"I Just Have Big Emotions, Okay?!": Exploring Emotional Literacy Through Picture Books

Amie L. Bigelow

Brigham Young University

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“I Just Have Big Emotions, Okay?!”: Exploring Emotional Literacy Through Picturebooks

Amie Bigelow

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Lynne M. Kganetso, Chair
Melissa A. Newberry
Corinna Peterken
Paul H. Ricks

Department of Teacher Education
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

“I Just Have Big Emotions, Okay?!”: Exploring Emotional Literacy Through Picturebooks

Amie Bigelow
Department of Teacher Education, BYU
Master of Arts

Many children in the United States struggle with mental health issues. The increase in mental health difficulties for children and adolescents has increased so greatly after the COVID-19 pandemic that it has been declared a national mental health emergency by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children’s Hospital Association (AAP et al., 2021). The burden to provide children with social-emotional learning, opportunities, access, and support often falls on teachers, and this burden can be particularly acute in rural communities, stemming from the limited availability of resources. Using picturebooks through means such as developmental bibliotherapy is one way for educators to address the increasing need to care for children’s social and emotional wellness in schools. This self-study explored my lived experience reading and connecting with award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks for emotional literacy content and considering the possibility of using them in interactive read-aloud sessions. Analyses revealed four overarching themes: (a) my personal journey, (b) discovering emotions in characters, (c) the importance of relationships, and (d) nurturing and recognizing positivity. These findings highlight important implications for supporting young children’s emotional literacy through interactive read-alouds, emphasizing the idea that teaching is a personal act, the potential for interactive read-alouds to provide hope or positivity, and the opportunities afforded to foster meaningful interactions with text through developmental bibliotherapy. This study may inform future work regarding teaching and supporting social-emotional learning concepts for young children, specifically applying insights related to pedagogy, teacher perspective, and student learning.

Keywords: developmental bibliotherapy, interactive read-aloud, emotional literacy, self-study, picturebooks
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never planned to go to graduate school. I was perfectly content in my own little world of home, classroom, and school. However, an early morning prompting set me on a path to personal and professional growth. Looking back on the past 2 years fills my heart with gratitude that my Heavenly Father provided a way for me to accomplish the things He asked me to do.

A simple thank you is not enough for Dr. Lynne Kganetso, who poured a tremendous amount of time and heart into this project. I will always be grateful for your kindness, patience, and willingness to share your knowledge and talents with me. I am also indebted to my critical friends, Dr. Paul Ricks and Dr. Melissa Newberry, who both recognized my self-doubt and provided the encouragement and confidence I needed at critical times. Your time, expertise and mentoring have meant the world to me. I also express gratitude to Dr. Corinna Peterken, who was instrumental in getting me off to a positive start with my thesis work and always shared just the right words of encouragement at the right time.

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Finally, I express gratitude and love for my family. Your encouragement sustained me throughout this whole experience. Thank you especially for loving me despite my “Gerald-ness”! The night before my first graduate class, I was debating whether I should even go. One of my boys said, “Mom, it’s just your anxiety. Go to school!” As soon as I named it, I could start to overcome it.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When one of my children was in kindergarten, he went through an emergency medical event that triggered a difficult battle with depression and anxiety. With an overabundance of big, heavy emotions that his little body and brain could not handle, family and school life became nearly impossible for him to manage. Amid his difficulty, I began my teaching career. My experiences as the mother of a child with mental health issues instantly shaped the type of teacher I wanted to be. I was determined to be the caring, emotionally responsive teacher I always hoped my son would have.

My teaching career has been both challenging and rewarding, but my resolve to be that caring teacher remains. However, I have felt powerless to help my child and the children in my classroom who battle emotional difficulties that impede their ability to learn and function in school. Classroom teachers are not trained to provide the social and emotional support many young learners need, but we still have responsibility for their social and emotional well-being (Heath et al., 2017). The gap between my desire to help and knowing how to support my students has been frustrating. This has led to a pattern of examining how my firsthand experiences have impacted my teaching career and motivation to seek knowledge and learning opportunities to help me be more responsive to my students’ social-emotional learning journeys.

