

Diverse books for diverse children: Building an early childhood diverse booklist for social and emotional learning

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecl**Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal** 

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Abstract

Research has indicated how diverse books contribute to a more culturally responsive pedagogy, allowing children to identify themselves in the stories they read and gain an appreciation for others whose lives are different from theirs. Moreover, a sensitive discussion of and critical responses to diverse picturebooks is found to positively influence a child's social and emotional learning competencies, apart from increasing a child's cultural knowledge and serving as a catalyst for social justice. This paper is meant to broaden early childhood educators' repertoire of picturebooks that can be used in the classroom to also include international titles (translated into English from their original languages) and multicultural titles to facilitate affective engagement with these narratives and introduce social and emotional learning skills (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making). This paper provides a list of diverse books (from the Netherlands, Japan, Lithuania, Spain, Germany, France, Argentina – among others) for students in early childhood (from preschool to third grade) thematically organized across the five social and emotional learning competencies. Strategies such as book-bonding and literacy bags for family engagement will be shared while using the framework of culturally responsive teaching in an early childhood setting. Recommendations for how family members can be more involved are included, along with critical literacy strategies that include conversations, multiple perspectives and the sharing of authentic experiences.

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Introduction

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as a process whereby adults and children acquire relevant knowledge and skills, allowing them to recognize and manage their emotions, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships and develop care and compassion for others (CASEL, 2013, 2015). Nowhere is this perceived as more significant than in the early childhood years where SEL is said to be foundational to the professional development and training of early childhood educators (Kremenitzer, 2005).

At the very core of SEL is the building of character and global citizenship, which facilitates the development of affective and relational skills, allowing young people to navigate the increasingly diverse and multicultural societies they live in. The degree to which quality education is able to reduce intolerance in a rapidly evolving educational landscape is something that Chong and Cheah (2010) have likewise explored since, as they point out, fostering tolerance within and across nations is integral to humanity's survival. In a National Teacher Survey conducted for the CASEL among 605 teachers in America (Civic Enterprises et al., 2013), it is shown how teachers generally value SEL in their classrooms. However, teachers reported wanting further training on SEL, as they noted how it is easier to implement SEL in their classrooms if they are appropriately equipped with the skills to model SEL to their students, and provided with learning spaces to improve their own social and emotional competencies and learn the language associated with it.

This paper aims to build the capacity of early childhood educators as regards SEL pedagogy by providing a diverse booklist that specifically targets SEL competencies as addressed through narrative themes in stories, and not just by focusing exclusively on characters coming from different cultural backgrounds.

The significance of SEL

The CASEL (2013, 2015) framework identifies five key competencies for SEL: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management and responsible decision-making. In conjunction with developing young

children's cognitive skills, there is a growing recognition of the need to also focus on their social and emotional competence (McClelland et al., 2017). This attention is driven by robust research indicating how explicit instruction in SEL skills, as conceptualized by CASEL (2013, 2015), is positively associated with an increase in reading achievement (Ashdown and Bernard, 2012), better academic outcomes and performance (Mayer et al., 2008) and a general reduction in problematic behaviours (Ashdown and Bernard, 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004). There are other theorists (Hyson, 2004; Whittington and Floyd, 2009), however, who assert that social and emotional development can best be nurtured by deliberately designed, caring environments with adults who respond in a compassionate manner rather than through teacher-led explicit lessons. This disagreement in the early childhood field has led to an integrated model that is characterized by warm and positive interactions while also embedding explicit instruction in an environment that is not too highly regimented (Pianta et al., 2009). McClelland et al. (2017) further note that a one-size-fits-all approach to providing SEL intervention may not necessarily work for all types of children; hence, sociocultural conditions and diverse backgrounds need to be taken into account. As Sabey et al. (2017) have pointed out, SEL competencies are meant to prepare very young children for the increasingly diverse and socially complex environments that they will inevitably encounter throughout elementary, middle school and beyond.

Diverse books and SEL

Theorists of early childhood education such as Dewey (1916), Froebel (1887/1974) and Eisner (2005) have unequivocally stated that curriculum content must have significance and value for the child in order for literacy learning to take place. Hence, Banks (2007) strongly advocates the use of resources, illustrations and content that accurately and authentically represent diverse cultural groups to emphasize key points, ideas, principles and theories as part of multicultural education. Culturally relevant stories are found to engage young children more, allowing them to make relevant connections from school lessons to their own life experiences, and also serve to model teachers' interest and acceptance of diversity in the classroom (Purnell et al., 2007).

Moreover, teachers need to be able to recognize the potential of diverse reading materials to introduce SEL competencies. Kim et al. (2016) point out how integrating SEL in to a literacy curriculum can help children acquire and

apply specific knowledge, attitudes and skills that are connected to SEL, such as identifying and managing one's emotions, demonstrating social awareness and a capacity to empathize with others, and establishing and maintaining positive relationships, particularly with those who are deemed as different by young children.

Research has indicated that children as young as four years old already begin recognizing differences and establishing racial stereotypes; such prejudices are said to increase significantly in their early elementary school years (Aboud, 2005, 2008; Seefeldt, 1995). One of the ways in which this is addressed by early childhood educators is through the introduction of outstanding diverse books to young children in a concerted attempt to create culturally responsive classrooms (Bennett et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2016; Klefstad and Martinez, 2013; Purnell et al., 2007; Souto-Manning, 2009). Adam and Harper (2016) further note that providing culturally diverse literature to young readers helps break down stereotypes and racial misconceptions. Integrating such diverse narratives into SEL competencies also allows young readers to navigate their own racial and cultural identity, creating spaces to develop compassion, and helps children gain a more affective and nuanced understanding of people whom they may perceive to be different from themselves (Kim et al., 2016).

