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# **Children's Social-Emotional Development: The Power of Pedagogical Storytelling**

*Maya Gunawardena & Merja Koivula*

## **Abstract**

Research shows Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) affects young students' positive behaviour which influences students' academic achievement as well as their wellbeing. Australian primary school teachers use diverse pedagogical practices and whole-school approaches to promote SEL. This qualitative study enquired about two popular approaches to SEL: whole school approaches and pedagogical storytelling. The data included thematically analysed in-depth semi structured interviews with eight primary school teachers and their classroom episodes of pedagogical storytelling interventions. The study found the whole-school approaches such as Positive Behaviour for Learning and the Berry Street Education Model to achieve SEL were used to discipline students. Teachers also used pedagogical stories to promote SEL and increase students' positive behaviour. This study highlighted the tremendous power within stories for igniting in-depth discussion to influence SEL. Pedagogical stories provide useful sources to foster children's emotional wisdom for self-awareness, social awareness, relationship building and decision-making.

**Keywords:** social-emotional learning; pedagogical storytelling; whole-school approaches; wellbeing; self-awareness; social awareness

## **Résumé**

La recherche montre que l'apprentissage socio-émotionnel (SEL) a un impact sur le comportement positif des jeunes élèves, ce qui influe sur leurs résultats scolaires et leur bien-être. Les enseignants des écoles primaires australiennes utilisent diverses pratiques pédagogiques et des approches globales de l'école pour promouvoir l'apprentissage SEL. Cette étude qualitative s'est intéressée à deux approches populaires de l'apprentissage SEL: les approches globales de l'école et les récits pédagogiques.

L'étude a analysé de manière thématique des entretiens semi-structurés approfondis avec huit enseignants d'école primaire et les épisodes d'interventions pédagogiques de

narration qu'ils ont vécus en classe. L'étude a révélé que les approches scolaires globales, telles que le comportement positif pour l'apprentissage et le modèle d'éducation de Berry Street, étaient utilisées pour discipliner les élèves. Les enseignants ont également utilisé des histoires pédagogiques pour promouvoir le comportement positif à l'égard de l'apprentissage et accroître le comportement positif des élèves. Cette étude a mis en évidence l'énorme pouvoir des histoires pour déclencher des discussions approfondies afin d'influencer le SEL. Les histoires pédagogiques constituent des sources utiles pour favoriser la sagesse émotionnelle des enfants en matière de conscience de soi, de conscience sociale, d'établissement de relations et de prise de décision.

**Mots-clés:** apprentissage socio-émotionnel; récits pédagogiques; approches globales de l'école; bien-être; conscience de soi; conscience sociale

### **Resumen**

Las investigaciones muestran que el aprendizaje socioemocional afecta al comportamiento positivo de los jóvenes estudiantes, lo que influye en su rendimiento académico y en su bienestar. Los profesores de primaria australianos utilizan diversas prácticas pedagógicas y enfoques integrales para promover el SEL. Este estudio cualitativo indagó sobre dos enfoques populares del SEL: los enfoques escolares integrales y la narración pedagógica.

Los datos incluyeron entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad analizadas temáticamente con ocho profesores de primaria y sus episodios en el aula de intervenciones de narración pedagógica. El estudio reveló que los enfoques escolares integrales, como el Comportamiento Positivo para el Aprendizaje y el Modelo Educativo de Berry Street, se utilizaban para disciplinar a los alumnos. Los profesores también utilizaron historias pedagógicas para promover el SEL y aumentar el comportamiento positivo de los estudiantes. Este estudio puso de relieve el enorme poder de los relatos para suscitar un debate en profundidad que influya en el SEL. Los relatos pedagógicos constituyen fuentes útiles para fomentar la sabiduría emocional de los niños con vistas a la autoconciencia, la conciencia social, la creación de relaciones y la toma de decisiones.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje socioemocional; narración pedagógica; enfoques escolares integrales; bienestar; autoconciencia; conciencia social.

## **Introduction**

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is vitally important in early education as it has direct and indirect benefits for learners in school and beyond. Despite the growing interest, research shows teachers' approaches to fostering students' SEL can be random and informal in many contexts (Weissberg et al., 2017). School-wide SEL programs such as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) are popular in many schools, but limited evidence exists regarding the practical implementation and effectiveness of such approaches in SEL education (Aerila et al., 2021). Similarly, although recent studies highlight the power of pedagogical storytelling in psychology education (Landrum et al., 2019), values education (Anonymised), cultural education and peace building (Hoffmann et al., 2020) there is little empirical evidence for the advantage of pedagogical stories in SEL development (Britt et al., 2016).

Pedagogical storytelling is "the use of stories as a method of teaching both science and social science concepts" (Landrum et al., 2019, p. 248). It implies there is both an art and science of telling a story to engage learners and influence their learning (Brakke & Houska, 2015). However, if teachers do not pay conscious attention to SEL based intention of storytelling, the benefits of this pedagogy in terms of SEL may not be realised. Stories are complex and so tensions exist between story as a source and an instructional approach where teachers have to think through when creating integrative learning experiences (Brakke & Houska, 2015). Xiao et al. (2023) saw in their study that students' responses and emotions related with stories seem to be a neglected aspect of storytelling pedagogies. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions and practice of two approaches (whole school and pedagogical storytelling) to provide insights into approaches for SEL enhancement. The whole school approach is an to extend learning from classroom to outside the classroom to increase student well-

being by adopting a range of strategies and priorities (e.g., to support student's holistic well-being, positive behaviors, relationship building, socially responsible ways of interacting, and establish joint values in school). Pedagogical storytelling is using stories as a mean of inculcating values and social–emotional capabilities. The literature review in the proceeding sections of this paper provides a detail exploration into these two approaches of SEL education. Teachers reported that they used both whole-school approaches and other approaches including pedagogical storytelling. So, we posed two research questions to drive this inquiry.

