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Read Alouds That Rock: SEL Storytimes

By Patricia J. Murphy | May 09, 2022

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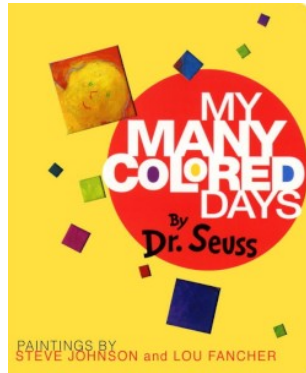
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Continuing our series on Read Alouds That Rock, we asked four educators to discuss some of the ways they share social emotional learning books with their students during storytime. Click here to see our previous stories.

Some day, our kids will tell their kids (and grandkids) about having to wear masks to school all day every day, or learning remotely—and living in a time that feels like being plopped into a dystopian novel with no end in sight. Through the centuries, being a kid hasn't been easy, but this generation of children has their own symphony of stressors: the pandemic, racial tensions, global aggression, climate anxiety, and cyberbullying, to name just a few.

As a result, mental health issues for kids (including anxiety and depression) are on the rise, and our kids need help now; and their parents, guardians, and educators need advice. We spoke with three teachers and one librarian who are trying their best to help their students navigate their emotional lives through SEL storytimes.



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Heather Justus and her kindergartners at Virtual Academy in Chesterfield County, Va., start their morning meetings by unmuting themselves on Zoom to say “hello,” share what’s new, and see how everyone’s feeling. “When the kids greet each other and say one another’s names, this helps our class develop a sense of community—especially since we are virtual—and makes my students feel special,” Justus said. “Kindergartners love to hear their names, feel acknowledged, and share waves, hearts, and virtual hugs. It’s the best way to begin our day!” The Virtual Academy opened during Covid and remains open due to popular demand.

After everyone is caught up, Justus and her class continue with daily affirmations the class has created to keep their SEL focus going. “We say: ‘I am smart. I am kind. I can do hard things. And, I can do anything.’” Justus said.

Then, it’s full steam ahead teaching social and emotional concepts from the district SEL curriculum, and lessons that Justus creates intentionally to integrate SEL across the curriculum. “In kindergarten, we are working on identifying and sharing our feelings.”

Most days, this inner work begins with a storytime featuring SEL books, including a series of books to deal with whatever feelings have popped up in the morning meeting. “Some friends may say that they feel happy, confident, loved—and some will say they’re sad, anxious, or frustrated. And we validate all of these emotions!” Justus said. “We will also look at our feelings color chart, discuss our feelings, and read one of the A Little Spot of Feelings books by Diane Alber that matches one of these feelings.”

Justus says these books are spot-on SEL resources because there is one for nearly every feeling. “For example, there is a happy book. And, the happiness spot says, ‘I am the happiness spot and I spread joy.’ It gets my kids thinking about what makes them happy or whatever emotion we’re discussing, and that they can help others be happy.

She especially likes SEL books because five-year-olds have lots of emotions, but don’t necessarily have strategies for how to deal with them. “These SEL titles help us identify emotions, verbalize them, and go from frustrated to happy again. Some kids are teaching their parents these strategies and using them at home.”



PW KidsCast: A Conversation with Maggie Edkins Willis
Maggie Edkins Willis spoke with PW KidsCast about her debut middle-grade graphic novel, ‘Smaller Sister,’ tackling issues such as mental health and body image for teens, and writing from her personal experiences.



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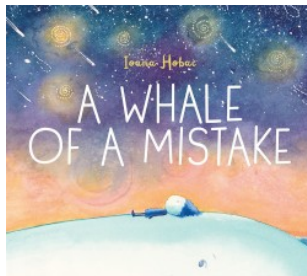
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FEATURED REVIEWS

THE LAST TO VANISH

Justus regularly uses picture books with SEL themes to help her kindergarteners further understand their emotions and regulate them, and teach empathy, too. "Picture books are a wonderful way to see characters—and the ways they behave, how they deal with feelings—and how you can be a kind person," Justus said.

Through her years of helping develop kind kindergartners (and fifth graders before that), she has collected a large number of favorite books that she uses for shared reading instructional times, content areas, and her required district SEL lesson. She also shares her top SEL books with her followers on her Instagram account, @books.make_me.happy.



A recent title that her kindergartners responded to was *A Whale of a Mistake* by Ioana Hobai. "The story is about a girl who has made a mistake that grows into the size of a whale. It's become one of our SEL favorites because the illustrations grab you and convey how the main character is truly feeling," Justus said. "You can really see and feel the emotion of the story, and my kindergarteners picked up on that."

