

# EXPLORING THE ROLE OF STORYLINE, CHARACTERS, AND INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES IN FOSTERING SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) competencies in early childhood education through interactive storytelling with Big Books. It evaluates how storytelling sessions in a kindergarten setting promote SEL development, focusing on themes like self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving. The research also examines how characters, settings, and events foster SEL growth. Additionally, creative storytelling techniques such as varied voice modulation, body language, and interactive prompts are analyzed for their role in enhancing children's emotional understanding and encouraging social interaction. The study employs qualitative methods, including interviews with preschool teachers and observations of children aged 4 to 6. Data collection is based on evaluations by kindergarten teachers, who assess the programme's effectiveness using SEL competency integration and storytelling techniques. Thematic analysis identified key findings such as a successful SEL competency integration, improved social interaction, and enhanced emotional understanding through character and setting portrayal. Children engaged more with stories where characters modelled empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving. Techniques such as voice variation and body language promoted active participation, while clearly illustrated emotions helped children relate better to the characters' feelings. Children also showed increased interest and enthusiasm in reading activities, demonstrating joy during storytime. Educators should incorporate creative storytelling techniques and delivery to support holistic SEL development in early childhood education. This qualitative approach provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers to improve early literacy and SEL programs.

**Keywords:** Socio-emotional learning (SEL), Interactive storytelling, Big Books, Early childhood education, Teacher evaluations

## INTRODUCTION

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) is a crucial aspect of early childhood development, equipping children with the skills necessary for managing emotions, building relationships, and making responsible decisions. In recent years, the integration of SEL into early childhood education has gained prominence as educators seek holistic approaches to nurture both cognitive and

emotional competencies (Mondi-Rago et al., 2021). One of the most effective yet underexplored methods for fostering SEL in young children is through interactive storytelling. Storytelling, an ancient pedagogical tool, offers an engaging platform for children not only for developing literacy skills but also for fostering emotional understanding and social interaction (Catala et al., 2022).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the use of Big Books and creative storytelling techniques such as voice modulation, body language, and interactive prompts, to enhance SEL competencies in preschool-aged children. While prior research has underscored the value of SEL, there has been limited investigation into how specific storytelling elements such as characters, settings, and plot events can foster competencies like self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving. This research aims to fill that gap by examining how creative storytelling delivery not only captivates young learners but also actively supports their socio-emotional development.

### **Statement of Problem**

This research aims to highlight SEL as a foundation skill set that underpins future academic success and social well-being. As early childhood is a critical period for emotional and social growth, it is essential to explore innovative strategies for integrating SEL into educational practices (Blewitt et al., 2021). This study will provide insights into the role of storytelling in promoting SEL, offering educators practical techniques for enhancing children's emotional and social skills in a natural, and enjoyable manner.

In early childhood education, socio-emotional learning (SEL) plays a critical role in the development of young children, helping them build self-awareness, empathy, social skills, and problem-solving abilities (Assessment Work Group, 2019). Despite its importance, there remains a significant gap in finding effective and engaging methods to foster SEL in early childhood classrooms. Traditional teaching approaches often focus on academic skills, leaving gaps in the intentional integration of SEL into daily classroom practices. Storytelling, a time-honoured educational tool, addresses this challenge by engaging children emotionally and cognitively through narrative (Brockington et al., 2021).

Bateman (2020) work indicates that storytelling often evolves as peers contribute by introducing additional characters, continuing the theme with increased emotional intensity, demonstrated through variations in voice pitch and tone, along with pronounced facial and body expressions. While this study has highlighted the children's engagement in the story through the changes of voices and body language, there is limited research on how carefully crafted narratives, emotionally rich characters, and dynamic storytelling techniques contribute to the development of specific SEL skills in early childhood education.