1. What are teachers' perspectives of their approaches to SEL?
2. How does pedagogical storytelling provide teachers with opportunities to foster SEL?

## **Literature review**

### ***Research on SEL education in early education***

Childhood is regarded as a critical phase for developing social-emotional competencies, including emotional intelligence and emotional literacy (Bowles et al., 2017), which are crucial for children's health, wellbeing, and learning, as well as tackling risk factors during development (Greenberg et al., 2017; Weissberg et al, 2017). Children develop their SEL competencies informally through various means in their exposure to family, physical environments, and society. However, research argues that early introduction to SEL has many benefits for children's development; For example, promoting ethical and moral development, social relationships, and feeling compassion toward others (Medin & Jutengren, 2020; Mäkinemi & Vainio, 2020). A plethora of research suggests SEL education impacts children's emotional regulation, as SEL has direct and indirect correlations with prosocial behaviour which positively influences

children's academic achievement and furthermore, SEL reduces the likelihood of behavioural and emotional difficulties in the future (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Greenberg et al., 2017).

Research argues that teachers can influence children's SEL development by enacting effective and high-impact pedagogical approaches for SEL (Freeman & Strong, 2017). However, teachers are not always comfortable using strategies for SEL (Brackett et al., 2012) and many teachers lack confidence, and some do not consider SEL their responsibility (Elbertson et al., 2009). As Hogan et al. (2018) saw, teachers are often left alone to find effective teaching strategies based on their beliefs, passion, and motivation.

### ***Teachers' perspectives and beliefs regarding SEL***

Many studies have demonstrated that teachers' beliefs and perspectives about the need for teacher intervention for SEL affect their implementation of SEL approaches in classrooms and whole-school contexts (Collie et al., 2015; Brackett et al., 2012). In addition, their professional knowledge, commitment to SEL education, and perceptions of a school culture's support for SEL implementation contribute to their confidence and comfort in using various approaches (Brackett et al., 2012). In turn, these likely affect teachers' classroom SEL practices, how faithfully and systematically they implement SEL programs to create a positive whole-school culture promoting students' wellbeing (Brackett et al., 2012). By surveying a large sample of Canadian teachers, Collie et al. (2015) identified three distinct teacher profiles regarding their SEL beliefs and their perspectives on promoting SEL in school culture: 1) the SEL-thrivers, who displayed high comfort and commitment in implementing SEL, and high perception on promoting SEL in school culture, 2) the SEL-advocates, who had high SEL comfort and commitment, but low culture, and 3) the SEL-strivers with low SEL comfort and culture, and high commitment to SEL implementation. Collie et al. (2015) state further research

is necessary for understanding how teachers' SEL beliefs influence their implementation. The present qualitative study aimed to understand Australian teachers' perspectives and practice to address the gap noted above in the literature.

Additionally, teachers' positive, supportive interactions and student-teacher relationships (Rimm-Kauffman & Hulleman, 2017; Weissberg et al., 2017), and effective classroom management foster students' SEL competence (Collie et al., 2017). Moreover, teachers' own social-emotional competence and wellbeing combine with these factors (Greenberg et al., 2017) to influence the classroom atmosphere and student outcomes.

Teachers' SEL practices may be hampered, however, by inadequate relevant skills and competencies (Hogan et al., 2018), by not using an SEL program as intended, or by failing to sustain implementation long-term (Rimm-Kauffman & Hulleman, 2017). Therefore, we need more information on the diverse factors associated with teachers' SEL implementation as well as on practical SEL implementation, materials, methods, and approaches.

### ***Current approaches to SEL education in Australia***

Curricular reforms, such as the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2017) and national policies such point to the importance of SEL. In the Personal and Social Capability (Version 8.4) of the Australian Curriculum, "students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively". The Curriculum further explains that this includes "practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skill". However, there is

no cohesive national perspective on SEL in Australia; the states and individual schools are independent and exhortative in defining and choosing their approaches to SEL (Bowles et al., 2017). Furthermore, there are no specific benchmarks or criteria for implementing SEL nationwide (Bowles et al., 2017), as SEL is not considered a formal learning area but rather a general capability in the Curriculum (Hogan et al., 2018) along with six other general capabilities, namely literacy, numeracy, ICT, critical and creative thinking, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding (Australian Curriculum Version 8.4). Bowles et al. (2017) argue that Australia needs to develop “appropriate curriculum material and assessment tools, as well as a procedure for evaluating and improving the implementation of SEL programs” (p. 4). Collie et al. (2017) argue that unlike in the USA, the evaluation of different SEL programs has not been extensively studied in Australia. Therefore, the current situation has led teachers to continuously seek new, effective SEL practices and to use bits and pieces from various sources (Hogan et al., 2018). The Australian curriculum is crowded, and teachers lack support for implementing SEL education (Hogan et al., 2018) that enhances students’ awareness, positive behaviour, and social and emotional regulation. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of SEL education and the benefits of SEL for students’ well-being and academic outcomes, as well as the positive classroom and school climate (Weissberg et al., 2017).