Multicultural, international, global literature

Multicultural picturebooks refers to 'mirror' and 'window' books (Brinson, 2012: 30); with the former providing opportunities for young readers to see themselves reflected in the narratives they read, whereas the latter allow children space to imagine sociocultural realities very different from their own. International picturebooks, on the other hand, are defined by Yokota and Teale (2017) as books that do not necessarily come from the United States but have been translated from their original language into the local language where they are published. Both multicultural and international picturebooks are subsumed under the term global literature, defined by Hadaway (2007) as books that honour and celebrate diversity from within and outside of the United States, and this includes diversity not just in race and ethnicity, but also deal with linguistic and religious differences, varying levels of intellectual and physical ability, and differences in socio-economic status and sexual orientation, and global literature is said to be inclusive of both multicultural and international literature. Global literature is then used interchangeably with diverse books in this paper.

It should be noted that the selection of international titles is deliberate – not only to raise awareness and broaden the understanding of young children to include culturally diverse characters, but also to expose them to varying artistic and narrative styles created by authors coming from different countries, for example Europe’s innovative graphic design and layout (Marcus, 2010). Yokota and Teale (2017: 6) also highlight how translated stories are able to effectively portray world views and images that expand children’s sensibilities beyond those which they are ordinarily accustomed to. They also raise a very 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.

It is important to also point out that creating such an SEL booklist is meant to build the capacity of educators to find similar reading materials, with the list serving as a sample that educators can draw from, especially since most teachers were found to be not aware that such books exist in the first place. In fact, Brinson’s (2012) study demonstrated how 65% of 113 pre-service and in-service early childhood teachers were incapable of naming books which include multicultural characters and themes.

The building of a diverse book list or text-sets, defined as a collection of books that are similarly themed and provide a range of alternate perspectives which children can use to make meaning of their world (Short et al., 1996), is not a new endeavour for educators. Martens et al. (2015) provide text-sets that pertain to a preschooler’s identity formation and text-sets about a child taking action and responsibility to make the world a better place. The text-sets are accompanied by various art concepts that can be used as extension activities across each of the global titles identified to promote intercultural understanding among young children. Purnell et al. (2007) provide a list of picturebooks that touch on exploring differences with people and celebrating one’s cultural heritage alongside possible art and literacy activities. Zeece et al. (2004) likewise share a list of titles for more exciting and inclusive storytime reading experiences, while Klefstad and Martinez (2013) provide Kenyan, Hispanic, Chinese and Korean picturebook titles alongside book-bonding activities that can be used to promote cultural awareness and appreciation among young readers. While these diverse text-sets are thematically arranged, they are not been explicitly organized across the five SEL competencies, which this paper attempts to do.

Method of book selection

The SEL booklist is part of a larger research project examining the reading lives of educators and students who attended courses at a teacher-training institute in Singapore. One of the deliverables of the research project involved the creation of a database of multicultural and international picturebook titles that touch on and explore themes across the five SEL competencies (i.e. self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making).

The research team comprises experienced teacher educators in Singapore coming from Early Childhood and Special Needs Education and English Language and Literature academic groups. The research team is interdisciplinary with a clinical psychologist, a socio-linguist and an experienced master teacher who has led the teaching of SEL and inclusive practices in local primary schools. The research team has likewise enlisted the assistance of international research consultants from the Philippines (a theoretical linguist) and New Zealand (a senior lecturer in children's literature and a teacher educator) in developing the SEL booklist.

Operational definitions

The research team was primarily guided by the SEL framework that has been operationally defined by the Singapore Ministry of Education (2005) and patterned after the CASEL (2013, 2015) framework. (1) Self-awareness is defined as having accurate knowledge of one's self, the capacity to recognize and identify one's emotions, and one's own strengths contributing to self-efficacy, and recognition of one's own needs and values. (2) Self-management has to do with the ability to manage and regulate one's impulses and stress levels, exercise self-motivation and discipline, and the capacity to set goals and develop organizational skills. (3) Social awareness is defined as the ability to take other people's perspectives, appreciate diversity and respect others, and develop empathy. (4) Relationship management is defined as the capacity to communicate, build relationships, work cooperatively. It also deals with negotiation, refusal and conflict management, and seeking help. (5) Responsible decision making has to do with demonstrating personal, moral and ethical responsibility; problem solving, evaluation and reflection as well as problem identification and situation analysis.

Hence, the key words used in the library database searches followed these operational constructs closely, including other key words such as diverse picturebooks, international children's literature, multicultural picturebooks.

Procedure

The SEL database is the product of multiple recommendations provided by international school librarians in Singapore who welcomed the research team into their schools: Tanglin Trust School, Canadian International School, Singapore American School, United World College Southeast Asia. Recommendations were also sought from the National Library Board of Singapore and visits were made to the Woodlands Regional Library, which houses over 8,000 titles available for circulation, as part of the Asian Children's Literature Collection, dating as far back as the 1900s. Moreover, the author served as an International Research Fellow for six weeks in 2017 and ten weeks in 2016 at the International Youth Library (IYL) in Munich, founded by Jella Lepman, known as the mother of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY). The IYL is reputed to have the largest international children's collection in the world with language specialists who provided valuable recommendations for picturebook titles from various parts of the world – some are not published in English – for potential inclusion in the database.

While there were over 5,000 titles generated by the initial search, including recommendations made by librarians, only 500 book titles are included in the final SEL booklist submitted as part of the final report for the project. All the books included in this paper represent a subset meant for the early childhood group. The research has likewise obtained ethical clearance to do data collection from the university's Institutional Review Board. Moreover, there is no conflict of interest between the author and the recommended books or authors in this list.

