



Literature

Literature as A Tool for Social-Emotional Learning: A Character-Based Analysis of A Little Princess

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the ways literature, namely *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, can be used to promote social-emotional learning (SEL) in classrooms. The incorporation of SEL through classic literature has not been well investigated, despite its rising profile for its impact on students' overall development. Based on the five main SEL competencies listed by the CASEL framework (self-awareness, social-awareness, relationship-skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management), this study uses qualitative content analysis to explore how Sara Crewe grows as a character and how her feelings and actions reflect these competencies. In particular, a character-based thematic analysis is used to show how Sara's empathy, resilience, and moral integrity demonstrate emotional intelligence and social competence. The findings show that classic children's novels, such as *A Little Princess*, can significantly improve social and emotional learning (SEL) classes by providing pupils with stories that are real, complex, and reflective of their own experiences. Additionally, literary character analysis is a great tool for social and emotional learning (SEL) instructors to help their students become more self-aware, reflective, and critical thinkers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the significance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in educational contexts has gained increasing awareness as emotional competence plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic achievements and overall personal growth. SEL refers to the ways in which people learn and practice the skills, attitudes, and information that are essential for emotional intelligence, goal-setting, goal-support, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making (Wicaksono & Saraswati, 2024). Worldwide, SEL has become an integral part of school curricula as a means to promote students' complete development.

Surprisingly, literature is one of the most underappreciated but highly effective ways to foster SEL. Readers can develop their empathy, perspective-taking, and self-awareness by immersing themselves in literary characters in intricate social circumstances. Rowe (2018) argued that reading literary works might help students acquire social principles and attitudes by allowing them to experience emotional journeys and moral issues authentically. Students may also consider their personal feelings and actions in connection to the characters via an examination of character growth, moral issues, and relationships with others.

Literary works such as *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett are ideal for digging into social and emotional themes (Fridayanti et al., 2013). The protagonist, Sara Crewe, is a little girl who, despite facing significant changes in her life, never loses her honesty, empathy, and perseverance. Character-based analysis within the framework of social and emotional learning (SEL) can be enriched by observing Sara's reactions to hardship, her capacity to remain compassionate and imaginative despite challenging

circumstances, and her resilience when confronted with loss. Moreover, social and emotional qualities, including self-awareness, self-management, interpersonal skills, and accountable decision-making, are exemplified by her narrative.

Sara demonstrates resilience to emotional stress, empathy, and ethical decision-making, all of which can be explored through character-based literary analysis. While Sara endures mistreatment at the hands of Miss Minchin and is subsequently demoted from her life of luxury to that of a servant, she never stops showing mercy to those less fortunate, such as her fellow worker, Becky. It implies a high level of empathy and moral thinking, which are in line with the SEL objectives. According to Vygotsky's theory of social development, which highlights the importance of cultural tools, such as literature, in cognitive and emotional learning, students are able to process their own emotional responses and consider alternative viewpoints through these literary experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

Reading novels with a lot of emotion, like *A Little Princess*, gives students a place to feel safe enough to talk about tough topics like loss, injustice, and isolation. By providing insight into the perspectives of others, literature serves as a dual purpose: reflecting students' own lives and fostering their emotional literacy and international understanding (Wicaksono & Saraswati, 2024). Literary integration into social and emotional learning is, thus, an essential pedagogical method for developing students' emotional intelligence, empathy, and sense of social responsibility, in addition to being an academically rewarding strategy in and of itself. This paper presents the case that *A Little Princess* can be used as a powerful tool for social and emotional learning (SEL) lessons based on character analysis, giving teachers practical strategies to get students thinking critically and growing as learners.

According to Wicaksono and Saraswati (2024), most of the recent studies on SEL have concentrated on modern texts that are specifically designed to teach interpersonal and emotional skills. Despite their usefulness, these resources have a tendency to oversimplify complicated emotions and portray social events in an overly educational or instructional style. Learners could end up with an unrealistic picture of complex emotional ideas like empathy, emotional control, and resilience. Classic children's literature, on the other hand, is underused in SEL development despite its abundance of emotionally complex stories. Despite the fact that works like *The Secret Garden*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett all feature characters who go through tough times emotionally, deal with loss, and grow as people, these books are still studied more for their literary or historical significance rather than their psychological insights (Gao, 2019; Heath et al., 2017).