The storyline, characters, and interactive storytelling techniques such as voice modulation, body language, and interactive prompts impact the development of SEL competencies in young children remain underexplored. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the effectiveness of interactive storytelling in fostering SEL competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving in young children. The study will examine how story elements like plot, characters, and settings and delivery techniques such as voice variation, body language, and prompts can create meaningful SEL learning experiences, providing insights for educators and policymakers on how to integrate SEL more effectively into early childhood programs.

Understanding how these components of storytelling impact children's socio-emotional development will offer educators a valuable tool to nurture holistic growth, ensuring that children are equipped with the emotional and social skills they need for future success.

### **Research Objectives**

To determine whether the integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) competencies in early childhood education through interactive storytelling with Big Books is effective, this research proposed these objectives:

1. To assess how storytelling sessions using Big Books in a kindergarten setting promote SEL competencies, focusing on children's engagement with themes of empathy, self-awareness, and problem-solving.
2. To explore how characters, settings, and events in Big Books facilitate SEL growth.
3. To determine the role of creative storytelling techniques such as varied voice modulation, body language, and interactive prompts in enhancing children's emotional understanding and encouraging social interaction.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several theories and studies that support this research on the role of storytelling, characters, and interactive storytelling techniques in fostering socio-emotional learning (SEL) in early childhood education are Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory.

#### ***Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory***

According to Vygotsky's social development theory, the role of social interactions is highly significant in a child's cognitive growth and learning ability (Zhou, 2024). His theory suggests that children learn through interactions with more knowledgeable others such as teachers and peers in their environment. Storytelling sessions can be seen as a form of social interaction where children learn about emotions, problem-solving, and empathy. R. Eric Landrum et al., (2019) work highlights the use of storytelling techniques as a pedagogy in the classroom. Their study also explored the importance of teachers in choosing the right storybook before conducting the lesson. The story chosen should aim to achieve the learning goals and to focus on what the student's needs are instead of what the teacher has determined.

Besides the effectiveness of storytelling as a pedagogical tool, it also has a significant finding as an intervention for the psychophysiology of children as supported by Brockington et al., (2021). This study found a positive effect of storytelling on children's physical and psychological condition in a hospital. The findings reveal the short-term advantages of storytelling as an intervention that could help ease the physical and psychological discomfort of hospitalised children on the day of the session.

## ***Bandura's Social Learning Theory***

As this research focuses on the storyline, characters and storytelling techniques to foster SEL development, Bandura's theories come into play where this theory posits that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modelling. Bandura emphasises that children learn best from observing the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others (Amsari et al., 2024). This is very much obvious during their early years of where they would mimic adult's facial expressions and language. However, these skills are still being developed in their kindergarten years where children watching characters in stories resolve conflicts, express emotions, or exhibit empathy may imitate these behaviours in their real lives. Through interactive storytelling, teachers model appropriate emotional responses and problem-solving techniques, which children can then adopt.

## ***Theory of Mind***

Theory of Mind (ToM) (Premack & Woodruff, 1978) refers to the ability to attribute mental states, beliefs, intents, desires, knowledge to oneself and others, and to understand that others have perspectives different from one's own. Storytelling allows children to practice understanding the thoughts and feelings of characters, which is a direct application of ToM. By listening to and engaging with stories, children learn to consider what a character might be thinking, feeling, or intending. This fosters the development of empathy, as children are required to put themselves in the shoes of others.

In this study, characters in stories serve as models for SEL competencies. When children observe characters resolving conflicts, experiencing emotions, or solving problems, they are essentially engaging in exercises that enhance their ToM by interpreting and predicting the behavior of others. Interactive techniques such as asking children how a character feels or why they acted a certain way help children build this cognitive skill.

Research indicates that storytelling is a powerful medium for developing critical socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills such as empathy, self-awareness, and emotional regulation in young children (Catala et al., 2022; Landrum et al., 2019). These foundational skills are essential for fostering positive interactions and promoting emotional health throughout a child's development.