Criteria for selecting diverse picturebooks

The research team was guided by Harper and Bran's (2010) checklist for selecting and evaluating diverse picturebooks. This includes an examination of whether the author is an insider or outsider of the culture being represented in the narrative, and a closer look at whether the story is engaging, while also containing authentic language that is distinct to the cultural group highlighted in the story. Other elements included in the checklist are the believability of the characters, a realistic and accurate depiction of the setting and theme of the story, as well as a closer analysis of the plot, theme, illustrations and developmental appropriateness of the narrative. Furthermore, Adam and Harper (2016) add important considerations, such as historical accuracy and realistic lifestyles which young readers can resonate with. Furthermore, the compound word *picturebook* is used to refer to the complex interplay between words and

images, as well as the overall layout and design of the book (Serafini, 2009), which provides space for multiple interpretations (Ghosh, 2015). Sipe (1998) mentions the necessary synergetic relationship between words and art, which enhances the reading experience by generating layered meanings as compared to when a text or just an image is considered in isolation.

Grounded theory framework and culturally responsive teaching

In order for the research team to determine patterns and interrelationships of themes that emerged from the picturebooks, grounded theory was used in the data analysis, involving Creswell's (2014) open, axial and selective coding. In open coding, the research team read the recommended picturebooks, with each member coming up with their own initial categorization of the books across the five SEL competencies. The team discussed their choices in axial coding, asking each other questions, guided by Merrick (1999), as to whether there were narrative themes that tended to cluster or overlap, and if there were preliminary themes that could be further divided into subcategories. A shared Google spreadsheet was created for the picturebooks mapped by the research team members across the five SEL competencies and the resultant subcategories or themes, based on the operational definitions listed above.

Selective coding is defined as the process whereby the interrelationship of the categories or themes that emerge from the data is described (Creswell, 2014), along with a conceptual framework. What the author has done is to frame the SEL book list from within culturally responsive teaching (Bennett et al., 2018) which advocates for a print-rich environment that is culturally responsive (hence, the building of the SEL booklist) and includes practices such as (1) book-bonding activities (Klefstad and Martinez, 2013) conducted from within enquiry-based learning that encourage meaningful conversations and experiential and immersive activities with students (Bennett et al., 2018) and (2) family engagement through literacy bags sent home by the teacher containing text-sets similar to the titles, for further read-alouds at home (Bennett et al., 2018).

Through book-bonding, young readers are prompted to identify with the characters that they read about by having an open-ended discussion about the characters in the stories. The children are also invited to participate in activities similar to what the characters experience in the story, either through dramatic play, role-playing, or illustrations and writing. The literacy bags sent home with young children further reinforce the SEL themes in the stories read in the

classroom, by encouraging family members to read similar-themed narratives and consider family-based activities revolving around a specific SEL competency.

Validity in qualitative research

Peer debriefing (Merrick, 1999) was used with the research team members to identify the predominant themes in the titles read, notwithstanding the multiple overlaps discerned across the five SEL themes in the narratives. This was done in a continual and iterative process in a shared Google spreadsheet, whereby diverse books are arranged across the five SEL competencies, until a consensus is reached among the research team members as to which categorization a picturebook should fall under. Multiple face-to-face discussions have been conducted with the research team members and follow-up email discussions conducted to finalize the SEL booklist. It should be noted that in qualitative research, the focus is more on establishing an understanding shared by participants, researchers and readers (Neuman, 2000), as opposed to establishing truth or facts that exist out there, which is characteristic of the positivist paradigm.

Personal reflexivity was likewise practised (Creswell, 2014) with the recognition that the lenses utilized by researchers are outcomes of their own preconceived notions and life experiences which can then influence their interpretations of any type of narrative. Hence, the author made use of disciplined self-reflection and valued multiple ways of reading a story, given how stories mean different things to different people.

The research team also made concerted efforts to share the final SEL booklist to the international school librarians who participated in the research through multiple sharing sessions. Moreover, the research team conducted sharing sessions with the National Library of Singapore and various local schools, with a few free sessions open to the public.

From the existing SEL booklist, the author selected diverse titles that not only fit into SEL themes, but are likewise developmentally appropriate to younger readers in early childhood settings. The goal of building the diverse booklist is to expand the notion of relevance (VanDerPloeg, 2012) and provide space for representation and identification by providing exposure to narratives from various parts of the world.

Results

The diverse booklist is divided across the five SEL competencies as defined by CASEL (2013, 2015). Country names in parentheses indicate the author/

illustrator's ethnicity and where they are currently based (see full list in Appendix 1). Hence, Vietnam/USA signifies that the author may originally be from Vietnam but is now based in the USA. A brief discussion of each diverse book will be accompanied by book-bonding activities. Recommendations for family engagement through text-sets shared in literacy bags prepared by teachers are also included.

Self-awareness booklist and book-bonding activities

CASEL (2013, 2015) operationally defines self-awareness as one's ability to identify and recognize emotions. Mies Van Hout's *Happy*, originally published in Dutch in the Netherlands, offers a non-didactic way to introduce various shades of emotions to very young children. There is only one single word per page depicting a specific emotion (e.g. brave, confused, nervous), encouraging young readers to imagine why the fish may be feeling the way they do. In reading the picturebook aloud, the teacher can invite the children to share why they think the fish is feeling nervous, or angry or brave. Vignettes or short stories can be written by the teacher for each of the full-page spreads based on children's suggestions and input. Students can also be asked whether they have felt the same way before, and what are the circumstances behind such emotions.

In *My Heart Fills with Happiness*, indigenous children and families from Canada are highlighted by the author Monique Gray Smith who is of Cree, Lakota and Scottish descent. The story highlights experiences in one's life that bring joy. Students can then be asked to keep a gratitude jar where they are asked to write down or draw the things that fill them with happiness.

