic engagement and intergroup understanding. Finally, the review highlights the crucial role of educational programs based on children's literature in fostering SEL within the Israeli educational system.

This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the representation of social-emotional skills in Hebrew children's books used in the government curriculum.

Social-Emotional Learning: A Comprehensive Review

SEL was first applied systematically in education in 1997 by a group of US experts who were looking for ways of helping students develop their non-academic skills (Elias et al., 1997). It refers to many intervention programs created to teach K-12 students social-emotional skills (Ran et al., 2018). These skills have been divided into five categories by CASEL:

1. **Self-awareness:** The ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
2. **Self-management:** The ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.
3. **Responsible decision-making:** The ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.
4. **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
5. **Social awareness:** The ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts (see Appendix A for details of the categories and related subskills).

(CASEL, 2012, p. 9)

Interest in social-emotional skills has recently grown, especially in education (Wentzel, 2019). This is understandable given recent changes outside the educational field, such as the blurring of the dichotomous distinction between cognitive skills and social-emotional skills, adjustments to the roles assigned to educational systems, families, and communities, and the need for improved social-emotional skills in the job market (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

Emphasizing the acquisition of social-emotional skills in schools is essential, as they contribute to the child's well-being (Durlak et al., 2011). Various studies have found that children who master social-emotional skills get along better with others and achieve greater academic success. As adults, moreover, they develop more successful careers, show greater social engagement, and have better physical and mental health with fewer risky behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Hadani et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, SEL activities are often marginalized by the growing presence of technology in students' lives, affecting their ability to acquire various social-emotional skills (Miller, 2005). They are also marginalized by educational policies that stress academic skills at the expense of social-emotional ones (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). According to Walker (2020), most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the social-emotional skills of school students due to the transition to distance learning and the reduced social interactions among students.

Early childhood years are crucial for SEL because young children frequently enter school without having enough experience engaging with classmates and teachers (Cline, 2019). They must also learn to control their emotions, handle difficult social circumstances, focus, use their

imagination, and solve problems. Miller (2005) discussed how different academic experiences, such as forming social relations with adults, exploring nature, the arts, and storytelling, might help young children develop social-emotional skills.

Children's Literature as a Channel of Social-Emotional Development

Children's literature is "a branch of literature in prose and poetry suitable in its content and style for the understanding of children aged 5-13" (Goldberg, 1978, p. 55). Given that moral maturity is a structural development at these ages, literature plays a particularly significant role as a socialization tool and as the foundation for normative education (Frevert et al., 2014). Furthermore, Rose (1984) contends that while children's literature is produced for children, it is written by adults, reflecting the world of adults with their desires, fears, and moral standards. Finally, Mashiach (2006) asserts that children's literature is not divorced from the political framework that permeates their daily lives.

Children's literature is also discussed as a SEL channel (Boyles, 2018). Heath et al. (2017) describe and recommend children's stories and bibliotherapy as instruments for promoting social-emotional skills. Using literature to teach such skills in early childhood is an effective way to integrate learning and teach the whole child through multidisciplinary teaching, which allows students to connect to their learning and strengthen their academic and social-emotional skills (Sandell, 2020).

Children's literature has an impact because of the connection between the reader and the text. By empathizing with the protagonists, readers interact with the real world through them and gain insight into their own experiences and values (Boyles, 2018; Shirav & Levi, 2007). Literature then "provides a living through, not simply knowledge about" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 38). Adivi-Shoshan (2022) adds that the literary text is unique, among other things, in that it facilitates emotional identification and multiple and diverse readings, allowing the teacher to use it to engage the students in discussions about controversial social issues.

The literary characters may demonstrate strong social-emotional skills and exhibit positive and pro-social behaviors as well as negative and antisocial ones (Linder, 2021). Hence, texts selected for SEL purposes must present dynamic characters that cope with challenges, characters that may be treated as heroes and role models, and strong characters that overcome difficulties and learn important lessons (Boyles, 2018). In addition to the proper selection of books, Boyles (2018) suggests focusing on teaching one social-emotional skill per text, even when multiple such skills may be reflected so that students can put the skill into practice and fully understand it. Lastly, Cappiello and Dawes (2012) recommend expanding the reading selection to include other genres, such as prose, poetry, websites, articles, and child-friendly news stories in print and digital media. This variety can attract the children's attention and support their motivation, curiosities, involvement, and ability to see things from various perspectives.

Additionally, as visual elements play a significant role in forming young children's consciousness at a time when their written and spoken language is still developing, it is crucial to treat the illustrations in children's books as yet another SEL channel. Illustrations included with the text may be utilized to support, clarify, or enhance it (Sitner & Meshulam, 2020). The visual aspect of the book is regarded as being equally important to the text and unique in that it offers a direct channel for delivering normative messages because it develops the immediate sensory experience and atmosphere, serving as a primary factor in defining its nature, power, and

attraction (Gonin, 2000). According to Sandell (2020), employing illustrations to promote SEL in young children increases their interest, focus, and involvement.