### ***Domains of SEL education***

To develop a holistic understanding of the elements affecting SEL, CASEL (n.d.) identifies five core elements in SEL education (Figure 1), which are also visible in Australian curriculum.



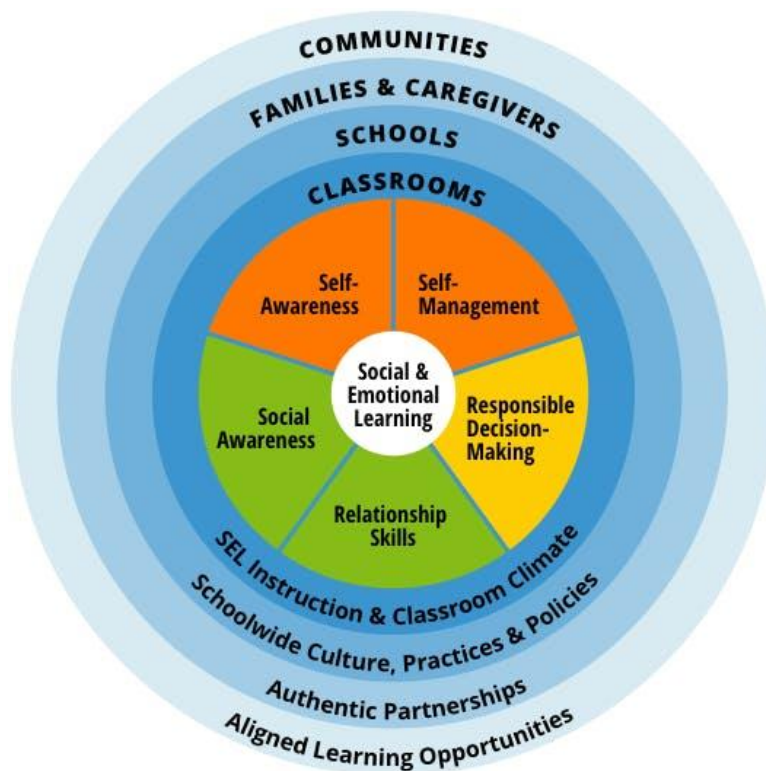


Figure 1. The framework for social and emotional learning (CASEL, n.d.)

The core competencies of individuals' SEL described in Figure 1, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making are all interconnected (CASEL, n.d.; Weissberg et al., 2017). In practice, we need *self-awareness*, i.e., understanding and identifying our emotions, thoughts and values, which influence our behaviours and *self-management* to manage effectively these emotions, thoughts and behaviours in diverse social situations and contexts. We also need *social awareness* to understand other people's perspectives and empathize with them and to be able to form relationships by using *relationship skills*. *Responsible decision-making* refers to making "caring and constructive choices about personal behaviour and social interactions across diverse situations" (see CASEL, n.d.).

According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), SEL involves students' "personal/emotional and social/relational

dispositions, intelligences, sensibilities, and learning” and leads to the development of overall personal and social capability (ACARA, 2019, Version 8.4, n.p). In the CASEL model (Figure 1), alongside individual SEL competencies, the importance of the partnership or collaboration between classrooms, schools, families, and communities has been recognised. Nevertheless, research concerning these wider whole school elements and their interactions has received less attention (Rimm-Kauffman & Hulleman, 2017), a gap to which the present study aims to contribute.

### ***Whole-school approaches to SEL education***

Whole-school SEL approaches promote activities, practices, structures (e.g., support and services for students), and policies that cultivate a positive school climate, culture, and community (CASEL, n.d.; Weissberg et al., 2017). Thus, whole-school approaches for SEL in tandem with teachers’ knowledge and pedagogical approaches along with skills that children bring with to classrooms jointly develop children’s positive behaviours through SEL (Greenberg et al., 2017). As Thapa et al. (2013, p. 13) suggest, a ‘sustained positive school climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement’. Yet, promoting SEL in schools is not always straightforward, as schools’ readiness for implementing SEL may depend on school leaders’ and the professional community’s views, approaches, and support for SEL (Hogan et al., 2018). Moreover, at the macro level, national policies, stakeholder support, and adequate resources for quality SEL implementation are also important (Greenberg et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2017). The curriculum focus has shifted towards subject-specific goals rather than more holistic approaches to learning, which include SEL as well as physical well-being.

In Australia, most schools and teachers use a variety of whole-school approaches to help students manage emotions and create emotionally healthy learning environments. Macro-level strategies include Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) (Mooney et al., 2008) and the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM) (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016), which provide teachers with a philosophy or framework for SEL education and behaviour management. PBL, a whole-school program, helps students develop positive attitudes and reinforces positive behaviours in schools (Mooney et al., 2008). PBL aims to reduce stress and enhance social and emotional regulation (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). However, the literature is inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of PBL (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016).