Much of the current SEL literature, contrary to the claims made by Pulimeno et al. (2020), remains with wider emotional themes instead of digging into the ways in which individual characters demonstrate CASEL's five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (*CASEL'S SEL Framework: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.*, 2020). Specifically, the constructed development of empathy and emotional regulation can be seen in *A Little Princess's* journey of Sara Crewe as she faces social rejection, poverty, and grief (de Swart et al., 2023; Retnaningrum & Hazhari, 2024). However, this depth is rarely examined from a structured social-emotional perspective. Therefore, additional investigation is necessary due to a lack of focus on character-level emotional development in classic literature, particularly within a well-established SEL framework. This study aims to show that literature that isn't specifically created for social and emotional learning (SEL) can nevertheless help students learn and grow emotionally by examining a classic book like *A Little Princess* through the CASEL methodology. Consequently, this study seeks to explore the following question: How does the character of Sara Crewe in *A Little Princess* reflect the five core SEL competencies as outlined in the CASEL framework?

The capacity to empathize with and comprehend the experiences, emotions, and perspectives of others is central to social-emotional learning (SEL). Here is where literature truly emerges as a potent instrument. The power of narrative lies in its ability to transport readers to different worlds and give them new perspectives. Theoretically, literature can help students better grasp and react to social signals and emotions by simulating social circumstances (van der Kleij et al., 2022). Following up on this, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (*CASEL'S SEL Framework: Collaborative*

for *Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*, 2020) lays out five crucial SEL competencies: self-awareness, social-awareness, relational skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making. These competencies exceed mere conceptions. As the characters in *A Little Princess* deal with grief, demonstrate compassion, build relationships, and make deliberate and considerate decisions, the researchers witness these essential competencies in practice. When students relate to these characters, they accomplish beyond simply listening to a narrative. Khongsankham et al. (2024) and Napa et al. (2022) found that those who regularly reflect on their emotions and behaviors exhibit a higher level of emotional intelligence.

In addition, literature-based SEL lessons offer a rich setting for students to reflect on their own learning. Engaging with complicated characters and narrative twists encourages students to reflect on their own emotional reactions in addition to the characters' motives and actions (Alatawi & Harshan, 2023). Developing empathy and ethical reasoning, as well as gaining deeper emotional awareness, are all aided by this introspective process. Furthermore, research by (Garcia-Peinado, 2023) highlights the positive effects of emotionally engaging stories on both student-teacher interactions and classroom climate. Thus, literature not only helps students become better students, but it also helps them develop emotionally and morally, which are important goals of social and emotional learning (SEL).

METHOD

Research Design

To analyse a novel entitled 'A Little Princess' by Frances Hodgson Burnett, the researchers used a qualitative content analysis approach as a tool for promoting social-emotional learning (SEL). According to (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is a research approach that involves interpreting text data subjectively by systematically coding the content and identifying recurring themes or patterns. Aligned with them, Patton (2002) describes Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) as a process of simplifying and interpreting qualitative data by analysing large amounts of material to uncover key patterns and underlying meanings. Schreier (2012) also stated that qualitative content analysis is well-suited for data that involve a certain level of interpretation. The analysis focused on Sara's emotional and social growth, the main character in the novel. The researchers also analysed Sara's experiences which aligned with SEL competencies. The demonstration of how literary works could exemplify emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, and ethical decision-making to students became the purpose of this research.

Data Source

The primary source for this research is Frances Hodgson Burnett's 'A Little Princess.' This novel was popular for children's literature. It was chosen due to its deep character development and emotionally engaging story, offering valuable material for examining social-emotional learning in a literary framework. Several secondary sources were also employed in this study to provide background and support for the analysis. These include:

Articles from scholars on *A Little Princess* that examine its themes, particularly on character development, which were potential as an educational tool.

Research on social-emotional learning (SEL), with a focus on studies that explore how literature can be utilized to incorporate SEL into educational context.