Enhancing Social-Emotional Skills in Diverse Societies

As a result of legislative moves and decisions made by courts in the US and other Western countries, the policy of including students with disabilities in regular classes is one of the dramatic changes that occurred in the education field (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). This policy has increased the diversity within regular classrooms in countries such as Israel (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020). Diversity has also increased due to the growing numbers of immigrants integrating into Western education systems, bringing different social communication and emotional expression norms. These systems often respond with exclusionary and stereotyping practices (Brenick et al., 2019). According to Weissberg and Cascarino (2013), for children to prosper in the present and realize their potential in the future within a diverse society, attention to expression must be devoted to their SEL. Benbenishty and Friedman (2020) believe that to deal with the diversity in the classrooms, teachers must devote greater attention to the social-emotional aspect of their role and equip their students with social-emotional skills.

The growing diversity in Israeli society, particularly within its education system, raises the need to provide students with multicultural literature, highlighting that society is a fabric of differences where violence against the Other is illegitimate (Rodin, 2015; Yokota, 1993). Such literature engages students in multicultural encounters and educates them to accept the Other and acknowledge their differences (Falk-Peretz, 2016; Robinson, 2013). Multicultural literature helps students get to know other cultures, become more empathetic and tolerant towards them, develop critical awareness, doubt hegemonic narratives, and participate in an inclusive and stereotype-free multicultural discourse (Ching, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2012). For children belonging to marginalized groups, this literature can foster pride and a positive self-image (Yokota, 1993).

According to Almog et al. (2010), the more connections there are between the reader's sociocultural and literary background and the book's contents, the more likely the reader will feel a richer and more intense connection to the book's contents. Others argue that children's literature should serve as both a window and a mirror, as both a reflection of the readers' cultural background and a gateway to other cultures (Bishop, 1990). This literature can arouse modesty and attention to the Other through a complex emotional process of empathizing with the literary figures and becoming attached to their lives (Darr et al., 2007). In light of this, SEL teaching based on children's literature ought to be culturally responsive so that all students feel represented while learning about others and how they come together both in the classroom and in society (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Apart from ensuring that all students have access to learning and the opportunity to develop their social-emotional abilities, this learning should also incorporate the ideals of equality and social justice (Desai et al., 2014).

The Challenges of Social-Emotional Learning in the Israeli Context

The sociocultural setting of the learners has an impact on SEL (Kopelman-Rubin, 2020). Therefore, discussing Israeli society's characteristics and how they impact SEL is important. Israel is a highly diverse country with multiple and substantially different national, religious, and cultural groups (Smootha, 2010). Nevertheless, many researchers believe that Israeli society is not multicultural, as it is a deeply divided society; the relations between its different sectors are characterized by inequality, alienation, a lack of dialogue, and mutual exclusiveness. Israeli

citizens are also deeply separated in many areas of life, particularly in the education system(s) and residential areas (Mautner, 2011; Paul-Binyamin, 2017; Smooha, 2010).

The rift is particularly deep between the Jewish-Israeli majority and the Palestinian-Arab minority (hereafter referred to as “Jews” and “Arabs,” respectively). Arabs in Israel represent one-fifth of its population. This group has unique ethnocultural characteristics, and their relations with the Jews are marred by an intractable conflict. Upon the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, they became an Indigenous minority because of war and uprooting. Israel fulfilled the dream of a Jewish state, while the Arabs were subjected to both formal and informal discrimination (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

The Arab-Jewish conflict has a dramatic and formative presence in all areas of life in Israel. Nevertheless, the Israeli education system ignores it (Yuval, 2022). Several scholars attribute this to political motives and view it as a strategy of reproducing the status quo; accordingly, the education system is shaped by reality and does not promote solutions for the conflict (Mendel & Kremerski, 2022; Tal, 2017; Yuval, 2022). Indeed, by the age of seven, most Jewish students hold views that legitimize rather than question the conflict (Tal, 2017).

Moreover, life in Israel and its education system are grounded in the logic of Arab-Jewish segregation, which is governed by a policy implemented consistently since Israel won its independence in 1948 (Yuval, 2022). This societal structure includes spatial, socioeconomic, sociocultural, psychological, and civic segregation (Dahan, 2018). In recent years, ethnonational segregation has deepened, as reflected by the 2018 Nation-State Law, which formally defines the State of Israel as a Jewish state and cancels the official status of Arabic identity (Zureik, 2020). As separate is never equal, this segregation also entails discrimination in resource allocation (Yuval, 2022). Finally, it is legitimized in the media and school textbooks (Peled-Elhanan, 2012).

In its final report, an expert committee that studied the promotion of SEL in the Israeli educational system noted two challenges that the system had to overcome:

1. Tensions, rifts, racism, and mutual exclusion between groups in Israel.
2. Threat situations are coupled with high exposure to violence.

Concerning the first challenge, the committee felt that in addition to promoting SEL in the intrapersonal (self-awareness and self-management) and interpersonal (relationship skills) areas (see Appendix A), emphasis had to be placed on SEL that promoted civic functioning, which addresses the ability to truly understand and communicate with members of other groups in a constructive manner. Regarding the second challenge, the committee stated that the education system had to address both political and criminal violence by promoting emotionally protective learning spaces and cultivating SEL to enhance individual and collective resilience (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

Summary

SEL is a crucial tool for students to develop non-academic skills, including self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2012). Early childhood years are crucial for SEL, as they teach students to control emotions, handle social situations, focus, and solve problems (Cline, 2019). Children's literature is

considered a SEL channel, as it should present dynamic characters with strong social-emotional skills (Boyles, 2018). Teaching one social-emotional skill per book and expanding the reading selection to include various genres is recommended (Boyles, 2018; Cappiello & Dawes, 2012). In addition, using illustrations to promote SEL in young children increases their interest, focus, and involvement (Sandell, 2020).

