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A Diverse Social and Emotional Learning Booklist for Gifted Learners and Advanced Readers

Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal , Najwa Mohammed Alhosani, Hala Elhoweris, and Ruanni Tupas 

ABSTRACT

Despite the changing school demographics indicating an increasingly greater diversity in today's classrooms, research indicates how teachers have little cognizance of the cultural backgrounds of their students. This becomes an issue among gifted students who are double minorities: those who are gifted and of a different cultural background, or of low-income status, rendering them doubly vulnerable. One of the ways this can be addressed is by introducing diverse books with an international focus to 9- to 12-year-old gifted students allowing them to see themselves reflected in what they read and to facilitate the learning of social and emotional learning competencies. Using the critical multicultural analysis framework and strategies on promoting multicultural awareness, recommended activities and discussion questions are provided to educators.

KEYWORDS

booklist for gifted; culturally responsive teaching; gifted readers; multiculturalism; social-emotional

The impact of globalization has permeated today's classrooms which are described to "have become more heterogeneous, diverse, and multicultural due to the rise of migration, immigration and remigration" (Auzina, 2018, p. 25). This impact is evidenced in a greater emphasis on communication and collaboration skills, and learning themes of identity, human rights, cultural and intercultural awareness (Auzina, 2013), themes that are also subsumed under social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2013).

The latest immigration wave is said to be very diverse with most immigrants coming from Asian (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021) and Latin American countries (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2015). In fact, the projections indicate that "by 2050, Whites in the U.S. will be the minority population" (Eng, 2013, p. 275), and that Asian Americans will be the nation's largest immigrant group by the middle of the century, surpassing Hispanics in 2055 (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Demographic shifts may likewise be attributed to multiracial youth, with about one in 10 children born to parents of different racial groups, with the percentages expected to triple by 2060 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

In addition to the growing ethnic diversity in schools, the impact of gentrification, resulting in the displacement of low-income residents of color, is also said to have potential implications for changes to school district populations (Diem et al., 2019). Preliminary research findings indicate benefits for middle-class gentrifying

families and negative impacts for low-income families of color who may be existing residents (Tang & Falola, 2018). This can strongly influence everyone's social world, contributing to racial illiteracy (DiAngelo, 2012) that can subsequently lead to an epistemological divide that may lead to a resistance of and "delegitimizing all Other epistemologies" (Han, 2018, p. 599).

Despite the increasing diversity in schools, recent reports indicate how "students who are Black, Latinx, and Native American are disproportionately underrepresented" in K-12 gifted and talented programs (Peters, 2021, p. 1). Given the changing demographics in the student population around the world, the classroom is now perceived as the primary arena for interethnic contact and relationship formation (Schwarzenthal et al., 2018). Hence, teachers are expected to serve as globally competent professionals who are able to "examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world view, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible actions towards sustainable and collective well-being" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018, p. 4).

In fact, Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) claimed that the goal of teacher education programs in a globalized age should work toward "sustained commitment of working against oppressive structures that impede the academic success of students from diverse backgrounds" (p. 248). This is especially relevant to gifted students who are considered double minorities (i.e. being gifted

and of a different race or ethnicity or of low-income status; Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). Hence, information concerning gifted students' familial and community socialization processes and their unique cultural conceptions of intelligence are deemed as integral in programming and curriculum planning (Nguyen, 2012).

Despite the call for a greater infusion of multiculturalism throughout the gifted curricula, gifted education programs have still been found to be particularly wanting in this regard (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017; Ford et al., 2005). It is the authors' contention that introducing such a multicultural diverse reading list would build the capacity of educators to use more culturally responsive pedagogies, and provide opportunities to predominantly White communities to get to know and understand those whom they may perceive as "Others."

SEL and culturally relevant teaching

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2013, 2015) defines SEL as the process whereby one acquires relevant knowledge and skills allowing the individual to recognize and manage their emotions, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships and develop care and compassion for others. The explicit teaching of SEL becomes even more important in schools as research has shown it to be positively associated with academic outcomes and performance (Mayer et al., 2008), and increases prosocial behavior among students and lower levels of emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004).

Given the diversity in classrooms, there is a growing need to facilitate the development of pro-social and emotional skills required to confront uncomfortable feelings in connection to "fundamental societal issues of inequalities, injustices, poverty, and exclusion" (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018, p. 614). Hence, this capacity to govern one's own emotions and manage those of others is noted to be the hallmark of intercultural education (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018).

One of the more concrete strategies that are currently being explored by teacher training institutes includes the examination of multicultural children's literature from a critical literacy lens to encourage teacher candidates to become better-informed risk-takers in approaching complicated issues connected to the many aspects of diversity (Muschell & Roberts, 2011). Yet, despite research evidence indicating positive outcomes of using SEL pedagogy, there is limited empirical research on provisional effectiveness for supporting the socio-emotional growth of gifted students in particular (Smith, 2017; Wiley & Hébert, 2014).

Reading diverse books for SEL

The transformational potential of reading books has been documented in the literature. This can be facilitated through book clubs (Polleck, 2011) or using bibliotherapy to address anxiety among the gifted and high ability learners (Furner, 2017). Bibliotherapy is defined as the process whereby the reader is able to identify with a character in a book strongly enough to experience an emotional release or catharsis alongside the characters in the story, allowing the reader to develop insights on his or her own developmental needs and personal situations (Halsted, 1994; Hébert & Kent, 2000). Smith (2017) further noted that bibliotherapy provides high-ability students an opportunity for reader identification with literary characters through a thoughtful facilitated dialogue conducted in a safe and non-threatening environment. Diverse books, for example, have been used to engage and empower gifted Black girls as a form of bibliotherapy (Ford et al., 2019), providing readers the opportunity to identify with characters whose challenges and interests are similar to their own.

