

Supporting Emotional Intelligence and Inferential Comprehension Using Character Analysis in Picturebooks

Robin Griffith, Kate Davison, Lexxa Kight, Iman Stanmore

Teachers can support inferential comprehension about characters' feelings by asking students to use evidence from the illustrations and text to support their inferences.

First grader, Sarah* (pseudonyms used throughout) sits with classmates on the carpet as her teacher Ms. Clark reads aloud *Jabari Jumps* (Cornwall, 2020) a picturebook in which young Jabari decides he's ready to jump off the very high diving board for the first time. Ms. Clark invites the children to comment on the characters' feelings. On the opening pages, Sarah notes, "Jabari feels excited about jumping off the diving board." Ms. Clark probed, "How do you know?" to which Sarah directed her attention to the illustrations. "He's jumping up and down. He's blushing a bit. Like when you smile too much it (your face) turns pink." A few pages later, the students continue to use the illustrations and the text as evidence for their inferences about Jabari's emotions, "He's scared now! Because he squeezed his dad's hand back." Joseph explains, "He's feeling nervous. He's thinking should he do it or not." When the story concludes, Ms. Clark asks the class to think about the lessons they can learn from Jabari. Students suggest that it's okay to feel a little nervous or scared but that you can take a deep breath and tell yourself you can do it. Ms. Clark notes the class's use of evidence from the illustrations and the text to infer Jabari's emotions.

During this read-aloud in Ms. Clark's first grade classroom, we see evidence of the power of picturebooks to teach and support emotional intelligence and inferential comprehension. The purpose of this Teaching and Learning guide is to promote the use of picturebooks to teach social and emotional learning, particularly emotional intelligence through the use of inferential comprehension of characters' emotions using text and illustrative evidence.

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Why Social and Emotional Learning?

Children today face increasing pressure, anxiety, and social challenges. The complexities of childhood and the need to support social and emotional skills and development became glaringly clear during the COVID-19 crisis (Walker, 2020). During the pandemic, missing for many children were the classroom experiences and social interactions that offered opportunities for developing social competencies for navigating conflicts, regulating emotions, and respecting others (Chen & Adams, 2023; Muller & Baum, 2020). The importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) gained attention following the pandemic. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (para. 4).

In addition to the rigorous academic curriculum and standards, schools prepare young people to navigate

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today's complex and diverse world which should include instruction on the nuanced skills associated with SEL (Mahoney et al., 2018). We know that SEL can be taught. Durlak et al. (2022) and Dusenbury et al. (2014) found widespread evidence of the effectiveness of SEL programs on student attitudes, social behaviors, and academic outcomes.

Though there are many aspects of SEL, we were particularly interested in self-awareness and emotional intelligence. According to CASEL (2020), self-awareness is defined as “the abilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts” (p. 2). In some fields like psychology and business, the term emotional intelligence is used to describe a subset of self-awareness skills that allows one to notice, name, and monitor one’s own and other’s feelings and emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

In our work with young children, we noticed children often limited their identification of emotions to generic terms like happy and sad. They lacked the language to describe the range of feelings they, their friends, and family experience. We knew children’s picturebooks offered a rich resource for building students’ vocabulary about feelings while also teaching them how to infer character’s feelings using text and illustration evidence of what characters do, say, think, and feel.

Children’s Literature and Social and Emotional Learning

Children’s literature offers vast opportunities and meaningful experiences for young readers to explore and deepen their emotional intelligence in a way that ignites their understanding and ability to detect SEL topics. Children’s literature can offer comfort to readers who see characters dealing with trials (Sullivan & Strang, 2002) and offer a dress rehearsal for understanding challenging circumstances (Pulimeno et al., 2020). A rich and diverse collection of children’s literature can also promote also understanding of the ways in which emotions might be expressed by different cultures and in different contexts. This teaching and learning guide draws upon data from a study of primary grade classrooms exploring how reading aloud picturebooks can help young children identify, name, and recognize emotions displayed by characters in books, either through text evidence or evidence in the illustrations. This skillset has

a two-fold benefit. As readers, the ability to infer meaning not directly stated in the text is a critical skill for comprehension (Cartwright & Duke, 2019; Duke & Pearson, 2009; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). We can teach students to take note of what characters do, say, think, or feel as a way to help them infer. Furthermore, characters’ actions can teach

readers how to navigate social situations, particularly those that generate strong emotional responses. The teaching of emotional intelligence through children’s literature will allow young readers to detect the emotions being conveyed in the story, furthering their ability to understand, recognize and name the emotion.

SEL in the Classroom

In Ms. Clark’s first grade classroom in a Title I school in a fast-growing district in Texas, the teacher makes intentional decisions during her literacy block that allow her to support emotional intelligence and inferential comprehension. What is highlighted below is one part of a much richer classroom culture of respect, collaboration, and high expectations. Classroom routines and management of one’s own behavior is something that has long been established and nurtured in Room 16 so when Ms. Clark calls the children to the classroom gathering space on the carpet, the children easily settle into an attentive and engaged posture. They lean forward in anticipation, wait patiently along with Ms. Clark as their friends take the time to collect their thoughts and organize their words for a response or idea they want to share with the class. Ms. Clark’s patience and space for thinking is noticeable. She and the children are quite comfortable giving each other room for thinking.