Another aspect of self-awareness refers to the formation of one's identity, developing a sense of self-efficacy, forming accurate self-perception and recognizing strengths, needs and values (CASEL, 2013, 2015). This can be seen in *Strong As A Bear* which introduces very young readers to the use of simile as a method of comparison with each full-page spread depicting a brief one-liner text found at the bottom of the page, such as *loud as a rooster*, or *mischievous as a monkey*, or *busy as a bee*, and as the title of the book says *strong as a bear*. It shows young children in all their varied strengths, skills and mischief – and accurately perceiving each attribute. Teachers could also ask what are the things that make the children busy or curious, and what makes them strong. Since the book is from Germany, the children can also be asked whether they are familiar with the country and what they imagine children living in Germany must

be like. This discussion can be juxtaposed with the depictions of the characters in the story.

In *Alma And How She Got Her Name*, the reader is introduced to a young girl named Alma Sofia Esperanza Jose Pura Candela. For preschool-aged children learning how to write their names, this will prove to be an interesting read. In the story, Alma's patient and thoughtful father shares with her the story behind each one of her names, tracing it to beloved ancestors coming from Peru, including a grandmother named Candela who championed the rights of marginalized individuals by marching in the streets to fight social injustice. The author is also originally from Peru. Educators can ask older students how they feel the narrative has been enriched, if at all, by the author's ethnicity – and explore how she wrote this as a tribute to her country of birth, as she also indicated in the backmatter of the book. The children may likewise be encouraged to think of family members who resemble the ancestors of Alma and share this in class.

A Different Pond shows the story of a father and his son going fishing very early in the morning, while everyone else in the family sleeps. While for many people, fishing may be a recreational activity, for this family, it is a necessity. The fish that the father and son catch will be the family's dinner. This young boy is shown to recognize his ability to help out his father, while at the same time, drawing a measure of acceptance regarding his identity as a second-generation immigrant. Based on the author poet Bao's experiences as a young child growing up in Minnesota, he came with his family as Vietnamese refugees in 1975 as found in the Author's Note at the end of the book, it is a searingly quiet portrait of a family struggling to survive in a foreign country, and drawing pride in one's ethnic, cultural and familial identity. The children could be asked about where the food that they eat comes from (e.g. supermarket, grocery store), as a way of introducing the story. There is also a part in *A Different Pond* that shows how the father's English sounds like a 'thick, dirty river' to others, but to the young boy it 'sounds like gentle rain'. Children could then be asked about the languages they speak at home. This is an opportunity to discuss linguistic patterns, variations in pronunciation and to acknowledge that different people have different ways of communicating and speaking. The context of authorship can also be interrogated with young readers, especially since the extensive backmatter reveals significant information about the book's creators. The children can be asked what they think a *refugee* means, and imagine what it must be like for the author growing up.

Self-management booklist and book bonding activities

Self-management is defined by CASEL (2013, 2015) as one's capacity to regulate one's emotions, control one's impulses and manage one's anxieties. In *Jack's Worry*, the reader sees how Jack's anxiety over his upcoming trumpet concert has grown considerably as the big day draws near. While he loves to play his trumpet, his worry about failing has grown so great that worry seems to follow him everywhere. The advice of Jack's mother to make his larger-than-life worry become manageable is something that young readers, who have experienced fear at doing something for the first time, can identify with.

Another aspect of self-management is the setting of goals and the development of organizational skills, allowing one to be more purposive in realizing one's objectives. This is evident in the story of young girl who had a bright idea and is determined to make *The Most Magnificent Thing*. However, despite her carefully laid out plans, her creations do not seem right, leading her to discard one, and another and another, until she eventually 'explodes!' This book captures practically all the themes under self-management as the child learns to regulate her frustration with the realization that there is no perfect plan that goes right the first time. Students can be prompted by their teacher to share in what way they are like Jack in *Jack's Worry* or the unnamed girl in *The Most Magnificent Thing*, and to talk about moments when they felt worried or frustrated, and what they did to calm themselves.

In *The Dead Bird*, the young reader is confronted with mortality at the sight of a dead bird in the park. While mournful, the children dug a makeshift grave, paid their respects, and even sang a song to the bird. This is a light-hearted and matter-of-fact story about death that is not overly dramatized – yet it also gives a sense of agency to young children who took it upon themselves to bury the dead bird with tenderness and grace. If the teacher is musically inclined, a rhythm can accompany the poem/song about *The Dead Bird*, which the children can sing along to. This is also an opportunity to talk about the rituals some of the students may have followed to bury their pets or loved ones, and to pay their respects to those who have already passed away.

Another aspect of self-management is being able to regulate one's impulses – a trait that most preschool aged children struggle with, especially when they have to wait for a long time, be it at the dentist's office, queuing for a meal or going on a road trip with family. This sense of impatience is captured in Dan Santat's *Are We There Yet?* where a family is shown going on a long road trip on their way to a birthday celebration for another family member. Here, the

children can be asked whether they have gone on long trips and how they felt while they were travelling. Students can be asked about what they do to keep themselves occupied in order to avoid boredom during times when they need to wait for quite a long time. The author was also born to Thai immigrants in Brooklyn, which the teacher can raise and discuss in class. The children may be asked to comment how they feel the author's background may have influenced the way he depicted the extended family in the story and their relationships with each other.

This sense of frenzied energy and calming one's self by being mindful is portrayed authentically in *Now*. The story begins with a carefree description of a girl's favourite breeze, cloud and tree. Each full-page spread set outdoors is an invitation to breathe in the clouds, plant one's feet firmly on the ground and raise one's face up to the sky. This book can be read aloud outdoors with the breeze in the air, and in full sight of trees, while paying attention to the environment. This could be a good opportunity to discuss mindfulness, breathing techniques and strategies to calm one's self whenever worry or anger or sadness seems too difficult to manage.