This paper argues that teachers can utilize diverse picturebooks to facilitate the key elements of developmental bibliotherapy (identification, catharsis, insight, and application) through the introduction of SEL competencies. This refers to awareness of identity (self-awareness), conflict resolution (relationship management), regulating one's emotions (self-management), respect for others and empathy (social awareness), social justice and moral responsibility (responsible decision-making) (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013). Diverse picturebooks are deemed to be particularly effective as a resource (Harper, 2016), since high-quality picturebooks have been found to foster moral development (Harper & Trostle-Brand, 2010), help develop empathy among children (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013), and provide the foundational framework for appreciation of diversity (Harper, 2016). Moreover, research indicates how such powerful multicultural narratives can even serve as a catalyst for social action, as they serve to increase students' cultural awareness and sensitivity (Ford, 2014).

This idea is not new to gifted education with research indicating the benefits of using diverse picturebooks among gifted children of Hispanic (Abellán-Pagnani & Hébert, 2013) and African American (Fears-Floyd & Hébert, 2010) descent, providing teachers with spaces to more thoughtfully anticipate and respond to social and emotional concerns such as struggling to fit in while being bilingual, bicultural, and gifted (Abellán-Pagnani & Hébert, 2013). The Asian American gifted who have always been perceived as a "model minority" (Han,

2018), and other linguistically different immigrant gifted who are socio-economically disadvantaged, would likewise benefit from a more inclusive set of reading materials that touch on their experiences and realities.

Darvin (2011) pointed out that most teacher preparation programs focus more on the “mechanical aspects of teaching, such as creating assessments and lesson plans” producing a mismatch between teacher education coursework and actual challenges faced in diverse classrooms as teachers “increasingly encounter culturally and politically sensitive issues in their classroom” (p. 17). Han’s (2018) study, on the other hand, demonstrated that there are White teachers who consciously avoid multicultural literature in the classroom, with one of the teacher respondents articulating that they felt “targeted and criticized by what our ancestors did years ago” (p. 603). This recent research finding is alarming, since much of the reading materials provided to students from morning read-aloud to assignments are pre-selected by teachers. They naturally reflect teachers’ “assumptions, conscious or not, about children, childhood, learning and the purpose of reading far beyond merely learning to read” (Cooper, 2007, p. 318).

Hence, it is the goal of this paper to expand the repertoire of international and multicultural picturebooks at the teachers’ disposal. The intention is to make educators more aware that there are complex picturebooks out there that exist, not so much to make them uncomfortable (Darvin, 2011), but to provide them with a familiarity and a structure to introduce diverse picturebooks that can serve to mitigate such polemical issues (Nguyen, 2012). It would provide spaces for both teachers and students to navigate their way around social justice issues that may resonate with advanced readers and gifted children in particular who hunger for a critical reading and discussion (Kenney, 2013) of powerful narratives.

Method of book selection

The SEL booklist is part of a larger research project that started at a teacher-training institute in Singapore and continued in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Part of the output of the research project involved the creation of a multicultural and international picturebook database mapping out themes across the five SEL competencies and a catalog of diverse picture book titles depicting exceptionalities. From this database, an *early childhood* diverse booklist for SEL (Garces-Bacsal, 2020) and a book chapter on what gifted students can learn from multicultural picture book biographies (Garces-Bacsal, 2021) have been published, as well as teachers’ conflicted discourse and practice in response to reading diverse

picturebooks (Garces-Bacsal, 2021). This paper focuses specifically on a diverse SEL booklist for gifted learners and advanced readers.

Description of the research team

The research team is interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and multi-ethnic in nature. The principal investigator (PI) is a Filipina registered clinical psychologist specializing in the social and emotional needs of gifted and high-ability learners. She was based in Singapore as a teacher educator for 11 years and has been teaching in the UAE for 3 years. The Co-PI is a Filipino sociolinguist teaching in the United Kingdom for the past 3 years and previously based in Singapore for 15 years. Two other Co-PIs from the UAE consist of a Sudanese-American special needs teacher educator based in the UAE for over 15 years, and an Emirati teacher educator who specializes in early childhood and chaired the Abu Dhabi Reads campaign for 2 years. The team is also supported by two Emirati doctoral students who are inservice teachers in the UAE.

Procedure

While there were over 5,000 titles generated by the initial search, including recommendations provided by librarians, the authors selected picture book titles suitable for the upper primary grade levels (aged 9–12) that fit into the competencies identified in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2013) framework (see codes and operational definitions). Moreover, the researchers selected diverse picture book titles that are relevant to traits and characteristics of gifted students and high-ability learners, such as asking profound philosophical questions about one’s self and the world (Rimm et al., 2018); appreciation of ambiguity in emotions (VanTassel-Baska, 2009) and visual metaphors (Rimm et al., 2018); developing a firm sense of identity while cultivating familial (Fears-Floyd & Hébert, 2010) and ethnic identity and pride (Abellán-Pagnani & Hébert, 2013); heightened emotional sensitivities and overexcitabilities (Mendaglio, 2021); and moral judgment and ethical responsibility (Tirri, 2011) among others. It is also important to point out that students not identified as gifted could also demonstrate the above traits and characteristics.

Criteria for selection of diverse picture books

Multicultural children’s literature has been defined primarily to be stories written by and about people of color (Robinson, 2013; Sims Bishop, 2003), which serve to

highlight multiple power relations and give voice to the marginalized. Lukens et al. (2013) expand this definition by including diversity in ability, religion, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, political beliefs, body image—themes that are used in this paper. The term *diverse* picturebooks is used interchangeably with (a) *multicultural* picturebooks as the list includes award-winning titles published in Southeast Asia, and (b) *international* picture book titles defined as books “originally created and published in a country outside one’s own and then made available through a publisher in one’s country” (Yokota & Teale, 2017, p. 629).