SEL frameworks, such as CASEL Framework (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), which identifies five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Other articles based on Character Analysis Theory which supported how the study was constructed and supported.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process involved a detailed reading of the novel, with repeating readings to highlight passages or sentences where Sara demonstrated or struggled with social-emotional competencies. Special attention was given to:

Dialogues involving and related to Sara

Internal monologues by Sara

Descriptions of emotional reactions and interpersonal interactions by Sara

Narrative events stimulating personal growth or ethical reflection

These narrative elements were annotated and grouped into thematic units for further examination. The sentences highlighted were then coded according to the five CASEL SEL domains. Although there were other characters related to Sara, they were analysed separately, with a focus on identifying patterns of SEL development.

Data Analysis Technique

A thematic analysis was employed in this study, specifically character-based thematic analysis with Sara and other supporting characters serving as figures for uncovering themes related to social-emotional learning (SEL). Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that researchers use to systematically organize and interpret complex data by identifying recurring themes that capture the underlying narratives within the dataset (Dawadi, 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this approach enhances the validity of the analysis due to its accessible nature, clear procedures, and adaptable framework. The analysis followed these steps:

Coding for SEL Domains: CASEL framework was used as a guiding rubric. The sentences collected were coded into the five SEL competencies.

Thematic Categorization: The coded data were grouped into thematic categories based on SEL domains, which enabled a more in-depth exploration of how various elements of emotional and social growth were represented in the novel.

Themes Interpretation: The findings were analyzed to evaluate how *A Little Princess*, through the character of Sara, could function as both a reflection and example of social-emotional learning. The analysis focused on Sara's emotional and social development, examining how her interactions with others reflect the elements in SEL competencies. The researchers would also like to explore how Sara responded to difficulty, empathy toward others, and moral choices related to social-emotional growth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-Awareness

Sara showed a strong ability to reflect on herself, as well as recognize her emotions even when facing insecurities and inner challenges. In the beginning of the novel, she questioned compliments given to her: *"Why does she say I am a beautiful child?"* (p. 5), showing a self-awareness of perceptions. As challenges arose, Sara's self-awareness grew when she experienced hardship, for example, when she admitted, *"You are nicer than I am. Now that trials have come, they have shown that I am not a nice child."* (p. 61). Moreover, Sara acknowledged her pride and thoughtfully examined the genuineness of herself. This moment of reflection deepened when she said, *"Perhaps I have not really a good temper at all."* (p. 20), which revealed an honest evaluation from her emotions and behavior. Sara's commitment to maintain her personal values also displayed her self-awareness. When she reminded herself, *"If I do not remind myself of the things I have learned, perhaps I may forget them."* (p. 57), it shows that she made an effort to preserve her inner values by holding onto the lessons.

Self-Management

Throughout the story in the novel, Sara portrayed a notable emotional regulation and resilience. Sara's promise to her father, *"I promised him I would bear it,"* (p. 18), showed that she could survive the hardship with self-control. Another moment when she tried to manage impulses was demonstrated upon telling Ermengarde, *"I want to hit back, but I have to remember things quickly to keep from saying something ill-tempered."* (p. 34). In this SEL domain, Sara frequently incorporated imagination as a coping mechanism, for example, *"I say to myself, 'I am a princess'... and because I am a fairy, nothing*

can hurt me." (p. 91). This has shown that saying something positive and having a growth mindset can manage overwhelming emotions.

Social-Awareness

From an early age, Sara demonstrated a deep understanding of others' feelings and a clear sense of justice. It was exemplified when Sara comforted the younger girl, Lottie, by playing a role as her mother and saying, "*We will play that you are my little girl.*" (p. 25). Furthermore, her sense of empathy for the marginalized was shown when she shared insufficient food with someone who needed the meals more than her. Despite experiencing poverty herself, she said, "*She is hungrier than I am... I am not starving.*" (p. 95) Another evidence that she was sensitive to injustice is reflected when she resisted mockery and bullying. She said, "*It isn't funny, really... They ought not to laugh.*" when she felt empathy for those being treated unkindly. One value that Sara held was that kindness is more important than intelligence, by saying this to Ermengarde, "*To be kind is worth a great deal to other people.*" (p. 106)

Relationship-Skills

Although Sara and Becky (the scullery maid) had social barriers, Sara maintained positive and respectful relationships and treated Becky as an equal. It is shown when she said, "*We are just the same – I am only a little girl like you.*" (p. 31). In this case, Sara shared her food and showed empathy and solidarity. Moreover, to build a good relationship, Sara helped Ermengarde by offering to read and retell difficult books. Despite Ermengarde's poor academic ability, Sara showed patience and emotional support. No matter how the intellectual ability gaps are, Sara mentioned, "*Look here,... if you'll lend me these books, I'll read them – and tell you everything that's in them afterward – and I'll tell it so that you will remember it, too.*" (p. 105).