## **The Role of Storytelling in Promoting SEL Competencies**

Interactive storytelling has emerged as an effective educational tool in early childhood settings, particularly when utilizing Big Books. This method encourages children's engagement with narratives that emphasize SEL themes, allowing them to explore complex emotions and social scenarios in a safe environment. For instance, storytelling sessions that focus on characters facing emotional challenges help children reflect on their own feelings and develop a deeper understanding of empathy (Catala et al., 2022; Mondri-Rago et al., 2021). By immersing children in stories that highlight self-awareness and problem-solving, educators can facilitate discussions that enhance these SEL competencies.

## **Impact of Characters, Settings, and Events on SEL Growth**

The characters, settings, and events depicted in Big Books play a crucial role in facilitating SEL growth. Engaging with relatable characters allows children to identify with their

experiences, leading to enhanced emotional literacy (Blewitt et al., 2021). Storylines that present moral dilemmas or social challenges provide opportunities for children to practice problem-solving and cooperative behaviors, crucial for their social development. This is done by connecting emotionally with characters and their narratives, children learn to navigate their own emotions and understand those of others, thus strengthening their healthy relationship and interpersonal skills.

### **Creative Storytelling Techniques and Their Effects**

Creative delivery techniques, such as varied voice modulation, expressive body language, and interactive prompts, are vital for maximizing children's engagement during storytelling sessions. These techniques facilitate a deeper understanding of emotions and social cues (Landrum et al., 2019). For example, interactive prompts encourage active participation, fostering discussion and enhancing children's ability to empathize and cooperate with peers. Gunawardena and Brown (2021) support this pedagogical approach, asserting that authentic engagement with narratives enriches children's emotional literacy and helps embed SEL within the learning experience. Furthermore, Mondri-Rago, Giovanelli, and Reynolds (2021) emphasize that early childhood interventions incorporating storytelling create structured opportunities for emotional dialogue among children, fostering deeper social connections. This aligns with findings from Blewitt et al. (2021), which highlight the perspectives of early childhood educators who view the support of SEL as an integral part of their teaching practice as well as the importance of embedding SEL in everyday interactions for a supportive learning environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The research design of this study is a case study design using qualitative research through observation and interview methods. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, conducted in a kindergarten setting where interactive storytelling sessions using Big Books are implemented over a six-week period. This design allows for in-depth exploration of how SEL competencies develop through various storytelling techniques. The case study approach was selected to provide a detailed understanding of the specific context and the behaviors of the children during storytelling.

The study focuses on how creative storytelling techniques enhance SEL competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving among children aged 4 to 6. To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a combination of observational and interview-based qualitative methods, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of both the storytelling process and its impact on children's socio-emotional development.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A total of 20 children, aged between 4 and 6 years, are selected from a local kindergarten. Purposive sampling is used to ensure the selection of children who regularly participate in the storytelling sessions. Four teachers who lead the storytelling sessions are also selected for interviews. The storytelling sessions, using Big Books, are conducted once a week for 6 weeks.

Each session lasts approximately 30 minutes, and focuses on a range of socio-emotional themes such as empathy, self-awareness, and problem-solving. The sessions incorporate creative storytelling techniques, including; voice modulation to convey different emotions, body language and gestures to portray character actions and interactive prompts to engage children in discussions about the characters' feelings and decisions.

The observation sessions focus on children's reactions to the storytelling, their engagement levels, and their interactions with peers during and after the stories. The recorded data are then transcribed for thematic analysis.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with the four participating teachers after the storytelling sessions. The interviews aim to explore the teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of storytelling in fostering SEL competencies and the role of specific storytelling techniques which are voice modulation, body language, and interactive prompts in enhancing children's engagement and emotional understanding. The interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Teachers assess the SEL development of children based on observational rubrics designed to measure key competencies such as:

- **Self-awareness:** Ability to recognize and express emotions.
- **Empathy:** Ability to understand and share the feelings of others.
- **Problem-solving:** Ability to resolve conflicts and make responsible decisions.