The teacher has read quality picturebooks aloud to her class from the first day of school. She has always used a dynamic reading voice to draw children into the book with beautiful rhythms and cadences of language. She reads dialogue expressively and takes on the personality of the dynamic characters. This year, she is also making deliberate decisions to call children’s attention to the emotions displayed by characters. Ms. Clark knows that inferring is an essential part of reading comprehension. She knows these young readers will need to read between the lines to draw conclusions and to think deeply about what is implied but not directly stated. Her district’s literacy curriculum and the Texas state standards teaches students to infer by paying attention to what characters do, say, think,

PAUSE AND PONDER

- Are you making space for students to notice illustrations, dialogue, and character actions?
- What questions can you ask during read alouds that would promote noticing?
- How can you teach for deliberate transfer of inferential comprehension in the read aloud to independent reading?

and feel. She also knows she is teaching her students to be kind, compassionate, understanding, and accepting.

Selecting the Books That Support Emotional Intelligence

While many picturebooks and other children's literature can certainly be used to teach powerful SEL lessons like taking a stand against bullying, being resilient, showing kindness, being inclusive, believing in yourself, etc. in our careful examination of recommended books for SEL (Boyles, 2020; Britt et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2021; Gunn et al., 2022), we found not all books are great examples for teaching emotional intelligence. When selecting books to support emotional intelligence, we ask "what opportunities are present for readers to recognize, understand, label, express, and learn to regulate emotions?" (Tominey et al., 2017).

When selecting picturebooks for teaching emotional intelligence while simultaneously supporting inferential comprehension, we recommend the questions in Figure 1 to guide the text selection process.

As an example, *Jabari Jumps* (Cornwall, 2020) offers many opportunities for young readers to notice and name a wide range of emotions. Jabari goes from excited and confident to nervous and anxious to brave and joyful over the span of 32 pages. His facial expressions, body language, and dialogue provide evidence about his feelings making it a great choice for lessons focusing on emotional intelligence and inferential comprehension using character analysis.

Figure 1
Questions to Guide Text Selection

Ask yourself:
1. Do the characters in the book show different emotions throughout the book?
2. Can I name the emotions displayed by the character?
3. Are the characters dynamic?
4. Do the characters display emotions through dialogue?
5. What do the characters say and how do they say it?
6. Do they shout, whisper, whine, wonder, etc...?
7. Do the illustrations communicate feelings through facial expressions, body language, or illustration emphasis?
8. What text evidence can be used to identify the characters' emotions? Look for character actions, character thoughts, or even narrator thoughts.
9. Does the book teach a lesson?

Figure 2
Recommended Picturebooks for Emotional Intelligence

Recommended Picturebooks for Emotional Intelligence
<i>Jabari Jumps</i> (Cornwall, 2017)
<i>The Recess Queen</i> (O'Neill, 2016)
<i>Red</i> (de Kinder, 2015)
<i>The Day You Begin</i> (Woodson, 2018)
<i>The Dot</i> (Reynolds, 2003)
<i>Stand Tall Molly Lou Melon</i> (Lovell, 2001)
<i>Those Shoes</i> (Boelts, 2007)
<i>A Bike Like Sergio's</i> (Boelts, 2016)
<i>Maddie's Fridge</i> (Brandt, 2018)
<i>Chrysanthemum</i> (Henkes, 1991)
<i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i> (Henkes, 1996)

Figure 2 features the books we selected as excellent examples for teaching emotional intelligence. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but rather a springboard for adding to your own collection.

Noticing and Naming Emotions Beyond Happy and Sad

In Ms. Clark's classroom, children gather on the rug in front of the rocking chair as she opens the book *Those Shoes* (Boelts, 2007), a story of Jeremy who really wants the cool shoes like all of his friends, but his grandmother reminds him "there's no room for wants around here only needs." Throughout the story, Jeremy longs for *those shoes* until

he finally finds a too small pair at the local thrift shop. He buys them with his own money even though he must curl his toes to make them fit. The story concludes with Jeremy making the difficult choice to give his too small pair of those shoes to his friend Antonio who desperately needs new shoes.

With Ms. Clark's thoughtful prompting, the astute noticers identify with Jeremy's feelings of longing for something he cannot afford. They notice his facial expressions and his body language. Ms. Clark honors, values, and encourages that careful noticing as readers. She makes space for it in the read-aloud with the deliberate pauses and thoughtful questions. She intentionally supports emotional intelligence when she asks students to notice and name emotions. She nudges students to go beyond "happy" and "sad" emotions, and she always encourages students to explain the evidence they used to make that inference about the character's emotions. Ms. Clark often begins the read-aloud by asking, "What can we use in the book to help know characters' emotions?" She has taught the young readers to infer character feelings by paying attention to:

- Dialogue
- Speech Bubbles
- Facial Expressions
- Body Language
- Character Actions
- Narrator Thoughts
- The Words the Author Uses to Describe the Events in the Story

By being intentional with her text selection, planning intentional stopping points during the read-aloud, and asking students to notice and name character's feelings, Ms. Clark supports emotional intelligence and inferential comprehension. These practices can be implemented in your own classroom using the following recommendations.