The objective here is to expand the notion of relevance (VanDerPloeg, 2012) to introduce gifted children and high-ability readers to realities that may parallel their own life experiences providing spaces for representation and identification. The intention is to make readers empathize and appreciate lived realities other than their own. Hence, the selection of international titles is deliberate. In fact, Yokota and Teale (2017) raised this important question:

Why, then, should we care about books from other countries? This is a question that calls for adults who serve as gatekeepers to what children read to consider their roles in introducing works to children. And it is a question of what our hopes and aims are for children’s literate and global lives. (p. 6)

The compound word *picture book* is likewise used to refer to the complex interplay of visual images, textual narrative, and overall layout and design of the book (Serafini, 2009). Sipe (1998) referred to this as a synergistic relationship between written text and visual images whereby there is a more enhanced and multimodal reading experience that can generate layered meanings as compared to when the reader just considers the text or visual image in isolation. This allows for multiple interpretations and provides gaps to be filled by a thoughtful and insightful reader (Ghosh, 2015). Cooper (2007) noted that in selecting books for children: “the experience of them must allow the child to *practice some aspect of his or her potential self*” (p. 318, italics inserted). Authenticity also serves as a key criterion (Sims Bishop, 2003; Yokota, 2015) whereby literary elements of plot, setting, theme, point of view, and characterization all come together to form a compelling, coherent, and moving narrative that allows readers to form meaningful connections from the story (Harper & Trostle-Brand, 2010).

Document analysis and operational definitions

Document analysis is defined as a systematic procedure to review or evaluate both printed and electronic documents and materials in order to elicit meaning, gain

a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The researchers engaged a qualitative approach using document analysis as the research method to examine the diverse picturebooks.

The thematic analysis went through an iterative process involving several phases:

- (1) First-pass document review (Bowen, 2009) whereby the research team read the picturebooks and created a list of titles that fit into the five SEL competencies using the criteria for inclusion mentioned earlier.
- (2) The researchers used predefined codes (Bowen, 2009) based on the following operational definitions to conduct a careful and more focused re-reading of the titles to determine patterns, similarities and differences across the titles that have cleared the first phase of analysis.
 - Self-awareness is defined as identifying and recognizing emotions; having accurate self-perception; recognizing strengths, needs and values; having self-efficacy; awareness of spirituality;
 - Self-management refers to impulse control and stress management, self-motivation and discipline, goal setting, and organizational skills;
 - Social awareness is defined as having empathy, perspective taking, appreciation of diversity, and respect for others;
 - Relationship management is defined as working cooperatively; communication, social engagement and building relationships; negotiation, refusal and conflict management; seeking and providing help;
 - Responsible decision-making refers to problem identification and situation analysis, problem solving, evaluation and reflection, and personal, moral and ethical responsibility.
- (3) The research team discussed their choices in Phase 2, and asked questions similar to those as cited in Bowen (2009) as to whether there are themes that overlap or cluster together, and whether there are existing concepts or themes that can be divided further into subcategories.

The subcategories for the SEL themes that are likewise linked to unique gifted themes are as follows, with some overlaps of themes across the SEL codes:

- Self-Awareness: identifying and recognizing ambiguity of emotions, establishing one’s identity, establishing one’s cultural identity, coming to terms with

one's differentness, asking profound philosophical questions about one's self and the world.

- Self-Management: resilience; dealing with and overcoming difficulties; persistence and motivation; coping with loss, death, and dying; impulse control and anger management; heightened emotional sensitivities.
- Social Awareness: appreciation of diversity, portrayal of exceptionalities, ethnic pride.
- Relationship Management: refusal and conflict management, communication skills; dealing with bullying; building and developing relationships.
- Responsible Decision-Making: problem identification, solving, evaluation and reflection; personal, moral ethical responsibility; community service; social justice.

Theoretical framework for recommended classroom practice of the booklist

The study draws heavily from J. A. Banks (2013) pioneering work on multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as Sims Bishop's (2003) ideation of diverse picturebooks serving as windows and mirrors, providing young people the opportunity to see themselves represented in the stories they read and access realities different from their own.

Hence, this study attempts to frame the presentation of the SEL booklist with the three strategies found to facilitate empathy and promote multicultural awareness among the gifted as noted by Ford (2000), namely: (a) effective questioning, and (b) role playing and simulations. Ford (2000) described these as effective strategies that allow students to dig inside themselves to understand others and enable a more immersive connection with the characters in the story and the issues they are facing. This paper used these strategies along with Botelho and Rudman's (2009) critical multicultural analysis framework for *effective questioning*. Thus, educators are provided specific ways through which the diverse SEL booklist can be introduced to their gifted students and advanced readers (see Table 1 for this).

It is to be noted that these are only recommended ideas and that the questions will need to be piloted in further research studies for greater reliability and validity. However, this is the researchers' effort to "[bridge] diverse knowledges" by "bringing research into the teaching profession" (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 240). Teachers are also perceived to be "knowledge workers who reflect on their professional needs and current understandings" (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 241), and are thus expected to adapt, modify, and critically analyze the suggested

questions and activities to determine its fit or suitability with the demographics of their student population.

Botelho and Rudman's (2009) critical multicultural analysis framework is used primarily to elicit a more meaningful and affective understanding of the diverse picturebooks. The framework eschews the traditional notion of the educator being the only keeper of textual meaning, such that there is only one singular way of interpreting the diverse narratives. Rather, the framework encourages the reader to connect both visual and textual narrative to their own unique life experiences and other texts (both literary and non-literary) and the world (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). This is similar to what Kenney (2013) recommended for intermediate gifted readers: using the principles of critical literacy that focus on issues of power, multiple perspectives, and authorial voice and representation.