## RESULTS

Based on the three research objectives, the findings of this study reveal the recurring themes:

### **Children's Engagement with Themes of Empathy, Self-Awareness, and Problem-Solving**

The children listened to the story of 'The Tale of Compassionate Animal' by the teachers in which they displayed heightened empathy when the characters faced relatable emotional challenges in the story. They were observed to express concern for characters, identify with their emotions, and discuss the moral dilemmas the characters faced. For example, when characters resolved conflicts through understanding and cooperation, children demonstrated an increased awareness of others' feelings and needs during peer interactions. From the interview with teachers on how empathy is shown in the children's behaviour during the storytelling session, Teacher A highlighted that storytelling helped children better understand and relate to the perspectives of others.

*"the children were able to identify the emotion if the characters from the Big Book are feeling sad or frustrated"* (Teacher A)

Another significant finding throughout the observation and interview with teachers is, it helped the children to become more self-aware. The themes embedded in the Big Books, such as characters expressing frustration, joy, or sadness, encouraged children to reflect on their own emotions. Teachers reported that children were more likely to verbalise their own feelings and experiences, showing improved emotional literacy over the course of the sessions. For example, children showed more accurate and expressive emotions during circle time before the storytelling session starts.

Characters who modelled cooperation, sharing, or expressing vulnerability helped children practise these behaviors in real-life situations, resulting in improved social interactions in both structured and unstructured playtime. Teacher B shared that children practice cooperation and sharing after the storytelling session.

*“they always remind their friends with the character from the Big Book to always share and help each other during unstructured play session” (Teacher B)*

The problem-solving scenarios presented in the storylines led to children actively discussing possible solutions during and after storytelling sessions. Teachers noticed a marked improvement in children’s ability to resolve conflicts throughout the storytelling sessions. Instead of reacting impulsively, many began to negotiate, share ideas, and collaborate to find solutions, often referencing characters or situations from the stories.

*“child A showed greater patience and are more willing to listen to their peers during arguments at the last week of the storytelling session” (Teacher C)*

Children who participated in storytelling sessions were more likely to use negotiation and compromise during conflicts with peers. For example, instead of resorting to physical responses or tattling, children actively discussed solutions, often reflecting strategies that were modelled by characters in the stories.

### **Characters, Settings, and Events in Big Books Facilitate SEL Growth**

During the observation session, children were engaged more deeply with characters that they could relate to such as family and friends. For example, Big Book 1 is a story about a child expressing her anger and frustration and talking about the feelings with the mother could help her to calm down. Characters who modelled empathy, cooperation, and problem-solving became role models for the children. They often mimicked these characters during their interactions with peers, demonstrating social behaviours such as sharing and helping others.

The settings and events in the stories provided relatable contexts for children, enhancing their ability to transfer SEL skills to their own experiences. For instance, stories set in familiar environments such as when playing with their friends or at home with their family encouraged children to draw parallels with their real-world situations. This made the socio-emotional lessons more meaningful and relevant, leading to a stronger SEL impact.

Events that challenged characters to make decisions, cooperate, or resolve conflicts were particularly effective in promoting SEL competencies. Children discussed the characters' actions and the consequences, showing an increased understanding of fairness, empathy, and personal responsibility.

### **The Role of Creative Storytelling Techniques to Enhance Children’s Emotional Understanding and Encourage Social Interaction**

Varied voice modulation significantly enhanced children's emotional engagement and understanding. Teachers noted that children were more attentive and expressive when the storyteller used distinct vocal tones to reflect different emotions. Children responded more

actively during these moments, showing a stronger connection to the emotional content of the story.

The use of exaggerated body language and facial expressions by storytellers helped children grasp the emotions of the characters more effectively. For example, children mirrored these expressions during role-playing activities, which improved their ability to interpret and express emotions non-verbally. This led to improved social interaction, as children used non-verbal cues more effectively in their communication with peers.