Despite their assumed benefits, whole-school SEL approaches are critiqued for lack of effectiveness in SEL learning at deep level and potential mismatches between students' and teachers' values based on diverse cultural backgrounds (McManus, 2021) as children bring diverse values, experiences and knowledge that children bring with them to school. Research argues that SEL programs must be culturally sensitive, consider students' diversity and allow students agency in developing their social-emotional competence (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). At the micro level, teachers employ various simple classroom strategies to offer students opportunities to talk, think, and learn about positive emotions and use stories to promote this goal. The Second Step, a SEL education program (Low et al., 2015), pursues the explicit goal of helping children to "learn, have empathy, manage emotions and solve problems" (Low et al., 2015, p. 464). Its scripted lesson cards help teachers implement the inbuilt strategies for SEL to structure their teaching experiences. While these programs undoubtedly enhance SEL education, research is inconclusive as to whether they have a significant impact on students' learning.

### ***Pedagogical Storytelling***

Storytelling is one of the oldest ways of teaching and learning, irrespective of culture and time (Landrum et al., 2019). However, mere storytelling simply does not always lead to enhancement in learning unless teachers have clear learning outcomes and effective strategies to meet those outcomes. Pedagogical storytelling is using children's stories for the pedagogical advantage aiming to help students engage in the storytelling process and make connections between the narrative, their own experiences, and academic content (Landrum et al., 2019; Lisenbee & Ford, 2018). Thus, pedagogical storytelling enables reflection and learning and makes academic content meaningful and memorable to students while facilitating communication, exploration, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving (Landrum et al., 2019).

The typical narrative structure of stories, characters, protagonists, experiences, problems or complications encourages people to think, wonder (Landrum et al., 2019), construct and reconstruct knowledge. Nevertheless, the effectiveness them in the classroom depends on pedagogies being used. For generations, stories have been used to impart knowledge and culture 'to promote the emotional, social and cognitive development of children... guide children's thinking, shape their behaviour, and even help solve problems' (Lucas & Soares, 2013, p. 138). Stories can exploit modelling, guiding and questioning techniques for teaching content to students (Britt et al., 2016) and stories allow in-depth reflection and discussion. Cremin et al. (2017) offer a pedagogical approach for telling and acting of children's own stories enrich children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. However, storytelling for pedagogical purposes as described in this study has been sparsely researched in the context of SEL (Britt et al., 2016).

Pedagogical storytelling can take different shapes based on the purpose of storytelling, story reading or story dramatizing, including entertainment, teaching content knowledge, cultural integration and inclusion, enhancing deep thinking and developing moral values, ethical understanding and SEL education. Through stories, students ‘conceptualize experience by comparing other experiences in terms of similarities and differences, develop problem-solving and decision-making skills’ (Coskun & Oksuz, 2019, p. 43) according to experiential learning theories.

Britt et al. (2016) suggest that pedagogical story reading for SEL, teachers must choose books based on students’ needs, not interests (Xiao et al., 2023). Aerila et al. (2021) recommended that story reading needs to be carefully planned to create an atmosphere that fosters SEL goals. Teachers also need to understand the non-verbal communication such as facial expression and intonation that contribute to meaning making. Stories must be accompanied by joint discussion, as this serves as a means of supporting comprehension and advancing thinking. However, the effectiveness may vary based on teachers’ competence and skills (Brakke & Houska, 2015), teachers’ choice to prioritize SEL and academic content and their fidelity (Rimm-Kauffman & Hulleman, 2017) and also teachers’ ability to have meaningful conversations based around stories to trigger emotional responses (Britt et al., 2016). This study, therefore, aimed to explore the authentic dialogues and interaction in storytelling endeavours.

## **Research Methods**

The study used a qualitative research design, including semi-structured interviews with six female and two male primary school teachers ( $n = 8$ ). The teachers’ experience ranged from 3 to 24 years ( $M = 8.88$ ;  $SD = 7.04$ ). Six teachers had bachelor’s degrees in

primary school teaching, and two teachers had master's degrees. The study also included audio recordings of the participants' storytelling interactions to examine how teachers provided opportunities within storytelling for promoting SEL education in the classroom. Ethical principles, including informing teachers about the objectives of the study, gaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring their anonymity, were carefully considered throughout the research process. The university (Anonymised) ethics committee granted permission to conduct this study (Reference number 2062).

### ***Data collection***

This study's qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews (Mill & Gay, 2010) and recorded classroom interactions (Rymes, 2015) yielded profound insights into teachers' perspectives and practices pertaining to pedagogical storytelling. The interviews allowed the teacher participants time for 'self-reflexivity, and thick description' (Tracy, 2020, p. 2), and the 'specified set of questions' helped to 'elicit the same information from all the respondents' (Mills & Gay, 2019, p. 554), with the responses being used for aggregation and comparison (Bryman, 2016). The semi-structured questions helped participants maintain focus on sharing their views freely and avoiding digression. The study also asked teachers to audio record their storytelling lessons and these storytelling episodes provided a rich authentic data source for examining language in use (Rymes, 2015) and teacher-student interactions in the classroom.