A critical multicultural analysis essentially encourages the readers to examine the narratives from a historical and sociopolitical lens, with an exploration of the complex web of power in society, grounded in the history of underrepresented, marginalized, and silenced cultural groups (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Thus, educators could ask questions such as why is the text written in a particular way, and get readers to imagine how else it could have been written, and how the narrative could be challenged (Robinson, 2013). Moreover, it is important to highlight the dialectical authority of the educator: "as teachers relinquish the authority of truth providers, they assume the mature authority of facilitators of student inquiry and problem solving" (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 240). The gifted students are, therefore, expected to be self-directed, autonomous in their learning, and capable of producing their own knowledge. This framework is adopted in some of the questions included in Table 1.

Peer debriefing

In qualitative research, the focus has now shifted from establishing truth or facts that exist out there (Creswell, 2014), which is characteristic of the positivist paradigm, to establishing an understanding shared by participants, researchers, and readers (Bowen, 2009). While there are overlaps and interconnectedness across the five SEL competencies evident in the picturebooks, peer debriefing was used with the research team members to identify the predominant themes in the titles read. Multiple face-to-face discussions were done to read the recommended titles indicated above, and the research team conceptualized the criteria to narrow down the selected titles.

Table 1. Diverse social and emotional learning booklist.(Note. The full booklist can be found at <https://gatheringbooks.org/social-and-emotional-learning-sel-bookshelf/>)

Book Title	SEL Themes	Gifted Themes	Effective Questioning	Role Playing and Simulation Suggestions
Self-Awareness Booklist				
<i>The Little Black Fish</i>	Establishing one's identity, coming to terms with one's differentness, existential issues	Asking profound philosophical questions about one's self and the world, establishing one's identity and cultural sense of self	In what way are you and the little black fish (or <i>Thomas</i> or <i>Marco the Fox</i> from <i>The Antlered Ship</i>) the same? In what way are you different? If you were Marco the Fox or the black fish, how would you behave under similar conditions/ circumstances?	Role play the situation wherein Marco faced pirates and a sea storm while navigating the antlered ship or while little black fish was leaving her family and going someplace unfamiliar. Gifted children could role play their response to the motley crew when invited to join the antlered ship to travel the world: will they stay where they are safe, or risk being away from everything familiar in search of answers to questions on life's meaning and purpose?
<i>I Am Thomas</i>				Students can be asked to substitute their own name to <i>Thomas</i> as others simulate the whispered messages "think like us. be like us" to the student.
<i>My Place</i>	Establishing one's cultural identity and kinship with community		What do you consider to be "my place?" Link responses to current refugee crisis, issues on illegal migrants, rising xenophobia around the world.	Students can be asked to watch the TV series adaptation of this picture book and asked to develop their own version, based on what they consider "my place."
<i>Ten Tears And One Embrace</i>	Identifying and recognizing emotions	Appreciation of ambiguity in emotions	Do you have different types of tears? What are these? Do you have shades of happiness, too? Give examples.	Students can be tasked to use the book as mentor text for other emotions (e.g., fear, joy) as a way of simulating the narrative.
Self-Management Booklist				
<i>The First Journey</i>	Resilience, dealing with and overcoming difficulties; persistence and motivation; setting goals and organizational skills	Heightened emotional sensitivities, visual metaphors	Compare and contrast your experience with An. How do other children from other parts of the world go to school?	Simulate own rituals of going to school, juxtaposing it with An's experience of attending school.
<i>After The Fall: How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again</i>			What are other things that cannot be "healed with bandage and glue" to encourage discussions on brokenness and vulnerabilities.	The narrative lends itself well into a play with Humpty Dumpty's transformation: from trauma to recovery.
<i>This Is a Poem That Heals Fish</i>	Coping with loss, death and dying; stress management		What is a poem for you? What "heals" your hurt or pains?	Students can be tasked to ask people from the community their definition of a poem and compile the responses.
<i>Cry Heart but Never Break</i>			How do you deal with negative emotions? Do you have someone like Arun's grandfather to talk to when emotions overwhelm you?	The conversation that the children have at the kitchen table with Death over a cup of coffee, as they discuss Sorrow and Grief, as well as its two sisters Joy and Delight – can be made into a play by gifted children.
<i>Grandfather Gandhi</i>	Impulse control and anger management; self-regulation			Meditative and breathing techniques can be taught to gifted students to manage emotions.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Book Title	SEL Themes	Gifted Themes	Effective Questioning	Role Playing and Simulation Suggestions
Social Awareness Booklist				
<i>Let's Talk About Race</i> <i>Sitti's Secrets</i>	Cultural and global identity, appreciation and respect for culturally and linguistically diverse people	Ethnic identity and pride; formation of self and cultural identity	Share your understanding of race and ethnicity. How do you communicate with someone whose language is different from yours?	Students can be asked to learn the basics of another language from a native speaker to simulate challenges in communication brought about by racial/ethnic diversity.
<i>What Is A Child?</i> <i>What Color Is The Wind?</i> <i>The Amazing Discoveries Of Ibn Sina</i>	Appreciation of diversity; portrayal of exceptionalities	Asking profound philosophical questions about self and the world	Gifted students can be tasked to write down their responses to the book titles. Share your own "10 amazing discoveries" about your community.	Gifted students can be asked to make a list of their own questions about the world and to seek and discover the answers through field work or experimentation.
Relationship Management Booklist				
<i>Pete And Pickles</i>	Communication skills; refusal and conflict management, seeking and receiving help, dealing with bullying	Heightened emotional sensitivities, visual metaphors, ambiguity in emotions	How do you deal with and respond to people who are different from you, or who do not understand you?	Pete the Pig has a predilection to say " <i>Ridiculous</i> " whenever he encounters something that does not conform to his expectations and view of the world. Gifted learners can be asked to provide alternative ways of communicating that show understanding and empathy, with an eye toward building meaningful relationships with another.
<i>Nasreddine Strictly No Elephants</i> <i>Why Am I Here?</i>		Asking profound philosophical questions about self and the world	Students may be encouraged to provide possible responses to the protagonist's queries, bearing in mind what is currently happening in the world – and to raise their own questions concerning international conflict and social justice.	Students can be asked to role play how they respond to bullying and exclusion. The questions asked by the protagonists in both stories can be role played by students to produce a more visceral and immersive understanding of what it means to be "free" and what it is like to wonder about one's place in the world.
<i>Ten Cents A Pound</i>	Building and developing relationships; caring for others	Firm sense of identity and developing familial and ethnic identity and pride	The author is a physician and social justice advocate whose family came to Canada as refugees from Vietnam in 1979. Students could be asked to research on sociopolitical events in Vietnam during this period and juxtapose it with the dream the mother has for her daughter, and the daughter's resolve to provide a better life for her mother. How did the author's background influence the writing of this story, if at all?	
Responsible Decision-Making Booklist				
<i>Maybe</i> <i>Something Beautiful</i> <i>Message In The Sand</i> <i>Twenty-Two Cents: Muhammad Yunus And The Village Bank</i> <i>Razia's Ray Of Hope</i> <i>Dangerous Jane</i>	Problem identification, solving, evaluation and reflection; personal, moral, ethical responsibility; service to the community	Heightened sensitivities; moral judgment and ethical responsibility; asking profound questions about one's self and the world; sense of social justice	How did the protagonists in these stories change their community and society? Why are they perceived as "dangerous?" Gifted students can be asked to research on the historical period surrounding the picture book biographies from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and World War I so that they will have greater sociopolitical understanding of the circumstances that prompted Razia, Muhammad, and Jane to develop ideas to make the situation in their countries better during this period.	Students may be tasked to do something similar around their school or community: clean up or decorate it and transform it into something "beautiful" and "sustainable." Gifted students may also be encouraged to provide a proposal on a real-life environmental issue that they may be experiencing in their city, and to conduct a service-learning activity to implement said proposal.