Israel's sociocultural setting significantly impacts SEL, as the country is deeply divided due to inequality, alienation, and mutual exclusiveness (Smootha, 2010). As a result of the long historical conflict, the rift between the Jewish-Israeli majority and the Palestinian-Arab minority is particularly deep (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). Recent recommendations from an expert committee called for the Israeli educational system to foster SEL to address these cultural tensions (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

The role of educational programs based on children's literature in developing social-emotional skills in the Israeli educational system is crucial. This study examines how, if at all, social-emotional skills are reflected in Hebrew children's books included in the government educational program "March of Books" for Jewish schools.

Materials and Methods

Design and Approach

This qualitative study combines two methods or approaches: content and semiotic analysis. *Content analysis* is designed to systematically describe and analyze the messages conveyed in a certain text and derive conclusions applicable to broader contexts. One of the most important steps in content analysis is classifying data into categories and themes (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1990).

Next to the textual dimension examined using content analysis, this study examines the visual dimension of children's books. This approach to analyzing photos and other visual images is called *semiology*. Combining semiology with content analysis can help the researcher overcome the difficulty of determining absolute visual criteria for describing normative messages and arrive at conclusions that are more reliable and less likely to be affected by selection and subjective biases (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

Procedure

This study was conducted in four stages. In the *first stage*, the titles to be studied were selected, including all 25 listed in the reading recommendations for the 2020-21 school year for grades first-third (see Appendix B). In the *second stage*, the texts and illustrations in those titles were analyzed; the analysis included a few substages:

1. The titles were read and the materials (texts and illustrations) contributing to the development of the social-emotional skills included in the CASEL's (2012) SEL model were identified.
2. The materials were classified into themes and subthemes. Every theme related to one social-emotional skills category (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, or social awareness), and the subthemes referred to the

- subskills included in each category (see Appendix A for details on the categories and related subskills determined by CASEL [2012]) (see Appendix C illustrating the analysis table).
3. For each theme, two quotes were chosen and colored in yellow highlighter, in addition to one or two pictures that illustrated each theme in the best way.

The *third stage* involved a quantitative analysis—counting and comparing the social-emotional categories and subskills reflected in the titles' contents. Finally, in the *fourth stage*, the qualitative and quantitative findings were written down and explained and practical suggestions for improvement were provided.

Validity and Reliability

The reliability of this study was examined using the test-retest technique. In addition, the richness of recurring findings related to the same theme is another way of affirming the research instruments' reliability. Finally, a research diary, with the researcher's comments, impressions, hesitations, and decisions, was kept during this study, which also contributed to the success and reliability of the study (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1990).

In this study, validity was assured by creating a coding table that represented the theory underlying the analysis (construct validity) (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). The table included themes, each representing one of the skills in the CASEL (2012) model, as well as the texts demonstrative of each. It also included comments, hypotheses, clues, and proofs for the researcher's use (see Appendix C).

To establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, a common approach is to present the researcher's "self." The unique perspective of qualitative researchers is affected by their cultural background, personal experience, and training (Ely et al., 1997). In turn, this is supported by Foucault's (1984) emphasis on the analytic importance of the authors and their affinity for the text.

The researcher is a Palestinian-Arab citizen of the state of Israel who has extensive research experience in the fields of language and literature and their social and educational aspects. The researcher's work focuses on social-emotional learning and multicultural encounters reflected in language and literature as a mirror that reflects a reader's lived reality socially, educationally, culturally, and politically. Her acquaintance with Arab society has contributed to the interpretation of the findings. Additionally, the researcher's experience as a lecturer on children's literature contributes to the reliability and authenticity of her analysis. Finally, as a lecturer in a Hebrew-speaking college, she is also well aware of the cultural sensitivities and literature of the Jewish majority culture in Israel.

Results

The 25 selected titles analyzed below are fictional prose works. They all may be classified as short stories, apart from one novel, *P.F.O.T.E - Ear for Every Problem*. In terms of content, the titles include historical stories such as *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep*, folktales such as *Troya's Holiday Dress*, biographical stories such as *Miriam Yalan-Shteklis*, scientific stories such as *The Moon's First Friends*, and adventure stories such as *Superheroes Guide* (Appendix B). In

most titles, no suggestions for class or family activities were provided except for some titles included in the Pajamas Library, which is a state reading program for children.

Social-Emotional Skills Reflected in the Texts

Content analysis of the 25 selected titles shows that all social-emotional skill categories determined by CASEL (2012) were reflected in these titles. It was found that the most reflected category in these titles is self-management, which was reflected in all 25 texts 52 times (25.61%) (see Table 1).

Table 1.