### ***Data analysis***

Interviews and classroom interactions were transcribed verbatim and analysed qualitatively by thematic analysis to identify and analyse themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were carefully studied and coded, and researcher triangulation of selected excerpts was employed to ensure accuracy in coding. The excerpts were discussed together

and consensus was reached regarding their interpretation. The inductively identified dominant themes (see Table 1, for examples) pertaining to the first research question included teachers' perspectives on SEL, its benefits, pedagogical approaches to SEL, and the impact or power of stories on SEL. Classroom story reading interactions were analysed and coded deductively using CASEL (n.d.) to examine teachers' interactions with students to promote SEL. Thematic analysis of the classroom interactions was appropriate, as we were not examining discourse patterns or patterns in the language used (Rymes, 2015). The themes related to the second research question, exploring their approaches to storytelling (see Table 2, for examples) included developing students' self-regulation, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

**Table 1.**

*Teachers' perspectives on SEL: examples of coding*

<b>Teachers' perspectives of SEL/ themes</b>	<b>Example excerpts</b>
The importance of SEL on student wellbeing	I think also building relationships with the students is something that, I mean it is highly important in all aspects of teaching but particularly for something like that it means that the students can relate to you and can actually come and speak to you about things (Saba)
SEL for classroom management	that it is not okay to just feel grumpy and take that out on everybody else, if we are feeling upset over something, we have a personal responsibility to take strategies to manage that. (Rita)
Other strategies for SEL development	in the mornings, we do something called Morning Circle and it is basically a, I guess, it is kind of an introduction into the school day. It is time to first to say good morning to our peers... (Lucy)
Whole school approaches impacting SEL	.... the Berry Street model, has lots of restorative justice. We still do attention for like breaking of rules that happen out on the playground, so that's only done by executives and when the children come to that session we talk about their character strengths, we talk about you know that you've said your

	character strength is honesty but hang on this has happened here so how can we support you ...Mara
PD for Whole school approaches	So we've got a common language across the school because the PD for whole school approaches (Liam)

**Table 2.**

*Teachers' perspectives on the power of stories: examples of coding*

<b>Teachers' perspectives of pedagogical storytelling</b>	<b>Examples excerpts</b>
Can relate with stories (self-awareness and social awareness)	They can really relate to it and they can connect with it a lot more than if it is just some abstract kind of story that is coming from somewhere. It is a real-life situation as well, so if it is happening to me then they could potentially think that could happen to me or it could happen to someone else, (Rita)
Can mirror other people (social awareness)	it has been really useful to use stories for them to see the mirror that for many urban Aboriginal people that the lifestyle is very similar to the rest of us but also give an opportunity to see that window into more remote communities who might have a more traditional lifestyle (Beth)
Help relationship building (relationship skills and self-management)	So, it was really poignant to be able to point out that the things you said make you be able to feel good when you walk away from an interaction with a friend have nothing to do with what they look like or things they have or what brand name their pencil case is (Mara)
Provide language to express emotions (self-awareness and social awareness)	The kids will often talk about that language when they think about whether they are being kind to each other, so I think about the language in that book is very on their level. (Peter)

## Findings

### *Teachers' perspectives on approaches to SEL*

In the interviews, all teachers were passionate about SEL education and unanimously believed that SEL and promoting students' positive behaviour were their key responsibilities. They were all SEL thrivers as described Collie et al. (2015) who



displayed high comfort in SEL education as seen the interview data. They believed that SEL impacts students' wellbeing, which directly influences their positive classroom behaviour. All teachers affirmed that SEL facilitates classroom management and felt that positive behaviour must be modelled and reinforced daily. Most teachers supported the use of BSEM, Berry Street Education Model (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016), and PBL, Positive Behaviour for Learning for schoolwide SEL because they had undergone professional development in using the BSEM, and school leaders stressed the benefits of that model. The majority agreed that this program had helped them develop pedagogical strategies to enhance students' self-regulation and SEL. For example, Mara said:

‘We use the Berry Street model and as a school they’ve spent an absolute fortune on four days of professional development over the last two years for every single teacher and every executive teacher in the school, so everybody is skilled. Our Whole Health program is based on the Berry Street modules.’

Clearly, Mara appreciated the value of BSEM for the school community and children's wellbeing. Saba added that ‘Berry Street is a wellbeing program that we use across the school, so a lot of SEL comes from that program.’ Mara also affirmed the benefits of the BSEM, saying, ‘The program fits well with the Australian curriculum, so I would imagine we are covering the majority of it just simply by doing the Berry Street strategies.’ The teachers also indicated that these programs have positively contributed to establishing student-teacher relationships and have benefited parents as well as teachers.

‘Our whole behaviour has changed because of the Berry Street model – lots of restorative justice. We still pay attention for like breaking of rules that happen out on the playground, so that's only done by executives.’ (Mara)

Other SEL approaches suggested and occasionally used by teachers included ‘Morning Circle Time’ (Emilson & Johansson, 2013) and ‘The Second Step’. Lucy explained the morning circle process:

‘We start our morning with a morning circle, and we do a positive primer, because often kids will come to school and they might have had a bad morning or whatever has happened; they just need a bit of a perk up, and at our school, we are really big that the children aren’t going to learn until they are in their right mindset.’ (Lucy)

Furthermore, a few teachers valued the contribution of ‘The Second Step’ program, which consists of scripted lessons for problem-solving. Both ‘Morning Circle Time’ and ‘The Second Step’ are conversational strategies through which students can have an ‘introduction into the school day’ (Peter) or ‘follow the steps if they encounter a problem’ (Mara). Sensory Gardens was also employed, which is a lunchtime club where ‘children are allowed to go into the sensory garden if they are having some problems out on the playground with other students or their emotional responses to social situations’ (Mara).