Personal reflexivity

The question of subjectivity in qualitative research is always present (Creswell, 2014), as the lenses that researchers use in interpretation are naturally an outcome of preconceived notions and life experiences related to *otherness*, *diversity*, and *giftedness* (among others), which can influence data analysis and reading of narratives. The researchers then made disciplined efforts to engage in self-reflection and to value differing conceptualizations of narratives with the understanding that stories mean different things to different people.

The SEL booklist

The diverse booklist is divided across the five SEL competencies as defined by Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2013). A brief discussion of each diverse picture book title is shared here. While the titles may be used for gifted children aged 9 to 12 years old, teachers and practitioners should be mindful of the emotional readiness of each individual child, especially with the more mature themes explored in some of the picturebooks. See Table 1 for suggested discussion questions and activities and Appendix A for the full list of books listed across the SEL themes.

Self-awareness booklist

This competency has been operationally defined by Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2013) as one's ability to identify and recognize emotions. For gifted students who are able to appreciate the ambiguity and complexity of emotions (VanTassel-Baska, 2009), *Ten Tears and One Embrace*, originally from Spain, depicts the nuances of emotions in a lyrical manner. While most picturebooks for children tend to present emotions in a discrete fashion—as if there were no permeable boundaries across each shade of feeling—this book celebrates its complexity by demonstrating that there are different kinds of tears for different types of emotions: there are laughing tears, the ones shed in times of total mirth; or prickly tears, the ones shed when one is angry; or even “first time” tears that appear “*the first time you see the sea, touch the snow, taste chocolate, hear a song, read a poem.*”

For gifted children, self-awareness may also include existential queries about one's identity and place in the world. *The Little Black Fish* (Behrangi, 1968/2016), originally from Iran, is a philosophical tale of a little black fish who believes that there must be something beyond the stream that he and his mother and all the other black fishes like him have been swimming in for what feels like

forever. While everyone perceives the stream to be the entire world and considers the many queries of the little black fish as impertinent and subversive even, the little black fish is convinced that there must be more to life than just the little stream where they are, as they swim back and forth endlessly in the same direction. Hence, the little black fish took an enormous risk by heading into where the stream ended as it moved into the river, and then the sea where the fish encountered marvels and dangers that it did not even imagine existed. In the Author's Note, it was indicated that the story was originally published in pre-revolutionary Iran in 1968 and was regarded as an allegory for a nation whereby to be politically different is considered dangerous. Hence, this seemingly innocuous children's story of a black fish daring to question the smallness of its existence and wanting to integrate with other kinds of creatures was originally banned in Iran.

Two other diverse titles that highlight this sense of questioning about one's identity and one's purpose in life can be seen in *The Antlered Ship* (Slater, 2017) and *I Am Thomas* (Gleeson, 2011). In the former, the reader gets introduced to a fox named Marco who asks a lot of questions about the world around him: *Why don't trees ever talk? How deep does the sun go when it sinks into the sea?* Unfortunately for him, everyone else is oblivious to the burning questions that plague him. When an antlered ship came where he lived, he decided to join a motley crew of three deer and a flock of pigeons. Marco wanted to go someplace where his questions can be answered, where meaning can be found. Marco's plight is not unlike that of many gifted children whose incessant questions about the world (Rimm et al., 2018) may not be understood by same-aged peers who do not share similar concerns.

In *I Am Thomas* (Gleeson, 2011), the reader is introduced to a young man who claimed that “*I am not the child I once was.*” This statement makes sense as the reader flips through the pages, and witnesses snickering classmates, angry school teachers, and dismayed parents with disappointed tears in their eyes, all the while with messages “*do as we say . . . think like us . . . be like us*” conveyed to Thomas by authority figures and significant others. There is a distinct sense of entrapment, a confining need to conform to societal expectations, and an institutionalized attempt to suppress one's spirit, sense of joy, and identity. This is an emotionally powerful and intense book that may help gifted readers find their voice amidst the reverberations of “should-be's” and “must-do's” and “have-to's” implicitly and explicitly conveyed to them by society. Balancing this *voice* with the need to take counsel from well-meaning adults is a further rich topic for discussion among precocious

readers who may sometimes feel that they do not have to listen to authority figures, a way of thinking that can potentially lead to long-term negative outcomes for gifted children of color. The book provides the perfect opportunity to navigate through these complex issues and concerns.