SEL Categories as Reflected in All 25 Selected Texts

	Title / Category	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Responsible decision-making	Relationship Skills	Social Awareness	TOTAL
1	<i>P.F.O.T.E - Ear for Every Problem</i>	5	7	6	6	5	29
2	<i>Life on Mars</i>	2	1	1	1		5
3	<i>Whirlpool</i>	4	7	3	4	3	21
4	<i>Zarah & Zottel</i>	3	1	1	3	2	10
5	<i>Tafiti and the Gigantic Baby</i>	3	3	3	5	6	20
6	<i>Noni and Noni-More</i>	1		1	2		4
7	<i>The Kingdom of Serious and the Kingdom of Silly</i>	2	1	1	1	2	7
8	<i>Extra Yarn</i>	1	2	2	1		6
9	<i>Not Quite Narwhal</i>	1	1	2	1	1	6
10	<i>A Unicorn Rhinoceros</i>		1	1			2
11	<i>Miriam Yalan-Shteklis</i>		2		2	3	7
12	<i>Princess Posey and the Tiny Treasure</i>		1	2	1	2	6
13	<i>What Pet Should I Get</i>		1	4	2		7
14	<i>The Most Beautiful Magic</i>	2	1		1	2	6
15	<i>You Won't Find Me</i>	2	3				5
16	<i>Superheroes Guide</i>	3	6	3			12

17	<i>The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep</i>	1	3	1	1	1	7
18	<i>Lemonade</i>		3	1	1		5
19	<i>Freaky</i>	1		1	2	1	5
20	<i>Winter’s Broom Dance</i>		1		2	3	6
21	<i>The Moon’s First Friends</i>		1	1	2		4
22	<i>Troya’s Holiday Dress</i>					3	3
23	<i>Zaha Hadid (Little People, Big Dreams)</i>	3	4	1	2	1	11
24	<i>My House</i>		1		4		5
25	<i>The Upside-Down World</i>		1		3		4
TOTAL		34 (16.74%)	52 (25.61%)	35 (17.24%)	47 (23.15%)	35 (17.24%)	203

The sub-skills within the categories that were most widely reflected in the 25 texts are listed below (see Appendix A for details of the sub-skills within each category):

1. In the self-awareness category, which includes nine sub-skills, the sub-skill that was most frequent was “experiencing self-efficacy” (reflected nine times in all 25 texts; all other eight sub-skills in this category were reflected 25 times).
2. In the self-management category, which includes eight sub-skills, the sub-skill that was most frequent was “Setting individual and collective goals and acting to achieve them” (reflected 11 times in all 25 texts; all other seven sub-skills in this category were reflected 41 times).
3. In the responsible decision-making category, which includes six sub-skills, the sub-skill that was most frequent was “Identifying solutions for personal and social problems” (reflected nine times in all 25 texts; all other five sub-skills in this category were reflected 26 times).
4. In the relationship skills category, which includes nine sub-skills, the sub-skill that was most frequent was “communicating effectively and listening actively” (reflected nine times in all 25 texts; all other eight sub-skills in this category were reflected 38 times).
5. In the social awareness category, which includes seven sub-skills, the sub-skill that was most frequent was “**understand[ing] the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts**” (*emphasis mine*) (CASEL, “Self-Awareness,” 2024) (reflected 11 times in all 25 texts; all other six sub-skills in this category were reflected 24 times).

Titles with Particularly Powerful Social-Emotional Aspects

The content analysis showed that 10 texts out of the 25 selected titles have been identified as conveying or addressing social-emotional skills at a level higher than the rest. This was

determined by the number of sub-skills reflected in each text divided by the number of pages in the book. This subsection will focus on these 10 texts to examine their educational and literary characteristics and their relationship with social-emotional learning (see Appendix D for the full list of these 10 titles).

Six of these ten titles are translated, as opposed to four originally written in Hebrew (see Appendix D). Seven of the texts contain diverse skills from all five SEL categories. Nevertheless, a small portion emphasizes one category over the others.

The plot in each of the 10 texts (see Appendix D) is based on a major course of events, at the center of which is a protagonist or two who serve as role models. Early on, the protagonists encounter certain difficulties or set challenging goals for themselves, which, thanks to their well-developed social-emotional skills, they manage to overcome and/or achieve. These protagonists are very young and physically small but nevertheless manage to create healthy and rewarding relationships, withstand pressures, and affect the events around them. Importantly, they are also dynamic, as they change and develop by interacting with others and undergoing certain experiences and may, therefore, be considered well-rounded characters. They also share several traits: curiosity, openness, creativity, independence, confidence, self-efficacy, bravery, and initiative.

For example, *Tafiti and the Gigantic Baby* (Boehme, 2017) depicts an animal adventure unfolding in South Africa. At the center is a small meerkat named Tafiti, who is accompanied by a pig named Pinsel throughout the story. Early on, the two chance upon a gigantic baby elephant, and they take upon themselves the task of returning him to his herd:

“Oh, there you are! You cute little reptile!” “We’re meerkats,” Tafiti explains, “And we’ve found your baby and took care of him” [...]. “Goodbye!” Pinsel and the meerkats cry. The baby elephant trumpets his farewell, and then follows his mom happily. (pp. 70-73 of the Hebrew translation).

The story ends happily, as the protagonist has overcome the challenge and therefore serves as a role model, providing the young readers with confidence in their abilities despite their small bodies and age.