Interactive prompts, such as asking children to predict what might happen next or how a character might feel, encouraged active participation and group discussion. This fostered social interaction, as children collaborated in guessing outcomes or discussing emotional responses. Teachers observed that children were more likely to engage in cooperative behavior, such as working together or taking turns, after sessions where interactive prompts were used.

Overall, creative storytelling techniques such as voice modulation, body language, and interactive prompts significantly increased children's enthusiasm for reading and storytime activities. Teachers reported that children looked forward to storytelling sessions and showed greater interest in reading on their own or with peers. Storytime became a collaborative social experience, further enhancing their socio-emotional growth.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **A Holistic Approach to Children Development**

Storytelling, particularly when delivered interactively, recognizes that cognitive, emotional, and social growth are interconnected. As children engage with stories, they not only improve their language and literacy skills but also develop a better understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others - essential for forming healthy relationships and making responsible decisions. Hence, storytelling must not be viewed as supplementary or additional activity but serves as a core component of early childhood education programs to foster a well-rounded, emotionally intelligent, and socially responsible generation.

### **Implications for Early Childhood Education**

The findings suggest that integrating storytelling more fully into early literacy programs entails more comprehensive educational outcomes; addressing the emotional and social aspects of learning. Storytelling, with its intrinsic ability to convey complex emotional and social narratives in an accessible and explicit way, offers a platform to cultivate children who are not only academically proficient but also emotionally intelligent and socially adapt. The creative storytelling techniques highlighted in this study can serve as practical tools for teachers seeking a more emotionally enriching classroom environment.

### **Real-World Application of SEL Growth**

The findings indicate that storytelling not only enhances SEL competencies within the classroom but also extends to real-world contexts. Children who participated in the storytelling sessions were observed to display greater empathy and problem-solving skills in their interactions with peers. This suggests that the emotional and social values learned through the



stories were practical and transferable to everyday real situations, making storytelling a valuable tool for development. For instance, characters that modelled cooperation or conflict resolution, children applied these behaviors during playtime or group work. This real-world application is critical because it demonstrates that SEL skills developed during storytelling sessions are not limited to narrative but have practical value in children's daily lives.

### **Engagement Beyond Instructional Setting**

Interactive storytelling, especially through the use of Big Books, offers a multidimensional approach to education through the combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements; storytelling captures children's attention in a way that typical academic instruction and classroom setting often cannot. This immersion allows children to connect emotionally with characters, settings, and situations, leading to better engagement with the socio-emotional themes embedded in the stories. The stories used in this research were selected to address core SEL competencies such as empathy, self-awareness, cooperation, and problem-solving. Educators noted that children were not passive recipients of these stories; they actively engaged through discussions, role-play, and predictions. This active engagement is crucial because it provides children with opportunities to practise SEL skills in a controlled, yet imaginative environment.

### **Creative Delivery Method as Catalyst for SEL Development**

The use of creative storytelling techniques such as varied voice modulation, expressive body language, and interactive prompts played a pivotal role in fostering SEL competencies. These techniques did more than make the storytelling sessions entertaining; amplified emotional depth of the stories. For example, when teachers modulated their voices to express anger, joy, or sadness, children were better able to grasp the emotions, which in turn helped them understand the emotional experiences of others - empathy. Similarly, body language and gestures helped children interpret non-verbal cues, a critical aspect of social interaction. By observing these cues during storytelling, children learned to recognize and mimic appropriate emotional expressions, which could potentially enhance their ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations. The interactive prompts further deepened this engagement by encouraging children to express their thoughts and feelings, enhancing both self-awareness and social skills through verbal interaction.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that interactive storytelling through Big Books is a powerful tool for fostering holistic child development. As highlighted in the study, educators can make storytelling a multifaceted experience and transformative practice that nurture emotional, social, and cognitive growth through creative delivery techniques. Storytelling should be more fully integrated in the early childhood curriculum - 'a cornerstone of early childhood education programs in fostering SEL', not only to promote and enhance literacy but also to build and establish emotional and social foundations for children's well-being and life-long learning.

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