Our findings from the teachers’ interviews suggest that popular whole-school SEL approaches are primarily used to control students’ behaviour or establish a positive relationship with students to enhance classroom teaching and learning. However, the participants found stories and pedagogical storytelling helpful in developing students’ theories of mind and social awareness, which in turn helped students with relationship building and emotional wellbeing.

### ***Teachers' views about how stories influence student behaviour***

All the participants indicated that stories helped students think about themselves, the classroom, school, society and the world through stories that integrated literacy and promoted SEL. They were fascinated by the opportunities stories provide: ‘I read them ... or tell them a story, and I often find it soothing and calming for the little ones’ (Mara).

The everyday use of stories was endorsed in each interview; the teachers were passionate about the discussions that stories inspired, which opened children to the wider world and beyond their own life experiences;

‘I believe strongly in the power of literature. I would read picture books and part of a novel every day and then tell stories about myself and my life and my experiences to stimulate discussions’ (Rita).

‘We read a book every day to relate to real-world issues ... discuss a lot of little things about what the book tells us about the situation or what we can learn from the characters in those situations as well.’ (Liam)

The participants were enthused about how stories created opportunities for dialogue. Stories were chosen because the teachers believed that children engaged with them and because they promoted students’ thinking:

‘When the story is about a real-life situation, they think it is happening to me; then, they could potentially think, “That could happen to me, or it could happen to someone else,” like, whatever it is, if I was talking about the resilience topic again and tell them a story about something that happened to me where I showed resilience, and I guess that would sort of make them think... oh, okay, that happens to my teacher and maybe it is a real thing, and they can connect with it more.’ (Saba)

All participants emphasised either written or oral stories or simply recounted those that they created on the spot. They recounted that stories had become an essential daily activity in classrooms. Stories were also used to provide extensions to the subject content. For example, Jo reported that they were reading a book about forces to reflect on their science lessons. The teachers emphasised the impact of stories on students’ positive behaviour and they expressed their view that stories stimulated affective networks in students’ brains to rewire their thinking dispositions to thrive for positive behaviour:

‘Students think about and reflect on their own behaviour, action, verbal action, total behaviour... and what to say because it is important to do that’ (Mara).

Stories are important for students’ self-awareness. Through stories, teachers create pedagogical situations for discussions and to help boost students’ positive character traits.

‘We read a story about a little boy showing resilience. Then we talked about what would have happened if he reacted in a different way. (...) How might you show resilience? And then we talked about different scenarios.’ (Larisa)

Stories provide multiple opportunities for students to gain an understanding and find solutions in different social situations. Teachers found that stories help to clarify misunderstandings, misinterpretations or stereotyping:

‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in our school tend to have very similar lifestyles to the kids in our class and I think there tends to be a bit of a stereotype about what is an Aboriginal person. So, it has been really useful to use stories for them to see the mirror that for many urban Aboriginal people that the lifestyle is very similar to the rest of us but also gives an opportunity to see that window into more remote communities.’ (Rita)

Teachers also read stories to develop intercultural understanding and concepts of belonging and connectedness in groups and communities. ‘Students are unexposed to such scenarios and stories allow us to expose them and to be in their shoes and develop empathy’ (Saba).

The teachers indicated that stories are vehicles for scaffolding students’ thinking and conveying key messages to children. Sometimes, they narrated their own anecdotes to convey important messages to help students develop self-awareness:

‘We’ve been talking a lot about the growth mindset. I’ve told them stories about when I am at the gym and I want to give up, I have a candid attitude, I believe in myself, and I push myself and I can do those things.’ (Larisa)

‘We’ve been talking quite a lot about the responsibility that we have for our own mental health and that it is not okay to just feel grumpy and take that out on everybody else. If we are feeling upset over something, we have a personal responsibility to take strategies to manage that.’ (Rita)

The teachers shared their own experiences and translated messages to help the students understand the purpose of reading stories. Four teachers explicitly mentioned how hard they try to develop ‘critical consciousness’, as stories are a way for students to experience others’ emotions. When teachers noticed gaps in students’ understanding or perceptions, they used stories to get them to think about different perspectives. Based on teachers’ perspectives and evidence from storytelling experiences, stories are powerful tools for influencing and changing students’ behaviour.

### ***Findings regarding teachers’ storytelling interventions***

The classroom interactions demonstrated that storytelling interventions are quite fruitful in reinforcing positive behaviour and SEL education, particularly self-regulation, self-awareness, and social awareness, as the following episodes show. These episodes are snippets from teachers’ authentic storytelling interventions.

#### ***Episode 1: Raising self-awareness and helping children with their self-regulation***

Before Jo started reading a book named ‘Mr Huff’ in her Year 1 class, she asked students to read the name of the book and predict what the book was about.

Teacher: Alright, let’s share a few things that you were thinking.

Student 1: Mr Huff is a cloud who is sad and he lives in the building.

Teacher: Interesting. Why do you think he is sad?

Student 2: Because his face, his mouth is in a line and his eyes are facing down.

Teacher: Okay, so Lorrie is looking at clues in the pictures on the front cover.

Ella, what do you think this book is about?