Tip 1: Give Them Language to Talk About Emotions.

Ms. Clark knew her first graders needed to be introduced to emotion words beyond "happy" and "sad" so over several weeks, the class created an emotions chart (see [Figure 3](#)). She began by naming the most common emotions and by asking students to think of other ways to say that emotion. Students were able to generate most the words, but Ms. Clark supplied additional emotion words to round out the list. She used prompts like, "Do you know what it's called when you think you're ready to do something? It's called being confident. Let's add that to the list." This running list

of emotions served as a resource for students throughout the school year.

Tip 2: Ask Students to Notice and Name Emotions and to Identify the Textual or Illustration Evidence That Allows Them to Infer That Emotion.

When reading aloud *Those Shoes* (Boelts, 2007), Ms. Clark prompted the students to infer characters' feelings. She asked, "How do you think Jeremy feels on this page?" When students responded that Jeremy was feeling a "little down," she encouraged students to dig deeper by asking,

"Why do you think he's feeling a little down."

Tony responded, "Because he really wants those shoes."

Ms. Clark asked for evidence, "What tells you that he really wants them? Did something in the book tell you he really wants them?"

Tony explained, "Yes, the words. He said, 'Grandma, I really want them.'"

"Ah, so you used text evidence. You paid attention to what the character said," Ms. Clark reminded the class.

On another page, Ms. Clark encouraged the students to interpret Jeremy's feelings of frustration when he jabbed his pencil at the page while doing homework that evening. Exchanges like this one are commonplace in Ms. Clark's classroom. She sets the expectation that readers infer about character feelings by paying attention to textual and illustrative evidence.

Tip 3: Nudge on Vocabulary. Even when we give students more language to talk about nuanced emotions, they will sometimes still default to the generic "happy/sad" responses. Nudge on vocabulary in these instances, like Ms. Clark did in the exchanges below:

Ms. Clark inquired, "Let's think about Jeremy's feeling on this page?"

Katherine responded, "He's kind of sad because he really wants those shoes."

Ms. Clark nudged, "What's a word besides sad?"

Drawing upon the earlier events of the story, Katherine noted he might be disappointed that he's not getting the cool shoes like everyone else because Grandma can't afford them.

Teachers may need to introduce words to help young children develop a more robust bank of words to talk about nuanced emotions. Creating a chart like [Figure 3](#) may be helpful. Just remember to include the students in the work.

Figure 3
Emotions Chart Generated to Build Feelings Vocabulary

Happy	Sad	Mad	Good
excited	UPset	angry	respectful
Proud	unhappy	frustrated	thankful
joyful	disappointed	grumpy	grateful
glad	down	furious	Caring
delighted	dreadful	impatient	Kind
Merry	Miserable	mean	Patient
loved	hopeless	irritated	generous
thrilled	ashamed	annoyed	nice
			Polite
			safe
Scared	Mean	Brave	Other
Nervous	Rude	Tough	jealous
afraid	ungrateful	fearless	lazy
frightened	unkind	Strong	set bored
Worried	jealous	Courageous	Clever
anxious	dishonest	determined	hopeful
frustrated	selfish	confident	impatient
terrified	foolish		concerned
confused	Sassy		

Tip 4: Remind Them That Readers Can Gather Important Information About Character Emotions by Paying Attention to Key Events in the Story. During the read-aloud, Ms. Clark prompts for inferences based on evidence from the text and illustrations and asks students to name the evidence. She knows they will not always read books with illustrations and that they will need to rely heavily on text evidence rather than just evidence from the illustrations, so she encourages them to draw upon the words too.

Ms. Clark prompts, "What's happening? How is Jeremy feeling at this point in the story?" Brianna notes that Jeremy is trying not to be disappointed, but he's really embarrassed

he has to wear the hand-me-down shoes from the school counselor. The class recalls how Jeremy described the free shoes with Velcro and a cartoon character logo like his baby cousin wears. They pick up on Jeremy's displeasure and embarrassment at having to wear the free shoes from the counselor. They piece key events of the story together to gather important information about character emotions and how they changed as a result of those events.

Benefits of Using Character Analysis

This intentional teaching move has produced promising benefits for the young readers in Ms. Clark's classroom.

TAKE ACTION

1. Review your classroom library.
2. Which books lend themselves to supporting inferential comprehension?
3. Which books have strong character emotions that can be inferred through textual and/or illustrative evidence?
4. Make a list of books to add to your classroom library.

After a few short weeks of intentional read-alouds, the first graders used more sophisticated vocabulary to name emotions. They moved from primarily using evidence from the illustrations (facial expressions and body language) to also drawing upon evidence from the text to infer (dialogue, narrator thoughts, and character thoughts). What we appreciate most about this work is how easy and natural it can be for teachers to implement in their own classrooms. With deliberate attention to text selection, focused questioning, and scaffolding, the read-aloud can be a promising venue for supporting emotional intelligence and teaching inferential comprehension particularly as it relates to characters' feelings.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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