Textual analysis of *Tafiti and the Gigantic Baby* indicates that all SEL categories are reflected, with emphasis on social awareness:

1. **Self-awareness:** Tafiti set a challenging task for himself and remained focused on it throughout: “‘We will explain this to you later,’ promised Tafiti. ‘First we must find the elephants’” (p. 47). Along the way, he remained deeply aware of his and others' strengths but also limitations. For example, when he tries to feed the baby elephant, he is aware of his own physical limitations: “‘How can meerkats offer food and drink to an elephant baby?’” (p. 33). He is also deeply aware of his own and others' thoughts and feelings and of how they affect each other: “‘But it seems Pinsel is slightly offended. Indeed, he made such a huge effort, and here comes this Kokopi...’” (p. 65).
2. **Self-management:** Despite the huge difficulties facing him, Tafiti did not give up and persisted in achieving his goal, so the entire adventure described in the story is the product of his personal initiative: “‘Please have a look around; maybe you’ll see some elephants somewhere,’” Tafiti asks. [...] She takes a quick look in all directions. “‘There’s no elephant here.’” Tafiti does not give up. “‘Are you absolutely certain?’” (p. 46).
3. **Responsible decision-making:** Characterized by curiosity and openness, Tafiti (Swahili for “search”) constantly “wants to search and discover” (p. 6). Throughout the story, he runs into

various difficulties but finds solutions based on well-reasoned considerations rooted in data analysis and factual knowledge. For example, due to the baby elephant's size, feeding him was a challenge. At first, Tafiti tried to use a ladder, but it was not tall enough, so he climbed a large rock to reach the elephant's mouth (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Tafiti feeding the baby elephant. (Image printed with permission from Sigalot Books.)

- 4. Relationship skills:** Tafiti managed to form positive and rewarding relationships with the animals around him based on cooperation. For example, he formed a new relationship with the elephants he helped by watching their baby in return for food supplies. He listened to others and understood their needs, enabling him to help them. Throughout the adventure, he dialogued with others and managed to influence them, including the formidable lion, whom he managed to convince not to devour the baby elephant, despite his diminutive size (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Tafiti protects the baby elephant from a lion. (Image printed with permission from Sigalot Books.)

5. **Social awareness:** Despite the huge differences between the baby elephant and the two friends and the difficulty of identifying him due to his unique outward appearance, the protagonists, together with the rest of the animals, rally to his help, showing compassion and empathy: “No, no, don’t cry,” grandma caresses the baby’s leg. “You poor little baby,” she says quietly, “you must be hungry” (p. 32).

To complete the task, Tafiti takes advantage of all his resources, including those of the animal community and his nuclear family. He identifies each animal's strengths and rallies them together to help; for example, he asks the giraffe to monitor the elephant herd from above. Thanks to the animals' diversity, they managed to help the baby elephant, each cooperating with the others and contributing their unique skills. In addition, Tafiti manages to take advantage of certain opportunities. In the end, for example, when returning the baby elephant to his mother, the elephants offer to compensate him. Tafiti asks them to pick fruits from the baobab tree, which he cannot do due to his diminutive size. In addition, the animals expressed gratitude and appreciation for Tafiti's help.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

The "March of Books" program provides a balanced combination of local and international literature, thus exposing the reader to Jewish-Israeli culture and others. Fourteen of the 25 titles (56%) are written in Hebrew by Jewish-Israeli authors. The remaining eleven (44%) are translated titles written by others in their respective languages (one in Swedish, one in Spanish, one in Russian, two in German, and six in English).

Comparing local and world literature indicates that the latter establishes social-emotional skills to a greater extent in the following four categories: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills, with the greatest gap being in responsible decision-making. Seventy-one percent of the skills included in the responsible decision-making category were reflected in titles translated into Hebrew, as opposed to 29% in the Hebrew titles.

Conversely, the social awareness category was reflected in the Hebrew literature to a greater degree than in the translated literature (57% versus 43%, respectively; see Table 2).

Table 2.

SEL Categories as Reflected in Translated vs. Hebrew Literature

SEL Category: Type of Literature	Self- Awareness	Self- Management	Responsible decision- making	Relationship Skills	Social Awareness
Local	(47%) 16	(46%) 24	(29%) 10	(49%) 23	(57%) 20
International	(53%) 18	(54%) 28	(71%) 25	(51%) 24	(43%) 15
TOTAL	34	52	35	47	35

Regarding the cultural identity of the titles’ protagonists, two titles (8%) included major characters with distinct personal and collective identities: *Zaha Hadid* (British-Iraqi) and *Miriam Yalan-Shteklis* (Jewish-Israeli). In addition, five titles (20%) included protagonists with distinct collective identities alone: *The Moon’s First Friends* (American), *Whirlpool* (Jewish-Israeli), *Troya’s Holiday Dress* (Jewish-Ethiopian), *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep* (Ethiopian-Jewish-Israeli), and *Winter’s Broom Dance* (German-Jewish). The remaining titles (72%) included characters not identified with a distinct individual or collective identity or symbolic animal characters suitable for any sociocultural context.

The selected titles establish pluralist values such as acceptance, partnership, equality, inclusion, and social justice. The CASEL skill: “understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts” (CASEL Framework, “Social Awareness,” 2024) was reflected most frequently (11 times). These titles attempt to establish social justice using various strategies based on empowering marginalized groups or individuals by including minority cultures and characters with special needs. These characterizations establish equality within Israeli ethnic groups. For example, describing a female character as powerful to establish gender equality, describing a child character as competent in order to establish age equality, and describing the Holocaust as a humane issue, are powerful ways in which diverse books operationalize equity in children’s literature.