Student 3: I think this book is about this guy that had a balloon, and the balloon was annoying the guy.

Teacher: Okay, so a guy had a balloon, and the balloon was annoying the guy.

Does that sound sort of similar to Lorrie's?

Students: No.

Teacher: Not really, hey, that was pretty different. Interesting. Rubin, what do you think the book was about?

Student 4: I think there is an elephant out the front yard. He comes to take a look and he tries to move the elephant, but he can't because it is too heavy.

Teacher: Another interesting idea and something very different from the other two. Okay. I want you to keep those ideas in your head and we are going to have a look now at the book.

Jo interacted with the students as she continued to read the story. She got students to wonder who Mr. Huff was and got them to predict events. In the end, students understood that Mr. Huff was an invisible feeling of being grumpy, and that if Mr. Huff was around, they should try to think positively. The story provided students with strategies to overcome negative feelings by thinking positively. Learning different strategies for dealing with emotions helps to improve self-awareness and self-regulation.

### *Episode 2: Learning Social Awareness Through a Story*

Mara narrated the book *The Invisible Boy* to her kindergarten class. She got the children to look at the book and predict why the boy was invisible. Students suggested

ideas, and Mara let them wonder to keep their attention as she read, stopped and interrogated students' responses.

Teacher: Let's talk about him. What have you noticed about all the other children and how they've been drawn?

Teacher: What a great observation. Brian has no colour; all of the other children are coloured. So, what do you think about it, remember, our book is called The Invisible Boy. Do you think he is really invisible, as in no one can actually see him?

Students: No

Teacher: What do you think about Brian?

Student 1: That he has no parents.

Teacher: I think he might have some parents. Archer?

Student 2: He is invisible, so he can walk through walls?

Teacher: Put up your hand if you think he is invisible and walks through walls. That type of invisible. So, how he is invisible? He is not actually physically invisible; he is there! We can still see him.

Student 3: Like invisible, like, in the story, nobody notices him.

Teacher: I love that. Did you hear that? He is invisible, nobody notices him, nobody wanted to pick him as part of their team, and nobody invited him to their birthday party.

Once the students understood why the boy was invisible, they started making connections with their own experiences. Student 1 said, 'That story reminds me of when I had no friends.' Mara enquired about how students feel when they have no friends and asked them to recall their experiences of being lonely. Mara also got children to suggest ways to help people who are feeling lonely, and she unpacked what kindness meant and how

people could be kind to each other. As the interactions continue, the students suggested different acts of kindness, connecting the story and their real-life experiences.

### *Episode 3: Social Awareness for Relationship Building*

Beth's class thought about a story named 'Kindness Grows'. Beth asked the students to make inferences about the story and their personal lives.

Teacher: How does this story show hope?

Student 1: By being kind.

Teacher: All right.

Student 2: Being together as one big family, collaborating.

Teacher: Collaborating. What a great word.

Student 3: Showing love.

Teacher: Ruby, lucky last.

Ruby: I think the bit when they're breaking up. It is kind of like they understand people. Sometimes... a different country and you try to speak a different language and it doesn't go so well so you can't actually play.

Teacher: But Ruby, just because you might speak a different language to someone, it doesn't mean you don't show kindness towards them. It might be a bit trickier to work together, but we still have to show kindness.

The episode shows how the teachers help students to have an awareness of other people and establish positive relationships with them. Teachers and students agree that kindness and love help develop relationships with others. Ruby, one of the students, elaborated on the point that students from other cultures need to be treated fairly in play, otherwise relationships break. This was an interesting observation for children in year 3 that they



work and play with children from diverse backgrounds. Relationship building is a key skill to help positive relationships thrive in school and beyond.

#### *Episode 4: Self and Social Awareness Helping Children with Their Self-Regulation*

Before narrating the book, *The Ugly Five*, about animals to Year 4 children, Liam discussed how stories help people understand complex daily issues. Most children listened to Liam read the story and interacted with him occasionally. However, towards the end, Liam initiated a discussion about how stories can be meaningful in the context of the human world and how similar humans are to animals.

Teacher: That tells us a little bit about the animals here. Someone, by putting your hand it, what were they feeling at the start of these characters?

Student 1: They felt sad because they thought they were ugly.

Teacher: Does anyone else have any other feelings that they thought at that point?

Student 2: That they didn't believe in themselves.

Teacher: Didn't believe in themselves. They were quite negative.

Student 3: Didn't think about what they could do to help people.

Student 4: They were negative.

Through this discussion, Liam reinforced the benefits of positive thinking and the issues and problems with negative thinking in relationship building. The story was symbolic of how humans may feel bad if they think they are ugly. However, this teacher talked a lot and only a few students interacted, while others remained silent. Nevertheless, it looks from the few interactions that the message was clear and relevant to students as their own perceptions of self are important in regulating their emotions. They can also better understand other students who may feel same way.

#### **Discussion**

This study has yielded original insights into teacher perceptions of SEL, their comfort, commitment, and pedagogical skills. Further, it has highlighted the strengths and rationale of different approaches to SEL, as perceived by teachers included in this study. The following sections of this paper will discuss insights into teachers' approaches in greater depth, focusing on the power of pedagogical storytelling.