Stacey Higgins has always used what many call "bibliotherapy" to target the individual needs of her second-grade students during classroom storytimes. Today in her classroom at Crim Elementary School in Bowling Green, Ohio, she feels a greater urgency to use SEL titles across the curriculum. "We're seeing more mental health issues, so we are trying to help students identify and manage their feelings."

Higgins says some issues may be big (e.g. parents divorcing or the loss of a pet) or smaller depending on the day. "Like when there's been a fight over a ball at recess, or one child tells another that they don't want to be friends anymore," Higgins said. "Having these titles and knowing where to find them is helpful to meeting students' SEL needs."

As for the best way to share these titles, Higgins believes it's through interactive storytimes with time for discussion and journaling. "Because it's not just that Susie's dog died, so we read *The Rainbow Bridge*, and then we move onto math," Higgins said. "It doesn't work that way."

What works, she said, is being fully prepared. "Before I read an SEL book, or part of one, I ask, 'What is my purpose?' I have questions ready to discuss, and a set stopping point when I say, 'We'll come back to this,' or I put it on our theme shelf to look at another time."

Higgins' shelves include newly discovered books and beloved classics. "A newer favorite is Dr. Seuss's *My Many Colored Days*," Higgins said. "It labels every day with a different color, but not with the traditional colors like sad being blue; instead, blue is happy."



As for the beloved SEL classics, Higgins often chooses *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry* by Molly Bang, because "it is told from the point of view of the child."

However, sometimes stories with animal viewpoints may be a better choice, like her favorite, *The Kissing Hand*. Higgins said, "Sometimes kids need a little distance with certain topics, and can talk more easily about them when an animal's demonstrating the feelings."

Higgins also likes animal books that add a slice of life and silliness. These include the Froggy series by Jonathan London and Gilbert series by Diane DeGroat.

"Both look at issues in a humorous way, allowing students to see themselves in these characters and realize that they're not alone."

Sometimes, Higgins may also choose a book with beloved characters that isn't typically an SEL book. "I've read *Charlotte's Web* every year," Higgins said. "There are many things that I pull out of it to connect with students' feelings."

These connections may just have life-changing effects. "SEL storytimes can also help kids create a link between a childhood experience and a text, deepen an appreciation of reading, and offer a way to help themselves when they don't have someone right there to help solve a problem. They learn they can reach for a book!"

Early in her career, **Maureen Clark**, a first-grade teacher at K.D. Markley Elementary School in Malvern, Pa., said that she would try everything to keep her students from feeling sad or frustrated. "Now, I am a recovering 'rainbow and sunshine' kind of person," Clark said. "I see that kids have to experience sad and frustrating times, so that the sunny times seem that much brighter!"

Today, Clark enlightens her students with SEL books and strategies to foster an "identity safe" classroom and teach children to self-regulate their emotions. "My goal is to create a welcoming, inclusive, self-accepting environment where we can come in and be who we are. If we're not feeling so great, we can talk about it."



Evidence of her approach includes a mantra and daily affirmations, among other things. "We say in our class, 'You can visit this feeling (e.g. sad, mad, frustrated), but you can't



Megan Miranda. Scribner/Rucci, \$27.99 (352p) ISBN 978-1-982147-31-0

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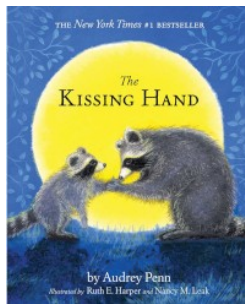
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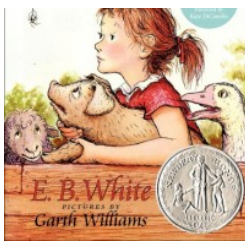
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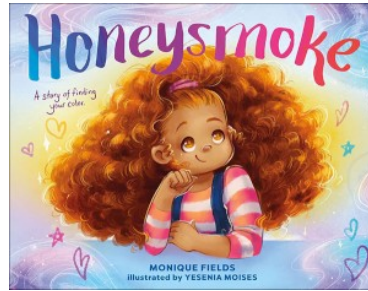
live there.' " And all who enter must look into the "Affirmation Mirror," which is surrounded by students' encouraging words and phrases.

Clark also likes to model strategies to use when a negative or uncomfortable emotion washes over students. "I have them name these feelings to help them move past difficult feelings on their own," Clark said. "If someone is feeling sad, I will ask them if they want to get a drink, do a coloring page, or say, 'I need a minute to think or meditate.' "

She and her students frequently read SEL books to build on these strategies. "We do this by focusing on characters' problems and how they've solved them. Students can see characters experiencing a wide array of emotions, thus emphasizing that everyone is not happy all the time, and that is OK. Sometimes just being able to name how you are feeling can help you work through it."