Social awareness booklist and book-bonding activities

Social awareness refers to appreciation of diversity and having respect for people different other than one self (CASEL, 2013, 2015). *The Stuff Of Stars* and *Under The Same Sky* are both titles that emphasize similarities among creatures, regardless of differences in outward appearance. The presentation of said books should likewise be done with care and sensitivity, especially in light of varying belief systems. The emphasis should focus more on human beings' fundamental sameness and, at the same time, the startling uniqueness of each individual.

In *She Persisted Around The World*, there are 13 influential women from around the world who are introduced by three children: one is in a wheelchair, another is a brown-skinned girl, while another is a darker-skinned child. From Sor Juana Ines De La Cruz from Mexico to Mary Verghese from India and Kate Sheppard, a suffragist from New Zealand, each of the 13 women comes from a widely different cultural background. Each woman is shown to be deeply aware of what is going on in their society. Their highly condensed and engaging life narratives demonstrate how each person, regardless of country of origin and gender, is deserving of respect, value and worth. The teachers may also want to highlight the book's author and illustrator as part of raising critical awareness. The children may be asked to share what they think the

author's and illustrator's intentions were as to why they wrote this book. Teachers could also encourage the children to add more names to the list of 13 women and be asked about their definition of 'persistence' and how this is shown in their own young lives.

In *Mommy's Khimar*, the wearing of a *hijab* or a *khimar* (a head covering worn by Muslim women) is portrayed as signifying the beautiful bond between mother and child – a comforting symbol that ties their connectedness to each other, even when apart. The children could be asked if there is a symbol or object that makes them remember a beloved family member. They can also be encouraged to bring a favourite garment, toy, photo or artefact that they feel best represents whom they are, as part of show and tell.

The Lines On Nana's Face, on the other hand, highlights the connection between grandparent and grandchild. While waiting for Grandma's birthday party to officially begin, the granddaughter quizzes Nana about the lines on her face. Nana shared that each line represents a specific memory that she keeps close to her heart, such as a picnic at the seaside or the first time she said goodbye. It is a story that evokes perspective-taking and empathy, as well as respect for others and the memories that they bring with them, marking their faces as they grow older. The author and artist, Simona Ciraolo, is originally from Italy. The children could be asked to imagine why they think the author might have written the story and be encouraged to write their own stories to characterize the elderly members of their family.

Relationship management booklist and book-bonding activities

CASEL (2013, 2015) operationally defines relationship management as the ability to exercise good communication skills and the capacity to build relationships by working cooperatively through effective social engagement. *You Hold Me Up* is an uplifting picturebook authored by a mixed-heritage woman of Cree, Lakota and Scottish descent. The Author's Note introduces another layer to the story as the author references the Indian residential or boarding schools in Canada that lasted for over 150 years, separating indigenous children (from First Nations, Metis and Inuit) from their families and communities. The story was 'written in the spirit of reconciliation and is dedicated to the children, families and staff of Aboriginal Head Star programs', as found on the Dedication page. Hence, as part of critical engagement, the children may be asked what they think a 'spirit of reconciliation' means as well as their understanding of 'Aboriginal' cultures. The teachers may also want to ask the students how they imagine the author felt as she was writing this story. A project that the students could also become

engaged in would be to write down ideas of *holding each other up* or the teacher might ask them to give specific examples of what friendship means, in addition to walking beside a friend who is sad or in need of support.

In *The Rabbit Listened*, the reader is shown various ways of responding to someone who has just experienced a great disappointment, as seen when the protagonist's stack of towers that he worked hard to build fell down. While well-meaning friends may want to talk it out, or be angry, or go on as per normal as if nothing happened, it appears that just being there to listen to a friend may be more than enough. The children could be asked how they usually comfort a friend who is feeling sad. Role-playing can be done with various children acting out the parts of the other animals in the story. The engaging dialogue and the 'voices' in the story lend themselves to an ideal performance activity.

The Pros and Cons Of Being A Frog, on the other hand, demonstrates ways of managing conflict through negotiation, good humour and a celebration of each other's peculiarities – be it wearing a frog suit or speaking in numbers. Here, the students could be prompted to think about alternative ways of responding instead of shouting at a friend when things do not go as expected.

The Fox On The Swing highlights an unusual friendship between Paul, a young boy, and a fox who dispenses sage advice while on a swing. The relationship built between these two unlikely friends makes the reader think about how to find joy in the simplest of things and what friendship truly signifies. The fact that this book is originally from Lithuania may also be a topic for discussion among the students, who may not know about the country. The children may be asked to focus on the distinct artistic style and how they feel the art and the story may be different from other books they have read.

The idea of extending one's hand in friendship is even more evident in the wordless book, *I Walk With Vanessa*, a story about a young girl named Vanessa who has just recently moved to a new school. An untoward incident between Vanessa and a mean boy was witnessed by a young girl who felt bad for Vanessa. Hence, on her way to school, the young girl knocked on Vanessa's door and walked with her all the way to school. The story shows how a simple act of kindness can extend far and wide and encourage others to respond in kindness and with inclusivity. Hence, the children may be asked to imagine how the young girl might have felt before she knocked on Vanessa's door. The teacher can also ask the students whether they would have done something similar, or what they would have done differently under similar circumstances. The issue of race and ethnicity can also be raised in open discussions of

friendship in the classroom, prompting students to share whether they make friends outside of their own cultural background.

Responsible decision-making booklist and book-bonding activities

In the final SEL competency, the learner is expected to identify problems and develop solutions after evaluation and reflection. All this is grounded in a firm sense of personal, moral and ethical responsibility and a capacity to give something back to the society (CASEL, 2013, 2015).