Two of the titles highlight the culture of Jews of Ethiopian origin as a minority group at the margins of Israeli society. *Troye’s Holiday Dress* describes folklore elements in Jewish-Ethiopian culture (Sigd holiday), and *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep* describes the Ethiopian Jews’ immigration to Israel. In addition, the title about Yalan-Shteklis illustrates the value of ethnic inclusion and social justice within Jewish society in Israel since its main character, the author herself, of European origins, encourages assistance for new immigrants in distress, most of whom arrived from Asia and Africa (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Miriam Yalan-Shteklis depicts an example of ethnic diversity. (Image printed with permission from Zeltner Publishing.)

Figure 3 shows the protagonist, Jewish author Yalan-Shteklis, hosting a child who has immigrated without her family to represent social justice. Note the child's complexion, emphasizing accepting ethnic differences among Jewish immigrants to Israel.

'Gender equality and partnership' is another recurring theme. Nine titles (36%) describe a powerful and self-efficacious female protagonist: *Zaha Hadid*, *Miriam Yalan-Shteklis*, *Extra Yarn*, *Zarah & Zottel*, *Winter's Broom Dance*, *A Unicorn Rhinoceros*, *You Won't Find Me*, *Superheroes Guide*, and *Princess Posey and the Tiny Treasure*. Another six titles (24%) describe two protagonists, a boy and a girl (usually a brother and sister), as having highly developed talent and who are equal partners: *Lemonade*, *My House*, *What Pet Should I Get?*, *P.F.O.T.E - Ear for Every Problem*, *Whirlwind*, and *The Kingdom of Serious and the Kingdom of Silly* (Appendix B).

Further, age equality was reflected in some titles that describe children (or animals) with unique skills. This motif provides young readers with a sense of confidence and self-efficacy and establishes the idea that every person can contribute to others and to the environment. The adult reader also learns to respect little children, address their needs, believe in them, and provide them with space for independent initiative (see Figure 4).

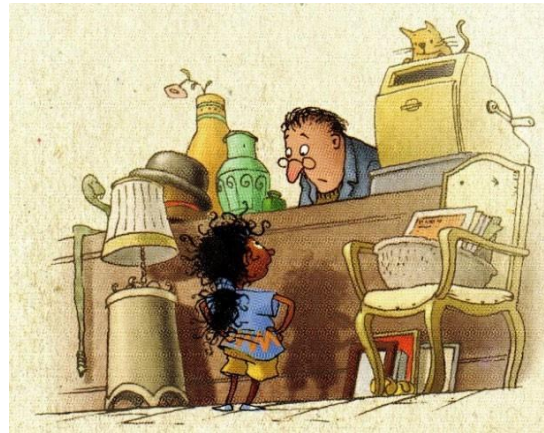


Figure 4. In “Zarah & Zottel” a scene depicts an example of independence. (Image printed with permission from Sigalio Books.)

Figure 4 shows the protagonist of *Zarah & Zottel* standing resolutely in front of the vendor negotiating the purchase of a pet. The child has decided to buy a pet and has acted throughout the story to achieve her goal without adult support. At the same time, she has dealt with multiple challenges in her transition to a new neighborhood. Since her mother works at night as a nurse, she has overcome those challenges independently.

Pluralism Limited to Jewish Society: Exclusion of the Arab Community

Despite the attempt to reflect Otherness in Israeli society and beyond by including those with special needs as well as gender, age, and ethnic equality, the selected titles fail to represent the culture of Arabs, who represent about one-fifth of Israel's population. Indeed, they do not include any work by an Arab author from Israel nor any work translated from Arabic, nor do they include bilingual works in Arabic and Hebrew. In addition, these titles refer at length to the Jewish-Zionist nation-building narrative while ignoring the narrative of the Indigenous Arab population for whom this “nation-building” involves a historical national trauma. Moreover, they do not include any literary character clearly associated with the Arab minority, and there is no reference to an intercultural encounter between Jewish and Arab characters based on mutual acceptance and respect. This lacuna is indirectly exemplified in the following quote from *Miriam Yalan-Shteklis* that defines the state of Israel as the “Jewish State” to include all Jewish ethnicities while excluding the Indigenous non-Jewish Israeli citizens (i.e., the Arab minority):

Miriam felt the sorrow of children in distress all her life. After the establishment of the State of Israel, many new [Jewish] immigrants arrived. There were not enough houses for everyone, and some lived in tents and shacks [...]. One winter day, Miriam published an editorial letter for all children of Israel: [...] Kids, rise up and make your statement; tell your parents: we have brought our brethren to the Jewish State, and we must now help them. [...] Miriam herself hosted a girl who arrived in Israel without her family in her own home. (Gani, 2019, n. p.)

Discussion

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is particularly important in early childhood since it provides a basis for students' development, helping them perform more effectively at school and in life (Cline, 2019). Providing social-emotional skills is particularly important in diverse and segregated societies, as it promises to promote reconciliation between hostile groups (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Yuval, 2022). This study examined how social-emotional skills are reflected in Hebrew-language children's literature in Israel as a diverse and segregated country through content and semiotic analysis of 25 titles included in the government educational program, "March of Books," for grades first-third.

The findings indicate that the children's literature examined can serve as a channel for SEL since they reflect all five social-emotional skills categories (CASEL, 2013). Alongside the text, the illustrations that reflect the various social-emotional skills can also contribute to fostering a deeper and more intriguing learning process. This is particularly so as, according to Sandell (2020), combining illustrations in SEL for early childhood increases the learners' interest, attention, and engagement.