But not just any SEL books work for Clark. She said that they must offer a positive representation of diverse groups that match the makeup of her classroom—and the world. "These are titles that help us develop self-awareness and acceptance and [realize] that we don't have to be like other people to fit in or to be loved."

A recent title, *Honeysmoke: A Story of Finding Your Color* by Monique Fields, was especially meaningful to Clark (who is white and Latina) and her BIPOC students. "It's about a biracial girl searching for her color—asking family and friends if she is Black or white. She comes up with her own color: *honeysmoke* like the 'golden honey in hives at her grandma's house, and the smoke from a passing train.' "



In addition to diversity of race and culture, Clark carefully curates choices that ensure all genders are represented and can share emotions freely.

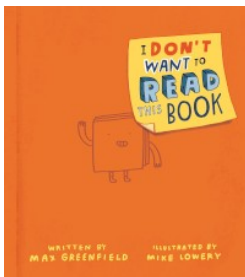
"Historically, whether directly or indirectly, boys aren't taught to express their feelings openly," she said.

Clark encourages her students to be active participants in SEL book discussions. As they talk in small groups, she listens, makes notes, and collaborates with her guidance counselor and students' parents outside of class time. "Explicit SEL instruction is important," Clark said, "because you can't learn if you can't keep your emotions under control."

But Clark sees her students as more than learners, "I see them as people. It's important for students to learn how to express themselves—the earlier the better."

Amanda Jones is an award-winning teacher librarian at Live Oak Middle School in Watson, La., where she has spent her career making the library the heart of the school and a safe place to land. "I want my students to love to come to the library, and find books and a space where they can feel safe, tell the truth, and have time for discussions."

Jones does this by integrating SEL themes across her library curriculum. "Social emotional learning is big in the school library world right now," Jones said, "because we know our teachers' school days are so structured that they don't have the time that we have to focus on it."



Jones is laser-focused on choosing literature to help students. "Even though I'm in middle school, I use picture books because there are many wonderful SEL titles," Jones explained. "I try to do at least one SEL read aloud a month for each class—and I only see them twice a month."

She feels this frequency is necessary considering what's going on in her students' lives. "It's a rough time for kids right now with the pandemic, on top of bullying and cyber-bullying. So I do whatever I can to be there for them."

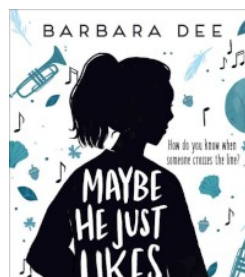
Recently, Jones and her students read the picture book *I Don't Want to Read This Book* by Max Greenfield, and participated in

an activity developed by Pernille Ripp, an expert in literacy and technology integration. "This allowed kids to share what they like and don't like about reading practices in our school," Jones said. "These types of discussions make them feel heard, and give them a voice."

The students use Jamboard, a digital interactive whiteboard, to share their literary responses (either tagged or anonymous) which are projected on a screen for everyone to see. "Most of the kids want to share," Jones said. "And when they see things that others share and that they might also be feeling or going through, you can see them kind of sigh with relief, like, 'I'm not the only one.' "

Jones and her students also exchange videos about books and middle school life using Flipgrid. "They record short video messages and send them to me," Jones said. "Then I'll respond through videos and offer advice and/or book suggestions."

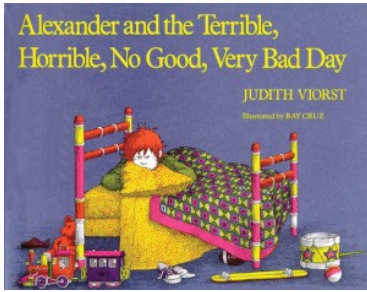
The videos are one way that Jones keeps abreast of topics that her students are interested in reading or talking about. A recent read-aloud, *Maybe He Just Likes You* by Barbara Dee, which Jones calls a #MeToo story for 10-year-olds, spurred a timely



conversation—and solutions. “We discussed how some of the boys were pinching girls’ bottoms at school,” Clark said, “and what the girls felt about it.”



Since this discussion, she’s seen a decrease in this behavior. However, Jones has seen an uptick in anxiety that often manifests itself in attention-seeking behaviors. For the most part, Jones said there are still more good days in her library than bad. But, if/when they turn from bad to worse, she has a classic SEL book for that.



“I love to read *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst whenever the kids are having a bad day. I’ll remind them that we all have them, and that everything will be okay, to give them hope,” Jones said. “One student will always come up to me and share that they’re having a *really* bad day. And then I’ll say, ‘Some days are like that’... and then, they’ll reply, ‘Even in Australia.’”

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