For culturally different gifted children, one's identity or sense of self may be inextricably linked with one's cultural or familial roots (Abellán-Pagnani & Hébert, 2013; Fears-Floyd & Hébert, 2010). In *My Place* (Wheatley, 1989), a picture book from Australia, this notion of cultural interconnectedness is explored in a clever fashion. While the first full-page spread opens to 1988, the second page takes the reader to 1978, until one gets to 1788 in the final page. It is an ingenious way of highlighting Australia's history in 10-year periods, through snapshots told from the perspective of different children living in each space, highlighting how the country has evolved over time. The reader sees families from Greece, Ireland, California, and Germany juxtaposed with the changing landscape. A critical discussion prompt that can be used among gifted readers is how people who are perceived as outsiders or "foreigners" are demonstrated in the narrative to have always been in this place, calling it "My Place" from as far back as a hundred years.

These diverse picturebooks introduce a level of complexity beyond simply identifying and recognizing emotions or having accurate self-perception. They provide opportunities to reflect more deeply on one's sense of self and identity and one's purpose in the world. Moreover, there are spaces for readers to recognize "emotional blends and contradictory feeling states" (VanTassel-Baska, 2009, p. 122) through the narratives.

Self-management booklist

This SEL competency deals with the ability of the person to regulate one's emotions and control one's impulses. In *Grandfather Gandhi* (Gandhi & Hegedus, 2014), the grandchild of Mahatma Gandhi, Arun, recounts an episode in his life when he was 12 years old, when he lived with his grandfather on the Sevagram Ashram. Arun had trouble containing his anger and resentment over having to share his Grandfather with so many people who seem to require his attention all the time. When Arun flared up over a soccer incident, he ran to his Grandfather's hut and cried out to his *Bapuji*. His grandfather spoke about how anger can both cut and strike like lightning; and how it can similarly be transformed and illuminate a person, turning darkness into light. This concept of channeling anger bringing about an enlightened transformation is something that would

appeal to gifted learners who are able to easily appreciate the mutability of one's emotions, and the capacity to transcend one's anger, subsequently transforming it into something positive and productive.

Self-management also deals with self-motivation and discipline as well as goal setting and organizational skills. In *The First Journey* (Quang, 2017), an award-winning title from Vietnam, the young boy An needed to brave the floods to attend school during the "floating season" when the Mekong Delta overflows. The entire narrative shows his journey in the river, as he faces heavy rain and the many real dangers that lurk in the waters, while traveling along the dark Melaleuca Swamp. Yet, he perseveres and continues on, as this is just another day in his life, as he attends school with all his other friends, most of whom go through the exact same thing.

Another aspect under self-management is one's capacity to manage life's challenges or difficulties. Santat's (2017) *After the Fall* tells the aftermath of what happened to Humpty Dumpty, *after the fall*, and how he was able to overcome his fears and anxieties. While the wonderful men from The Kings County Hospital patched him up well and good, Humpty realizes that "there were some parts that couldn't be healed with bandages and glue." It is an extraordinary tale of courage, self-determination, and a shaky yet firm resolve to not allow one's anxieties to rule one's life.

Two other picturebooks that deal with managing stress and difficulties are *Cry Heart, But Never Break* (Ringtved, 2016) from Denmark and *This Is A Poem That Heals Fish* (Simeon, 2007) from France. Both European picturebooks deal with loss and grieving especially when a loved one dies, and how one is able to comfort one's self through beauty and poetry. There is the recognition in both books of how sorrow stands with joy, and how grief is juxtaposed with delight. This knowledge is meant to make the pain somewhat bearable with the understanding that underneath the pain lies a love bigger than the world.

These diverse picturebooks move beyond merely providing gifted readers a few strategies to overcome their difficulties and manage their emotions. Rather, there is a sense of empowerment embedded in the narratives that bring about affective growth and transformation, which are elements that make up emotional intelligence (VanTassel-Baska, 2009).

Social awareness booklist

This SEL competency helps students to develop an appreciation of diversity and a respect for others who are deemed to be different from them. In Lester's *Let's*

Talk About Race (Lester, 2005), the skin and bones of race and all it signifies is explored with refreshing candor. The narrative text serves as an invitation for a casual chat whereby a discussion on race and story, its roots and beginnings can be told with unflinching yet uplifting truth. Lester pointed out that “no race is better than your race” and that anyone who says otherwise may be feeling “bad about themselves. Because they are afraid.” The narrative encourages the young reader to see what is “beneath our skin” and to see one another as an individual with a distinct story to tell.

This idea of connectedness, regardless of skin color or ethnicity, is also evident in Alemagna’s, 2016 *What Is A Child?* which celebrates childhood in all its glories, with some musings on what it means to be a grown-up. Children are portrayed in varied hues and states, with delightful character sketches capturing youth and innocence. The awareness of what it means to grow older and how to navigate linguistic differences is portrayed in *Sitti’s Secrets* (Nye, 1994/1997) where the reader gets to know young Mona who visits her grandmother in a small Palestinian village. Mona encounters difficulties in the beginning as she and her Grandmother, whom she calls *Sitti*, do not speak the same language and are only able to communicate through Mona’s father who serves as a cultural broker and a translator for both of them. In this story, the reader sees the symbols of love and expressions of affection that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.

This celebration of diverse cultural realities can further be explored in the *Amazing Discoveries of Ibn Sina* (Sharafeddine, 2013/2015) a picture book biography of a Persian philosopher, scientist, and physician who is considered to be one of the brightest minds of the Islamic Golden Age according to author Sharafeddine (2013/2015). Polette (2009) noted that sharing diverse picture book biographies with gifted students would allow them to fully appreciate the humanity of eminent individuals and the many challenges that they had to overcome in order for them to reach their level of expertise.