### ***Teachers' perceptions and approaches to SEL***

Our findings showed that the teachers included in this study are 'SEL thrivers' (Collie et al., 2015) who showed high comfort and commitment in implementing SEL, and they also had high perception on promoting SEL in school culture. These teachers used a range of approaches to promote positive behaviour. Whole school or school-wide SEL programs such as the BSEM (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016) and PBL (Mooney et al., 2008) were the most commonly used. They also adopted various conversational approaches (Emilson & Johansson, 2013) to advance students' thinking of SEL based learning. Our findings indicate that teachers are comfortable with these school wide programs due to their professional training and the presence of support materials for implementing them. Consequently, they found the whole-school approaches to SEL particularly useful in promoting students' behaviour management, reinforcing expected classroom behaviours, and building teacher-student relationships (CASEL, n.d.; Weissberg et al., 2017).

However, we saw the sustainability and strength of the whole-school approaches can be questionable as they are influenced by reasons such as compliance for classroom management by building positive relationships between teachers and students. Students make emotional decisions because the expected behaviour is reinforced and encouraged for the purpose of 'good behaviour' in school. Based on our small sample of teachers' views, we are unable to provide a generalization that whole-school approaches are not

effective. Therefore, further research is necessary to strengthen the efficacy of such approaches to SEL learning.

### ***The power of pedagogical storytelling***

Complementary to previous studies (e.g., Aerila et al., 2021), the participants of this study also saw storytelling as more powerful in promoting SEL. The participants warmly and unanimously agreed that promoting SEL through stories influences students' learning, behaviour and wellbeing. In line with previous research (Landrum et al., 2019; Lucas & Soares, 2013), the storytelling episodes demonstrated the value of stories in honing students' thinking skills, offering a learning platform where students co-construct their understanding with teachers. The evidence from the longer episodes included in the findings section of this paper showed that stories allowed students to dig deeper into their emotions, reflect on them, and critically construct shared understanding while also enabling teachers to build relationships with students. Thus, storytelling serves a dual purpose. There are examples in the episodes that illustrate the promotion of SEL, surpassing competencies highlighted in CASEL, providing a range of opportunities for conversation with teachers. The students learned by:

1. Reflecting on their actions through characters and events
2. Enhancing their critical consciousness and building solidarity in the class
3. Clearing out or clarifying misunderstandings, misinterpretations or stereotypes
4. Exposing themselves to problematic situations and making informed decisions
5. Increasing their confidence in communicating problems and issues
6. Articulating issues that they notice in society
7. Finding strategies for relationship building and emotional control
8. Changing perspectives towards people and life

9. Establishing positive behaviour and self-regulation
10. Thinking about morals and cultural values
11. Learning about cultures and people
12. Expressing their emotions through stories

Previous research has also supported that stories allow students rich opportunities for self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness and relationships and allow teachers to develop strong dispositions for emotional literacy in their students (see Coskun & Oksuz, 2019). However, teachers' explicit attention and their abilities to stimulate students' cognition and metacognition can impact the strength of storytelling on SEL. Further, a consistent approach is required in storytelling as research shows fidelity and quantity are significant in SEL development (Rimm-Kauffman & Hulleman, 2017).

### ***Limitations of this study***

Some limitations are worth noting. This qualitative study had only eight participants which impacted the generalisability of the results. The participants who volunteered were passionate about SEL education and they intentionally used stories to develop SEL skills. Therefore, a limitation of the study is that as all the participants were categorised as 'SEL thrivers', and hence, critical perspectives towards SEL education and pedagogical storytelling were lacking in this study. This needs to be addressed in future studies to gain more knowledge about the effects of teachers' beliefs on SEL education and practices. Furthermore, COVID-19 restrictions meant that interviews had to occur online, and we presume that this also affected the quality of the conversations. Teachers used storybooks and narrated stories as they usually do in their classrooms. The merit of the data is in the teachers' recordings of their storytelling, which allow for insights within classrooms without a researcher's presence affecting the situation. However, if the

researchers had had the opportunity to observe in the classroom, this would have enabled even richer, more descriptive data regarding pedagogical storytelling interventions.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings showed that teacher participants in this study used a number of strategies such as the Berry Street Model (BSM) and Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) because they were mandated in school policy. These programs provided teachers with professional development and the materials to assist them with the implementation of the proposed strategies. However, the participants used the programs mainly to assist them in managing students' classroom behaviour, and thus, the use of the programs was limited, and their potential was not fully exploited.

The storytelling episodes that we analysed in this study capitalised on the tremendous power of stories to influence students' SEL development. Through stories, teachers can prompt and probe students' thinking to develop emotional and social awareness, which, in turn, helps students to build strong relationships. We argue that stories are more powerful than school-wide policies as they provide rich substance for in-depth critical analysis and a platform to stimulate conversation. However, these qualities in stories may not be clear unless teachers explore and pay explicit attention to them. Stories need to be told and read intentionally to instigate students to critically reflect on their behaviour through mirrors and others through windows to foster their emotional intelligence and literacy. Storytelling allows teachers to focus not only on SEL competencies as illustrated in the five domains of the CASEL model but also to provide with competencies to identify emotions and have conversations about them. Storytelling is implicit and insightful and can lead to developing students' wisdom more than superficial discussion. However, further studies can support more consistent and robust

strategies for storytelling investigating the appropriate fidelity and quantity which in return can help to develop pedagogical skills.

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