Responsible Decision-Making

In this domain, Sara showed responsible decision-making through her actions, words, and thoughts, especially during difficult times. In the beginning of the novel, she said to her father, "*Well, papa... if we are here I suppose we must be resigned.*" (p. 4), showing that she could accept tough reality calmly and think clearly. In addition, she also stood up for what was right. When Miss Minchin tried to take her back, Sara refused by saying, "*You know why I will not go home with you... You know quite well.*" (p. 142). She chose to hold her principle by not returning to someone who treated her badly. Sara also reflected on how actions could give consequences, such as how unkindness can block empathy and meaningful connection, by saying, "*You will never find out whether they are (true) or not if you're not kinder to people than you are now.*" (p. 28).

Literature as a Setting for Social and Emotional Learning

The way Sara's emotions develop show how literature may help people become more self-aware, learn to control their emotions, and make better decisions through indirect, experiential learning. Pulimeno et al. (2020) stated that literature provides a vehicle for readers to experience emotional journeys and moral challenges in a manner that encourages meaningful comprehension and analysis. Reading about how fictional characters helps students integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies more efficiently than classroom teaching alone. This view is in line with the idea of (Suwastini et al. (2023) that education is transmitted by social interactions and that figurative tools, like stories and imaginary characters, can improve academic performance. In addition to providing amusement, stories expose pupils to complex emotions, interpersonal struggles, and moral dilemmas, all of which contribute to human development.

Sara Crewe's self-reflection, especially during her struggles with pride and doubts about her worth in the face of hardship, shows how literature can be a powerful instrument for discovering one's own identity. Young readers can use these inner monologues as a lens through which to view their own thought and emotion patterns. According to DeMink-Carthew et al. (2020), students can have a better understanding of their emotions, strengths, and weaknesses through the development of self-awareness in organized learning environments. Moreover, Sara's resilience and capacity to control her emotions in the face of hardship are qualities that young readers can learn from literature. Saying, "*I promised*

him *I would bear it*" (p. 18), Sara shows that she is making an attempt to maintain emotional control even while she is miserable. This scene serves a greater purpose than merely adding plot points. Thus, students can see an example of how to incorporate peace and persistence in the above example. One important part of social and emotional learning (SEL) that helps students deal with stressful situations and disagreements with others is emotional regulation (Wicaksono & Saraswati, 2024). Brackett et al. (2004) defined emotional intelligence as the integration of emotion and cognition in learning contexts. In addition, Sara's imaginative coping strategies, such as pretending to be a princess, reflect this concept. In 'emotionally relevant' lessons like *A Little Princess*, students learn that imagination is more than just a plaything. Therefore, the claim that narrative-based education helps foster healthy coping mechanisms and a deeper understanding of emotions is supported by the fact that literature not only presents SEL principles but also involves students as well.

Building Meaningful Connections and Making Ethical Choices: Relationship and Decision-Making Skills

Sara Crewe's capacity to create real connections, make responsible choices, and grow internally are all signs of her high emotional intelligence, which she displays even when faced with great challenges. She always attempted to put other people's feelings and humanity first, no matter how strict the social order was. For example, she once told Becky, "*We are just the same.*" (p. 31). This phrase portrays Sara's sincere need to connect with others and her rejection of social superiority. In addition, the need of developing connections characterised by mutual respect and care has been highlighted by Denham et al. (2012) as a crucial aspect of social-emotional competence. For her companion Ermengarde, who was having academic difficulties, Sara gave words of encouragement like, "*I'll read them and tell you everything that's in them afterward, and I'll tell it so that you will remember it, too*" (p. 105). This example is in line with Vygotsky's theory, which states that children develop emotionally and intellectually through interactions with others and this behaviour helps students learn.