For very young children, this idea of community service may seem too abstract or remote. However, in *Sidewalk Flowers*, an award-winning wordless tale from Canada, the reader sees that one does not need grand gestures; small, thoughtful, kind ones can make a world of difference, even if it means just leaving flowers along the pavement to brighten up one's day. Environmental awareness is evident in *The Last Tree* where a young child is shown to be in a city filled with grey concrete and tall buildings, devoid of greenery. The discovery of a sapling with another child leads to the clear identification of a problem in the presence of a 247-floor block of apartments that is about to be constructed where the last tree seedling is found. As an extension activity, the teacher can initiate a flower- or tree-planting activity around the school. The students can also be asked to write encouraging and affirming notes or create paper flowers that they can share with each other or with people in the community to brighten the environment.

In *The Lonely Mailman* from Spain, the reader sees a faithful postman delivering letters to everyone in the community. What is striking is that he does not receive any letters himself. He heads off alone to his lonely home – until a simple act of gratitude signifies how much his seemingly thankless contribution is perceived to be of value by the community. The students can be asked what they know about Spain, especially since both author and illustrator are from Spain, and the text translated into English. Attention can once again be focused on the artistic style and what makes the overall layout and design distinct from other stories they have read. Children may also be asked what happens when a text is translated into another language, and whether there are certain words or feelings that they think are difficult to translate. This can pave the way for a discussion of the linguistic differences among the students in class and their struggles in 'translating' their experiences in a language different from what they are accustomed to.

In *Malala's Magic Pencil* and *The Water Princess* – the reader is introduced to real narratives of two young women who turned their lives around by advocating

for education and clean water in short but engaging picturebook biographies about Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan and Georgie Badiel, originally from Burkina Faso. However, teachers should also be mindful to not overemphasize the idea of poverty in these stories, as it may lead to the danger of essentializing the narratives as the only possible story coming from these societies. Hence, the focus should be more on empowerment and the characters' capacity to initiate change for social justice. The young children could be asked to imagine themselves in Malala's or Georgie Badiel's situation – how would they feel if they were asked to discontinue attending school or asked by their family to wake up very early and walk through the desert just to get drinking and bathing water from a well. A sharing of the George Badiel Foundation or a brief viewing of Malala Yousafzai's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech could likewise serve as sobering and empowering reminders to young children that they can act for the change they need to make the world a better place.

Family engagement through literacy bags

Bennett et al. (2018) define an informal family engagement as being initiated by family members not just in one's own home, but something that can occur at any time and place. This can take the form of literacy bags curated by the teacher containing text-sets that are similar to what has been discussed in class. Barbour (1998) emphasizes that these bags are empowering for parents and any other family member or significant other in the child's life to make them feel more equipped to teach their own children. Some of the titles included in the literacy bags (see Table 1) have longer texts that require adult guidance and family involvement. Research has shown how shared book reading between parents and children is an effective family literacy activity (Meyer et al., 2016) that serves to develop receptive and expressive language skills (Denney et al., 2010), vocabulary development (Senechal, 2010) and reading skills (Mol and Bus, 2011). It is the author's contention that said reading materials can also provide a rich source of material to discuss issues on diversity and introduce SEL competencies through more experiential activities. Meyer et al. (2016) mention the usefulness of having guided-discussion bookmarks to provide scaffolding to parents who may or may not have the necessary skills and strategies to engage in meaningful shared book-reading experiences. It is ideal to have sustained and continuous conversations between teachers and parents before the literacy bags are provided, to guide the parents on how the books can be used to extend the SEL competencies discussed in class.

Table 1. Diverse social and emotional learning booklist, literacy bags, SEL themes and diversity themes.

SEL themes	Book list and suggested age group	Literacy bags and suggested age group	Diversity themes
<i>Self-awareness</i>			
Identification and recognition of emotions	<i>My Heart Fills with Happiness</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>100 Things That Make Me Happy</i> (Preschool–G1)	Indigenous families
	<i>Happy</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>Me and My Fear</i> (Preschool–G1)	Artistic style and layout
Self and family, self and identity formation; recognizing strengths, needs and values	<i>Alma and How She Got Her Name</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>Thunder Boy Jr.</i> (Preschool–G1)	Indigenous families, immigrant families, refugee families, culturally and linguistically diverse, diversity in socio-economic status
	<i>A Different Pond</i> (G1–G3)	<i>My Name is Amrita: Born to be an Artist</i> (G1–G3)	
		<i>Auntie Luce’s Talking Paintings</i> (G1–G3)	
Self-efficacy		<i>In a Village by the Sea</i> (Preschool–G1)	Artistic style and layout
	<i>Strong As A Bear</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>Little Big Boubo</i> (Preschool–G1)	
		<i>I Can be Anything!</i> (Preschool–G1)	
<i>Self-management</i>			
Self-motivation and discipline; goal setting and organizational skills; persistence	<i>The Most Magnificent Thing</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>The Girl and the Bicycle</i> (Preschool–G1)	Diversity in socio-economic status; diversity in perceiving/viewing the world
		<i>The Book of Mistakes</i> (Preschool–G1)	Artistic style and layout
Stress management, dealing with anxiety and overcoming fears	<i>Jack’s Worry</i> (G1–G3)	<i>Alone in the Forest</i> (G1–G3)	Culturally diverse
	<i>The Dead Bird</i> (G1–G3)	<i>A Stone for Sascha</i> (G1–G3)	Death and dying, dealing with grief
Impulse control, well-being, mindfulness	<i>Are We There Yet?</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>The Sound of Silence</i> (Preschool–G1)	Culturally diverse
	<i>Now</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>Silence</i> (Preschool–G1)	Artistic style and layout
<i>Social awareness</i>			
Global citizenship, parallel cultures	<i>The Stuff Of Stars</i> (G1–G3)	<i>You are Stardust</i> (G1–G3)	Culturally and linguistically diverse families, diversity in socio-economic status, immigrant families
	<i>Under the Same Sky</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>At the Same Moment, Around the World</i> (Preschool–G1)	