Central to the titles evaluated as high in social-emotional skills are protagonists characterized by well-developed social-emotional skills who can, therefore, serve as heroic figures or role models for the young reader who is similar in age and physical size and can, therefore, relate to and identify with them. The ability of those literary characters to cope with challenging tasks, as revealed in those titles, provides the young readers with a sense of self-efficacy and trust in their ability to affect and change the reality around them. These characteristics are in line with Boyles (2018), who proposed that the process of providing SEL through children's literature begins with selecting books with dynamic characters who cope with challenges and who can serve as heroes and role models.

However, in most of the selected titles, one specific social-emotional category was not prominently emphasized within each text, which may obstruct the SEL process since such a focus can provide students with the opportunity to practice a given skills category and understand it in depth (Boyles, 2018). Moreover, the lack of variety in literary genres across the selected titles, all of which belong to the prose genre, may reduce the students' interest by not considering individual differences. According to Cappiello and Dawes (2012), generic variety can contribute to students' interest, motivation, curiosity, engagement, and ability to take multiple perspectives.

Another issue with the "March of Books" selected titles is the lack of suggestions for educational activities in school or with the family, suggestions that should include reference to a set of social-emotional concepts. This affects the SEL process as such suggestions can help teachers and parents with their own efforts to provide social-emotional skills and cooperate in doing so, which is an essential prerequisite for successful SEL (CASEL, 2013). Activities around the text may contribute to internalizing specific skills and, more generally, facilitate social interactions with peers, teachers, and family members (Miller, 2005). Combined with literacy experiences, these activities can balance the acquisition of academic literacy and SEL (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is based on a sample of 25 Hebrew-language titles for first- through third-grade students included in the government educational program called “March of Books” for the 2020-2021 school year. The limited number of titles examined in this study can be a limitation for a wide representation of the issue being studied in the context of Israeli children's literature in general, Arab-Israeli children's literature, and literature intended for older age groups. Another limitation of the study is the lack of reference to the impact of children's literature on the target audience, which is critical in acquiring social-emotional skills through this literature. This study also refers to the role of stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and librarians, who use children's literature as a tool for imparting social-emotional learning. To expand that database, suggest more nuanced insights, and provide a large investigation, I recommend the following future studies:

1. Studying a larger sample of works from the same program, as proposed over the past five years.
2. Studying other programs based on children's literature in Israel and other countries and examining how they establish SEL while dealing with diversity.
3. Studying Arabic titles included in curricula for Arab schools and comparing Hebrew- and Arabic-language government programs in terms of their approach to SEL.
4. Studying government programs in elementary and high schools for more advanced ages.
5. Studying the impact of children's books on children.
6. Studying the role of stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and librarians in imparting social-emotional skills through children's literature.

Implications for Practice

Children's literature can be used to promote SEL when integrated into a government educational program that meets the following recommendations:

1. The program should include titles that reflect all social-emotional skills. Each title will emphasize one SEL category, allowing in-depth discussion, understanding, and practice.
2. The program will include titles from diverse literary genres in print and digital formats. Central to these titles should be a protagonist serving as a role model in the context of the skill to be acquired. Moreover, these titles must be accompanied by suggestions for practical educational activities in the school and family context, integrating social-emotional concepts and literacy acquisition. These suggestions should also establish cooperation between the school and the family in teaching the skill.
3. The program balances local literature in the learners' native language and global, translated literature. This combination will expose the readers to their own specific culture and that of others. Accordingly, the characters in the titles should include representatives of the local culture and representatives of others, emphasizing

- sociocultural diversity in the learners' environment, establishing values of equality and social justice, and showing respect to others.
4. Finally, and specifically regarding the Jewish-Arab context in Israel, it is recommended for such a program to expose the students to positive encounters between Arab and Jewish characters who conduct respectful and inclusive dialogue and can serve as role models. Moreover, such literature can promote intercultural contact through bilingual texts, texts that reveal the other's perspective (even without accepting it), or texts that present the two national narratives side by side.

Such a program will meet the recommendations of the expert committee on cultivating SEL in the Israeli education system (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020). The committee has pointed out that coping with tensions and rifts among the various groups in Israeli society represents one of the key challenges that the Israeli education system needs to address in cultivating SEL (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020). Such a program can promote an alternative educational process based on developing critical thinking that challenges hegemonic views and facilitates dialogue and reconciliation between the two populations.

Finally, the presentation of the researcher's positionality and her actions in analyzing the data and using the researcher's diary for writing comments, impressions, hesitations, and decisions (as described in the methodological section) were all requested out of the awareness of the researcher and the readers alike of the fact that the findings presented in this article are the result of the researcher's personal interpretation that leads to the construction of a certain reality that should stand up to criticism (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1990).

Conclusion

Together with practicing SEL, "March of Books" contributes to promoting multiculturalism by maintaining a balance between the local culture (Hebrew-language titles) and global ones (translated titles from different languages). SEL can, therefore, serve, in Bishop's (1990) words, as both a mirror and a window. This meets the recommendations of various researchers who support the choice of texts strongly connected to the reader's sociocultural background to ensure engagement (Almog et al., 2010) while at the same time exposing the reader to other cultures to promote identification with the Other (Linder, 2021).