Immordiono-Yang et al. (2019) emphasize that attending to social-emotional learning, social-emotional needs, and supportive social-emotional contexts benefits the whole child, resulting in social, emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits. Children and adults who are socially well, physically well, and emotionally self-regulated have been found to think and perform better (Immordiono-Yang et al., 2019). Despite the many social-emotional learning
programs prevalent in schools, children in the United States struggle with mental health. In 2023, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that one in six U.S. children aged 2–8 years (17.4%) had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. Additionally, the American Academy of Pediatrics et al. (AAP; 2021) declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health, stating that they have witnessed soaring rates of mental health difficulties in children because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These statistics emphasize the important and necessary work, described by Immordiono-Yang et al. (2019), in attending to students’ social-emotional experiences in educational settings. When barriers such as mental health stigma, cost, lack of awareness about mental health conditions and the need for treatment, or lack of resources prevent parents from seeking professional help for their children, the burden to help often falls on schools (Heath et al., 2017). Whether the causes are intentional or unintentional, schools tend to bear the responsibility to provide children with social-emotional learning, opportunities, access, and support.

This social-emotional support and teaching burden can be particularly acute in rural communities, stemming from a lack of resources and the stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment for children. While many believe that life is safer and healthier for children in rural areas, limitations in the availability, accessibility, and affordability of resources have made mental, emotional, and behavioral health in rural areas worse than in other places, leading Kelleher and Gardner (2017) to declare, “We have failed miserably the behavioral health system in rural areas” (p. 27). Additionally, a stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment is tied to the close-knit nature of rural communities. Families might be concerned about the lack of anonymity in small towns (Boydell et al., 2006). Parents may be less likely to seek treatment out
of fear that the community will see them as inadequate parents or that the child will be misjudged as incompetent or dangerous and treated unfairly (Blackstock et al., 2018).

Wilger (2015) observed, “In rural areas where mental health services are scarce and families face unique barriers to accessing care, schools play a significant role in providing or linking students and their families to mental health services” (p. 1). However, rural educators cite limited funding along with staff availability and retention as significant barriers to serving children with mental health struggles in rural schools (Lee et al., 2009). Due to these scarcities, the burden of caring for students often falls to classroom teachers.

Using picturebooks is one way for educators to address the increasing need to care for children’s social and emotional wellness in schools. Research has shown that practices such as bibliotherapy can be efficiently interwoven into the daily routine of school and should be a natural addition to the classroom curriculum (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). While bibliotherapy may be unfamiliar to classroom teachers, interactive read-aloud sessions have been effectively used in helping young children build foundational social-emotional skills (Britt et al., 2016; López & Friedman, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to consider the emotional literacy content and possible applications of picturebooks for a rural early childhood classroom.

When considering which picturebooks would have the potential for rich, engaging discussions about emotions, I considered content, accessibility, and availability. My collection of Mo Willems books came quickly to mind as these books are well-known and award-winning, well-liked by my students, and accessible in my rural community. Willems is a New York Times bestselling author and illustrator of picturebooks who has received three Caldecott Honor medals. His well-loved Elephant and Piggie early reader series has been awarded two Theodor Geisel Medals. Willems does not profess to write social-emotional learning content intentionally.
However, he does mention that his books might lend themselves to it, stating, “I never know what the book I’ve made ‘means.’ That’s my audience’s job. You, the reader, create meaning out of the story; I just set the table” (Willems, 2011). These picturebooks seem to provide a venue and create an opportunity for children to explore and learn about emotional literacy. Therefore, I plan to use these books to examine the emotional literacy content and understand my own experiences in identifying, connecting, and applying emotional literacy content for use in my own practice.

**Statement of Problem**

Many children in the United States are struggling with mental health issues, and this has increased so much after the COVID-19 pandemic that it has been declared a national mental health emergency (AAP et al., 2021; CDC, 2023). In rural communities and schools, there is a need for professional mental health resources to treat these children, but the availability of such resources is limited (Kelleher & Gardner, 2017; Wilger, 2015). Research has shown that teachers of young children are uniquely positioned to help develop vital social and emotional learning skills. However, they often need more resources or training to do so (Heath et al., 2017).