In *What Color Is the Wind* (Herbaults, 2011/2016), the gifted reader learns about empathy and perspective taking, which is also part of the *social awareness* competency, with a thoughtful blind boy as the main protagonist in the story. The boy, described as the “little giant” asks everyone he meets: from the wolf to an elephant to the mountain and the rain, what the color of the wind is. Each answer is more poetic than the last, with the art providing a more nuanced dimension to the narrative with cut outs and tactile pages, as the reader feels raindrops in the pages.

These diverse picturebooks do not just provide opportunities for appreciation of cultural and linguistic

diversity, but inspire difficult conversations about race and privilege, sight and wonder, and the various exceptionalities that make up a complex human being.

Relationship management booklist

This SEL competency refers to working cooperatively, seeking and providing help, conflict management, practicing effective communication and building relationships. In Berkeley Breathed’s (2008) *Pete and Pickles*, the reader is introduced to a predictable and pragmatic pig named Pete who lived a seemingly-stress-free existence governed by schedules and quiet dinners in front of the television; that is, until an elephant named Pickles came into his life. Pickles was a circus elephant who randomly chanced upon Pete’s house, ostensibly hiding from the Circus Master who kept her in chains. The story evocatively demonstrates how two strikingly dissimilar creatures managed to build such a beautiful and meaningful relationship together despite their very clear differences.

In *Nasreddine* (Weulersse, 2007/2013), a folktale that is said to have originated in Turkey, the reader gets to appreciate what conflict management is through the story of a young boy named Nasreddine, who felt deeply affected by the people who were making fun of him and his father Mustafa. Nasreddine tried to change his behavior to address the criticism that he hears from other people, only to hear another disparaging remark from different people. This went on until his father sat down with him and gently advised him to listen to his own counsel, rather than attempt to please everybody around him.

Managing relationships do not only mean resolving conflicts, it also refers to building and maintaining good interpersonal relationships. In *Ten Cents a Pound* (Tran-Davies, 2018) the reader gets to know the relationship between mother and daughter who are experiencing impoverished conditions. The daughter acknowledges her mother’s “calloused and blistered” feet, and her “coarsened and scratched” hands and promised to stay with her mother. Her mother, however, declares: “Ten cents a pound is what I’ll earn to buy these books and set you free.” It is a moving depiction of the sacrifice each one is willing to make to provide help and assistance to each other. It also signifies a mother’s dream for her child, and the child’s determination to succeed to ensure that her mother’s sacrifice is not in vain.

In *Strictly No Elephants* (Mantchev, 2015) a young boy was excited to bring his elephant to Pet Club Day only to be informed upon arriving at the venue that they have a “Strictly No Elephants” policy. The boy was deeply discouraged until he chanced upon another pet owner whose skunk was ostracized by other pets and their

owners in the Pet Club Day. By working cooperatively, these new friends decided to form another group with other rejected pets and their pet-owners, one where “*All are welcome.*” While deceptively-simple, this can also be considered as an allegory to the borders that are present in the world marking those who are deemed acceptable in contrast to those who are considered as outsiders or “foreign.”

Why Am I Here? (Orbeck-Nilssen, 2014/2016) published originally in Norway, shows what happens when the issue of “conflict” is taken to a macro-level with a young boy asking quite a number of philosophical questions about who he is and his place in the world. At one point in his musings, he asked: *What if I had to move from place to place? And the only things I could keep were what I was able to carry with me. What would it be like to live like that?* This is accompanied by an image of a boat filled with what could be perceived as refugees in the middle of a stormy sea.

These diverse picturebooks introduce a level of complexity in managing conflicts and developing relationships. They also surface issues about otherness and exclusion, and how to nurture deep connections among human beings, even those deemed as different from one’s self.

Responsible decision-making booklist

This SEL competency refers to problem identification and situation analysis and developing effective problem-solving skills after a thorough evaluation and reflection. In *Maybe Something Beautiful* (Campoy & Howell, 2016) and *Message in the Sand* (Aserappa & Obemio, 2008) the child protagonists in the story identify an issue in their community (a bleak and gray city lacking in color and beauty in the former, and a local mining company dumping waste into a river in the latter) and proactively do something to solve the problem. While there is a stark simplicity in the messages conveyed, there is also courage and earnest truth in the narrative that is empowering.

In Razia’s *Ray of Hope* (2013), Yoo’s *Twenty-Two Cents* (2014), and Slade’s *Dangerous Jane* (2017), the high-ability learners are introduced to picture book biographies of courageous individuals from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and the United States respectively. Such picture book biographies serve to provide high-ability learners the opportunity to not just regard themselves but one another as having equally high potential, especially when the biographies are coming from diverse populations (Fears-Floyd & Hébert, 2010) similar to the ones shared in this list.

From the creation of Razia’s *Ray Of Hope* Foundation meant “*to improve the lives of women and children in Afghanistan through education;*” to Muhammad Yunus winning the Nobel Peace Prize for developing the revolutionary economic concept of a Village Bank or micro-lending in Bangladesh in *Twenty-Two Cents* (Yoo, 2014); to Jane Addams providing a home to impoverished refugees and her active efforts to promote peace during World War I, even at the expense of her being regarded by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as “*the most dangerous woman in America*” – these are all edifying real-life narratives that demonstrate a commitment to social justice. The stories provide clear evidence of personal, moral and ethical responsibility among visionaries who have dedicated their lives in service of others and making the world a better place. Moreover, the narratives demonstrate how one’s profound sense of social justice can be used to empower and improve the conditions of the marginalized sectors of the community. This can be linked to recent research studies (Enriquez, 2014; Husband, 2019) demonstrating how diverse picturebooks can promote racial justice and how open dialogs about issues of power and oppression can facilitate a deeper critical consciousness of injustice in the world (Freire, 1973).