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

SEL themes	Book list and suggested age group	Literacy bags and suggested age group	Diversity themes
Appreciating diversity, respect for others, perspective taking	<i>She Persisted Around the World</i> (G1–G3)	<i>Bravo! Poems About Amazing Hispanics</i> (G1–G3) <i>Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions</i> (G1–G3)	
	<i>Mommy's Khimar</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>Suki's Kimono</i> (Preschool–G1) <i>Mama's Saris</i> (Preschool–G1)	
Empathy, awareness of old age	<i>The lines on Nana's face</i> (G1–G3)	<i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> (G1–G3) <i>Drawn Together</i> (G1–G3)	
<i>Relationship management</i>			
Seeking and providing help, negotiation, refusal and conflict management, building relationships	<i>The Rabbit Listened</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>My Two Blankets</i> (Preschool–G1)	Culturally and linguistically diverse, diversity in perceiving/viewing the world, bullying and kindness
	<i>The Pros and Cons of Being a Frog</i> (G1–G3)	<i>Be a friend</i> (G1–G3)	
	<i>I Walk with Vanessa: A Story About a Simple Act of Kindness</i> (G1–G3)	<i>Be Kind</i> (G1–G3) <i>Nora the Mind Reader</i> (G1–G3)	
Working cooperatively, communication, social engagement, building relationships	<i>The Fox on the Swing</i> (G1–G3)	<i>Life Without Nico</i> (G1–G3) <i>That Neighbor Kid</i> (G1–G3)	Diversity in artistic style, Children in transition
	<i>You Hold me Up</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>First Laugh Welcome Baby</i> (Preschool–G1) <i>Ask Me</i> (Preschool–G1)	Indigenous families, culturally diverse
<i>Responsible decision-making</i>			
Problem identification and situation analysis; personal, moral and ethical responsibility; evaluation and reflection	<i>Sidewalk Flowers</i> (Preschool–G1)	<i>Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighbourhood</i> (Preschool–G1) <i>All the Lost Things</i> (Preschool–G1)	Social justice, community service
	<i>The Lonely Mailman</i> (G1–G3)	<i>The Uncorker of Ocean Bottles</i> (G1–G3) <i>The Magic Hat Shop</i> (G1–G3)	Community service Diversity in artistic style

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

SEL themes	Book list and suggested age group	Literacy bags and suggested age group	Diversity themes
	<i>The Water Princess: Based on the Childhood Experience of George Badiel (G1–G3)</i>	<i>The House That Jane Built: A Story About Jane Addams (G1–G3)</i>	Social justice, community service, environmental activism
	<i>Malala's Magic Pencil (G1–G3)</i>	<i>Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story From Afghanistan (G1–G3)</i>	
Environmental awareness and caring for the environment	<i>The Last Tree (G1–G3)</i>	<i>Chirri & Chirra (Preschool–G1)</i> <i>Thea's Tree (G1–G3)</i>	

Self-awareness and identity, for example, can be subtly introduced with the family exploring the origins of their names, the languages they speak, the places they have been – an activity that can accompany the titles included in the literacy bags. Self-management can be introduced through the text-sets that tackle themes on self-motivation, discipline and goal-setting. Parents can encourage their young children to set monthly SMART (specific, measurable, achievable realistic, timely) goals that they can display in a prominent part of the home to celebrate tiny successes and demonstrate graphically the value of persistence. There are also text-sets on mindfulness that family members can use as a starting point to practise breathing techniques, active listening and how to be still.

The social awareness literacy bags include text-sets on the elderly and grandparents. A family project that could be initiated involves having young children interview elderly members of their family to talk about memories from their childhood. A scrapbook of memories can be created, highlighting significant memories from their past. For relationship management, the literacy bags include text-sets with themes on kindness and friendship. The picturebooks can be used as a way to encourage young children to talk about their peers in school or in the neighbourhood and discuss what being a friend means to them. It could also be a family practice to talk about one act of kindness done by each family member while having dinner at the end of the day, with each one answering the question: *How have I been kind today?*

As for responsible decision-making, families could be encouraged to do little projects to accompany the text-sets on environmental awareness and

service to the community. This could take the form of cleaning one's room, helping out around the house, or keeping the neighbourhood clean by having one weekend just devoted to picking up rubbish, and scavenging for lost things that can either be saved or transformed into something beautiful.

Conclusion: Early childhood educators' use of diverse books in the classroom for SEL

Despite substantive research evidence indicating the usefulness of diverse picturebooks in promoting a more culturally responsive pedagogy that is infused with SEL competencies, and its positive impact on young children (Anderson, 2009; Sawyer, 2011), teachers have expressed a general discomfort and unease with introducing such reading materials into their classrooms (Tupas and Garces-Bacsal, 2016), particularly in early childhood settings, since most educators feel that childhood should be a time of play rather than a time for children to be exposed to world issues and societal problems (Bennett et al., 2018). Moreover, educators also feel uncomfortable discussing race with children since they feel that topics pertaining to race and racism are too complex and difficult for young readers to grasp (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006).