Another objective of such reading programs is to educate people about equality and social justice through SEL (Desai et al., 2014). Indeed, "March of Books" attempts to establish ethnic, gender, physical, and age equality by empowering characters associated with populations at the margins of Israeli society. This attempt, however, is insufficient since the program excludes the culture of the Arab minority in Israel and offers the reader no intercultural encounter between it and the Jewish majority. According to Allport's (1954) classical contact theory, such an encounter is essential for reducing prejudices and promoting acceptance of the other. This exclusion is evident in the selected titles' textual and visual aspects, demonstrating Desai's (2000) claim that producing meaning from visual representations is not detached from power positions. The conclusion is that Hebrew children's literature, at least as represented in this program, attempts to establish multiculturalism, but only within the boundaries of the diversity among the Jewish population. Other studies have also reported this trend, which indicates the lack of multiculturalism in Israeli children's literature (Haj Yahya, 2021; Keren-Yaar, 2007).

Appendix A

List of SEL Categories and Sub-Skills (CASEL, 2013)

Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Responsible decision-making	Relationship Skills	Social Awareness
Understanding one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts	Managing one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations	Making caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations by considering ethical standards and safety concerns	Developing positive relationships	Understanding the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts
Recognizing one's strengths and limitations	Delay gratification	To evaluate benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being	To effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups	Demonstrating empathy and compassion
Experiencing self-efficacy	Managing stress	Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness	Communicating effectively and listening actively	Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones
Integrating personal and social identities	Exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation	Learning how to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts	Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving	Recognizing family, school, and community resources and supports
Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets	Setting individual and collective goals and acting to achieve them	Identifying solutions for personal and social problems	Resolving conflicts constructively	Recognizing strengths in others

Demonstrating honesty and integrity	Using planning and organizational skills	Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school	Showing leadership in groups	Understanding and expressing gratitude
Examining prejudices and biases	Showing the courage to take initiative		Seeking or offering support and help when needed	Recognizing situational demands and opportunities
Having a growth mindset	Demonstrating personal and collective agency		Resisting negative social pressure	
Developing interests and a sense of purpose			Standing up for the rights of others	

Appendix B

List of the Selected Titles

	<u>Title</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Year</u>
1	<i>P.F.O.T.E - Ear for Every Problem</i>	Bettina Obrecht	2019
2	<i>Life on Mars</i>	Jon Agee	2019
3	<i>Whirlwind (Swirl)</i>	Roni Eldad	2020
4	<i>Zarah & Zottel</i>	Jan Birck	2019
5	<i>Tafiti and the Gigantic Baby</i>	Julia Boehme	2017
6	<i>Noni and Noni-More</i>	Naama Benziman	2019
7	<i>The Kingdom of Serious and the Kingdom of Silly</i>	Tamar Brown Elkeles	2020
8	<i>Extra Yarn</i>	Mac Barnett	2020
9	<i>Not Quite Narwhal</i>	Jessie Sima	2019
10	<i>A Unicorn Rhinoceros</i>	Orit Gidali	2019
11	<i>Miriam Yalan-Shteklis</i>	Dorit Gani	2019
12	<i>Princess Posey and the Tiny Treasure</i>	Stephanie Greene	2020
13	<i>What Pet Should I Get</i>	Dr. Seuss	2019
14	<i>The Most Beautiful Magic</i>	Eytan Freier-Dror	2019
15	<i>You Won't Find Me</i>	Tamar Hochsteter	2018
16	<i>Superheroes Guide</i>	Elias and Agnes Våhlund	2019
17	<i>The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep</i>	Ilanah Zaidman	2019
18	<i>Lemonade</i>	Adi Zelichov-Relevy	2019
19	<i>Freaky</i>	Nurit Zarhi	2020
20	<i>Winter's Broom Dance</i>	Hadas Leibowitz	2020
21	<i>The Moon's First Friends</i>	Sussana Leonard Hill	2019
22	<i>Troye's Holiday Dress</i>	Tova Madhani-Gabey	2017
23	<i>Zaha Hadid (Little People, Big Dreams)</i>	Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara	2020
24	<i>My House</i>	Meira Piron	2018
25	<i>The Upside Down World</i>	Korney Chukovsky	2018

Appendix C

The Analysis Table

Titles details: Title, year, author and his origin, the original language	Text or image that illustrates the theme (specifying page numbers, if any)	Category	Theme and sub-theme (from the CASEL's model): Self-awareness, self-management, Responsible decision-making, relationship skills, Social awareness	Interpretive analysis of the researcher	Notes and reminders



Appendix D

Titles with a High Level of Social-Emotional Marking

	<u>Title</u>	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Year</u>
1	<i>Zaha Hadid</i> (translated to Hebrew)	Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara	2020
2	<i>Tafiti and the Gigantic Baby</i> (translated to Hebrew)	Julia Boehme	2017
3	<i>The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep</i>	Ilana Zaidman	2019
4	<i>Whirlpool</i>	Eldad Rony	2020
5	<i>Miriam Yalan-Shteklis</i>	Dorit Gani	2019
6	<i>What Pet Should I Get?</i> (translated to Hebrew)	Dr. Seuss	2019
7	<i>Not Quite Narwhal</i> (translated to Hebrew)	Jessie Sima	2019
8	<i>P.F.O.T.E - Ear for Every Problem</i> (translated to Hebrew)	Bettina Orbrecht	2019
9	<i>Extra Yarn</i> (translated to Hebrew)	Mac Barnett	2020
10	<i>The Kingdom of Serious and the Kingdom of Silly</i>	Tamar Brown Elkeles	2020

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