Even in the face of hardship, Sara always acted ethically. Sara quietly kept her stance and said, "*You know why I will not go home with you,*" in response to Miss Minchin's effort to steal her. "*You are quite knowledgeable.*" (p.142). From this example, Sara's profound ethical analysis was displayed. She made the decision to behave with dignity and stand firm in her principles. As also stated by Durlak et al. (2011), in order to make decisions responsibly, one must think about ethical standards and how those decisions could affect other people. Also Sara's statement, "*You will never find out whether they are true or not if you're not kinder to people that you are now,*" (pg. 28) reflects on the fact that her actions impact human connection, demonstrating that she thought about it deeply. According to Hossain (2024), when situated in this context, literature can serve as a powerful instrument for students to see and absorb values, such as justice, empathy, and ethical decision-making. In addition, emotional resilience and ethical judgement are linked in shaping caring, responsible people and students may observe this in Sara's interactions and decisions.

Bridging the Gap between Classic Literature and SEL Pedagogy

Narratives from classic literature, like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*, can captivate students and provide plenty of chances for social-emotional development (SEL). Moreover, teachers can learn from Sara Crewe's narrative, which is characterised by moral dilemmas and emotional hardships, on how to expose students to complicated SEL domains in a natural and accessible way. In addition, readers can also see the gradual growth of self-awareness and empathy via Sara's thoughts and interactions. In an effort to show her humility, Sara says, "*I was too proud to try and make friends*" (p. 61). In accordance with CASEL's (*CASEL'S SEL Framework: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.*, 2020) framework, this instance highlights the significance of being self-aware and growing from one's difficulties and challenges.

Sara exemplifies emotional resilience and self-control in *A Little Princess* when she uses her imagination to get herself through tough times, pretending she is a princess who can conquer any obstacle. This example reflects the findings of (Durlak et al., 2011), who argued that literature has the power to serve as a role model for resilient behaviors in the face of hardship. Even though she was

poor, Sara demonstrates extraordinary social awareness by choosing to share meals with someone less fortunate than herself. How compassion may direct action was also demonstrated by her choice to state, “*I am not starving*” (p. 95). This story can make students think about the following: “*Have you ever decided to help someone else even when you were struggling too?*” Students can comprehend social and emotional abilities such as empathy, justice, and compassion through the use of reflective questions such as these. In a safe and reflective environment, guided thinking enables individuals to express their personal values, identify emotional responses, and assess the ethical implications of decisions. Seeing how Sara overcomes adversity by imagining herself as a princess (p. 91) is one example of her resilience that can inspire children to reflect on how they handle difficulties in their own lives.

In addition, students develop a more inclusive and understanding worldview when they discuss readings with their classmates and listen to different points of view. These behaviours help shape students into people who are considerate, caring, and accountable, making them more equipped to contribute positively to a world that is more varied and interdependent. According to Jagers et al. (2019), these kinds of activities support what they call ‘integrated social-emotional and academic learning’, which in fact leads to greater insight and ethical awareness. Students’ personal development and interpersonal relationships are greatly impacted by this approach, which builds on the idea that incorporating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into literature instruction turns reading into a chance for self-reflection, community building, and ethical growth as narrative in literature often deal with complex emotions, ethical issues, and cultural diversity. Therefore, integrating literature and social and emotional learning has a transformative effect on students, helping them to develop traits like self-awareness, empathy, and moral compass.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has proven that the novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett serves as an effective medium for promoting social-emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings. Sara Crewe’s journey, in the story, demonstrates all five CASEL competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skill, responsible decision-making). Her emotional intelligence, kindness to people from different backgrounds, and strong sense of right and wrong set a good example for young readers to follow. The analysis done has shown that classic literature such as *A Little Princess* can be very useful in SEL lessons. This novel gives a deeper and more realistic view of emotions and relationships. It is expected that by following Sara’s story and her journey, students can understand their own feelings better and think more deeply about right and wrong decisions.

This research does not only emphasize the language development but also the emotional and social growth which will be obtained by integrating literary works in the classroom. By incorporating literature, it can serve as both a mirror and a window, which help students recognize their own characters and understand others’ perspectives toward something. Therefore, teachers can consider employing character-based literary analysis to support students’ holistic development.

Despite the valuable insights found, this study has some limitations. The analysis focused only on one novel and one character (Sara Crewe), without considering how students from diverse backgrounds might interpret the characters or the story. In addition, this novel’s relevance may vary among learners due to its historically and culturally different context from today’s classrooms. Future research could explore the comparison of both the classic and contemporary literary works to get more varied views.

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