It should be noted, however, that more early childhood educators are making use of diverse books and stories to expand the consciousness of young readers under their tutelage (Bennett et al., 2018) from Israel (Court and Rosental, 2007) to Korea (Kim et al., 2016), Taiwan (Hsiao and Chang, 2016) and Myanmar (Tin et al., 2013), to mention but a few. In the qualitative study conducted by Kim et al. (2016) in Korea with 12 five-year-old Kindergartners, the children were exposed to multicultural picturebooks that deal with racial diversity, equality, and injustice – providing the young children with window books allowing them access to stories pertaining to slavery, discrimination, racial stereotypes and interracial relationships. Over the course of a semester, the attitudes of young people towards Africans and African American people in particular changed considerably: from perceiving Black people as poor people in need of charity to people with a sense of agency deserving of respect. Moreover, the use of such reading materials was also shown to provide young readers with a chance to think and respond critically to issues pertaining to social justice, and this allowed young people to recall their own experiences pertaining to similar situations. This led the researchers to conclude that the discussion offered more than just an awareness of different races and culture but integrated their learning experiences about history, empathy, social studies, vocabulary and critical thinking. Bennett et al. (2018)

further point out that for classroom experiences to be authentic, relevant and truly meaningful, teachers need to go beyond a 'holidays around the world', or 'tacos and eggrolls' (243) type of curriculum that only touches the surface of multicultural education (Evans and Gunn, 2011; Rothenberg, 2000). Rather, students need to be engaged in conversations, given opportunities to make personal connections to the narratives with an eye towards social justice and empowerment (Au, 2011; Bennett et al., 2018), and responsible decision-making through the formation of moral, personal and ethical responsibility. The framework provided above with the recommended book-bonding activities and family engagement extension activities is meant to further and deepen these conversations with young readers, as part of introducing specific SEL competencies in a way that is more organic, rather than in a prescriptive, values-based, informational manner. The idea is for the students to be more affectively engaged in the stories through perspective taking and opening up their worldviews and sensibilities to other ways of doing and being.

Moreover, it is important to not utilize the books in a preachy, didactic and prescriptive manner. Rather, through the activities outlined above, it is suggested that a non-judgemental, open and inviting classroom atmosphere can be adopted while sharing and discussing the narratives. The books are meant to act as starting points for honest and authentic discussions, rather than a tool to merely prescribe appropriate values, SEL competencies and ways of relating to one another. There have to be opportunities for the young reader to navigate their way around the spaces of the narrative, imagine alternative conclusions and develop their own interpretations through open-ended and Socratic questions raised by the teacher.

It is evident, then, that access to multicultural books becomes imperative among young readers, since as Adam and Harper (2016) point out, a lack of authentic culturally diverse literature in the classroom only serves to create more challenges for teachers who hope to promote greater intercultural understanding in their classrooms. For students who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, research has likewise indicated how having a print-rich environment and being exposed to outstanding diverse stories mitigates the adverse effects of poverty, allowing all types of learners (regardless of their background) opportunities to actively engage with literacy and reading materials that they can identify with (Cummins, 2011; Reutzel, 2015; Reutzel and Clark, 2011).

In the study conducted by Pentimonti et al. (2011), they discovered that while narrative texts still dominate the genre read-aloud genre among preschool-aged children, their exposure to multicultural content occurred at

generally low rates with the inclusion of a multicultural focus found in only 10.6% of the texts. This led Pentimonti et al. (2011) to conclude that children who come from culturally diverse backgrounds are rarely provided with opportunities to connect to and identify with the type of literature presented to them. The text-sets recommended above are meant to provide starting points to make educators aware of the variety of resources that are out there to help facilitate the introduction of SEL themes and topics, rather than serve as a static book list. To continually expand the SEL bookshelf, teachers are recommended to be on the lookout for the biennial honour list released by the International Board on Books for Young People on outstanding international titles from around the world, along with catalogues downloadable from their website. The IYL in Munich also publishes an annual catalogue called *The White Ravens* which features the most outstanding titles from around the world as selected by their language specialists.

As Ulin (2018: xxxiii) notes:

Why should we fear one another's stories? The true act of resistance is to respond with hope. All those voices are what connect us. In a culture intent on keeping us divided, they are, they have been always, the necessary narrative.

This diverse text-set is meant to encourage and build the capacity of educators to find similar-themed stories written by outstanding children's book creators from around the world to affirm one's sense of identity and help foster one's connectedness with one's own environment and the world in general.

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Appendix I. Full list of books listed across SEL themes

Self-awareness

- Martinez-Neal J (2018) *Alma and How She Got Her Name*. Peru, USA: Candlewick Press.
- Phi B and Bui T (illus.) (2017) *A Different Pond*. Vietnam, USA: Picture Window Books.
- Smith MG and Flett J (illus.) (2016) *My Heart Fills With Happiness*. Canada: Orca Book Publishers.
- Stangl K (2016) *Strong as a Bear*. Germany: Enchanted Lion Books.
- VanHout M (2012) *Happy* [Original title: *Vrolijk*]. Netherlands: Lemniscaat.

Literacy bags

- Alemagna B (2015) *Little Big Boubou*. Italy, France: Tate Publishing.
- Alexie S and Morales Y (illus.) (2016) *Thunder Boy Jr.* Native American, Mexico, USA: Little Brown Books for Young Readers.

- LaTour F and Daley K (illus.) (2018) *Auntie Luce's Talking Paintings*. Haiti, Dominica, USA: Groundwood Books.
- Raghbeer A (2011) *My Name is Amrita: Born to be an Artist*. India: Tulika.
- Sanna F (2018) *Me and my Fear*. Italy, Switzerland: Flying Eye Books.
- Schwartz A (2014) *100 Things That Make Me Happy*. USA: Harry N. Abrams.
- Spinelli J and Liao J (illus.) (2010) *I Can be Anything!* USA, Taiwan: Little Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Van M and Chu A (illus.) (2015) *In a Village by the Sea*. Vietnam, USA and USA: Creston Books.

Self-management

- Brown MW and Robinson C (2016) *The Dead Bird*. USA: Harper.
- Portis A (2017) *Now*. USA: Roaring Brook Press.
- Santat D (2016) *Are We There Yet?* USA: Little Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Spires A (2014) *The Most Magnificent Thing*. USA: Kids Can Press.
- Zuppardi S (2016) *Jack's Worry*. UK: Candlewick Press.

Literacy bags

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