Discussion and implications

One of the challenges in introducing diverse books among teachers is that it forces educators to take on instructional practices that make gifted students “examine multiple viewpoints” while highlighting underlying sociopolitical issues that disrupt common understandings prompting students to “take action and promote social justice” (Norris et al., 2012, p. 59). However, it is the authors’ contention that for gifted educators to remain relevant in an increasingly diverse classroom environment, educators, and practitioners would need to be more cognizant of authentic, subtle, and thoughtful narratives that would prompt gifted learners to examine their own ideals and to make meaning of not just their personal identity, but to also navigate this alongside a deep understanding and respect of their cultural and global identities, and how they can actively contribute to their communities. There is a possibility that introducing such narratives can produce what is known as “cognitive disequilibrium” (Szecsi et al., 2010, p. 45) among teachers. However, this state of being unsettled has served to compel teachers to open themselves to more pluralistic approaches (Szecsi et al., 2010) and to make sense of potential conflicts in their discourse and practice in promoting a more

transformative pedagogy (Garces-Bacsal, 2021). As such, there is a palpable need for more professional development training that touches on this particular aspect, while providing educators opportunities to practice the use of diverse text-sets with their own students.

Gopalakrishnan (2011, p. 34) refers to an “urgent need for multicultural children’s literature to permeate the curriculum in schools” as this will provide the foundational framework to build an appreciation of diversity that goes beyond a tokenistic and touristic understanding of people from around the world (Styles, 2013) that is customarily reduced only to food, fashion, and festival (Ho, 2012). J. Banks (2015) pointed out that this cursory study of ethnic cultures and experiences, commonly referred to as the 3Fs (Ho, 2012), should give way to a more systemic school reform that enforces marked institutional changes that will lead the way to a transformative and social justice approach to multicultural education. This need for more multicultural materials and strategies is likewise mentioned by VanTassel-Baska (2009) in her recommendations on tailoring affective curriculum and instruction for low-income and minority students. Evidently, educators would have to expand their database of diverse literature to expose gifted learners to different ways of seeing and being in the world. In addition to the critical multicultural approach (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) mentioned here, educators can expand their “pedagogical toolkit” (Ford et al., 2019) by including a critical reader’s response approach (Enriquez, 2014; Husband, 2019) to encourage students to draw from their lived experiences and articulate their emotions and make meaning of the diverse narratives shared with them. It would likewise be good to document both teachers’ and students’ responses to diverse narratives in future research to encourage practitioners to be more reflective and mindful of their own classroom practice.

Researchers and practitioners are also increasingly acknowledging how anti-immigrant racist rhetoric, xenophobia, and state-sanctioned violence permeate daily discourse especially as of recent (Kinloch, 2020), emphasizing the urgency to teach for social justice (Darling-Hammond, 2017) and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2018). Thus, in the discussion of the SEL booklist, teachers and practitioners could ask questions related to the race and ethnicity of the author and illustrator of the books to surface issues connected to race, positionality, and voice. In these conversations, educators would need to be mindful of critical race theory, which highlights the intersectionality framework (Ladson-Billings, 2021) demonstrating how individuals can each represent multiple and complex identities across race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion

to name a few, to counter notions of essentialism. It is important for teachers to recognize how these hybrid identities come together to “contribute to both academic achievement outcomes and gifted identification” as Peters (2021, p. 1) pointed out. It is hoped that this SEL booklist would encourage more teachers to seek out similar titles that would make students under their guidance feel less invisible, their experiences validated, and allow young gifted readers to serve as witnesses to deeply moving narratives that would inspire them to serve as positive agents of change in the world.

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Appendix A: Full list of books listed across SEL themes

Self-Awareness

- Behrangi, S., Mesghali, F. (illus.), & Rassi, A. (trans.) (2016). *The little black fish*. Tiny Owl Publishing. (Iran).
- Gleeson, L., & Greder, A. (illus.). (2011). *I am Thomas*. Allen & Unwin. (Australia).
- Sanmamed, M., Azabal, M. (illus.), & Brokenbrow, J. (trans.) (2016). *Ten tears and one embrace*. Cuento de Luz. (Spain).
- Slater, D., & The Fan Brothers (illus.). (2017). *The antlered ship*. Beach Lane Books. (USA).
- Wheatley, N., & Rawlins, D. (illus.). (1989). *My place*. Kane/ Miller Book Publishers. (Australia).

Self-Management

- Gandhi, A., Hegedus, B., & Turk, E. (illus.). (2014). *Grandfather Gandhi*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers. (India/USA).
- Quang, P. N., & Lien, H. K. (illus.). (2017). *The first journey*. Scholastic. (Vietnam).
- Ringved, G., Pardi, C. (illus.), & Moulthrop, R. (trans.). (2016). *Cry heart, but never break*. Enchanted Lion Books. (Denmark).
- Santat, D. (2017). *After the fall: How Humpty Dumpty got back up again*. Roaring Brook Press. (USA).
- Simeon, J-P., Tallec, O. (illus.), & Bedrick, C. Z. (trans.). (2007). *This is a poem that heals fish*. Enchanted Lion Books. (France).

Social Awareness

- Alemagna, B., (author/illus.) & Bennett, A. (trans). *What is a child?* (2016, first published 2008). Tate Publishing. (Italy).
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- Sharafeddine, F., & Ali, I. M. (illus.). (2015, first published 2013). *The amazing discoveries of Ibn Sina*. Groundwood Books. (Lebanon).
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Relationship Management

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Responsible Decision-Making

- Aserappa, C., & Obemio, R. (2008). *Message in the sand*. Canvas.ph. (Philippines).
- Campoy, F. I., Howell, T., & Lopez, R. (illus.). (2016). *Maybe something beautiful: How art transformed a neighborhood*. HMH Books for Young Readers. (USA).
- Slade, S., & Ratterree, A. (illus.). (2017). *Dangerous Jane*. Peachtree Publishers. (USA).
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