**Purpose Statement and Research Question**

The purpose of this self-study is to examine: (a) my own connections with the text, (b) my own experience in determining the social-emotional content within award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks, and (c) the possibilities of applying the texts in a read-aloud with my current first-grade students. As an early childhood educator in a rural setting and parent of a child who has experienced mental health issues, examining the use of picturebooks to teach social and emotional skills could provide insight and application to my own practice. These insights should help me think about using an accessible set of texts to build emotional literacy in
the classroom. Therefore, the research question guiding this study is, “What is the experience of a first-grade teacher working in a rural elementary school when examining picturebooks for possible instructional use in interactive read-alouds?”
CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Academy of Pediatrics et al., (2021) declared a national emergency regarding the mental health of children and adolescents. Along with calls for increased federal funding, these organizations recommended the implementation of school-based interventions and support. Hundreds of social-emotional initiatives and programs have been implemented in schools (Elswick, 2018), but teachers often feel ill-prepared and underqualified to address the social-emotional needs in their classrooms. These challenges are particularly felt in rural communities where effective mental health resources for children and adolescents are limited. One way for teachers to address social-emotional learning involves interactive read-alouds of picturebooks, and many award-winning picturebooks are accessible and available for such work. This study draws from Hemmeter et al.’s (2021) notion of emotional literacy which includes teaching children the names of emotions, enabling them to identify and label how they are feeling. Joseph et al. (2005) add to this notion, defining emotional literacy as the ability to “recognize, label and understand feelings in oneself and others” (p. 20).

This study draws on research about social-emotional learning and literacy and the use of picturebooks to help young children increase their emotional literacy skills. First, I will define emotional literacy and discuss its impact on the development of young children. Then, I will explore the concept of developmental bibliotherapy, its use to enhance children’s learning, and its potential for enriching children’s emotional literacy. Next, I will share information about interactive read-aloud, a standard classroom practice in early childhood classrooms that can be utilized in developmental bibliotherapy (Brock, 2021). Finally, I will discuss the potential of
picturebooks to help children strengthen their emotional literacy.

**Emotional Literacy**

Childhood is a time when emotions “mark the peaks and valleys of daily life” and are readily observable in a range from “delightful squeals of joy to angry outbursts” (Harper, 2016, p. 80). Children experience a variety of emotions throughout their daily lives, and these emotions are complex, changing, and powerful. A crucial task for the adults who teach and guide young children is to help them develop emotional literacy, which is the ability to “recognize, label, and understand feelings in oneself and others” (Joseph et al., 2005, p. 20).

The foundation of emotional literacy includes knowing the names of many emotions, enabling children to identify and label how they are feeling (Hemmeter et al., 2021). Emotional literacy skills develop from childhood to adulthood through interactions with families, teachers, and peers (Zinsser et al., 2018). As these skills develop, children benefit in many ways. Children can learn emotional literacy from adults, and educators in particular. An essential first task requires teachers to ensure the classroom environment reflects the children, their families, and their communities and is not overly scheduled or rigid (Figueroa-Sánchez, 2008; Hemmeter et al., 2021).

The development of emotional literacy has various benefits for young children, especially as they learn to identify their own emotions. Being able to name and label how they feel helps children communicate their emotions and enables them to regulate difficult emotions rather than act out in harmful ways (Hemmeter et al., 2021). Emotional literacy is essential in helping children regulate their emotions, develop empathy, and establish positive relationships with others (Hyson, 2004). Bruce (2010) lists other benefits for children, such as the awareness and understanding of their own and others’ emotions, which leads to greater confidence, creativity,
independence, resilience, and engagement in learning activities.

**Developmental Bibliotherapy**

McMillen (2006) defines *bibliotherapy* simply as “helping through books” (p. 14) and emphasizes that teachers, counselors, therapists, librarians, psychologists, and other health professionals have used it with people of all ages for a myriad of different issues and problems. Samuel Crothers first used the term bibliotherapy in 1916, but using stories to teach important lessons is consistent across all cultures and times (Heath et al., 2017). A specific type of bibliotherapy, developmental bibliotherapy, is generally used in classrooms when teachers want to help children with normal stages of development or educate them about their feelings, behaviors, and attitudes (McMillen, 2006). The practice of developmental bibliotherapy, which involves using picturebooks to teach basic social and emotional skills, is a natural extension of teachers’ existing skills (Heath et al., 2017). This practice is noninvasive and thus can be used in familiar settings such as a classroom or library, where teachers or librarians can help students understand their emotions, thus reducing the anxiety, depression, and isolation that many students feel (Cook et al., 2006).

Implementing developmental bibliotherapy involves several steps. Initial work involves building a relationship of trust with the child, identifying other school personnel such as counselors or social workers who could assist the child, and involving the child’s parents or guardians (Prater et al., 2006). Next, teachers carefully select books that relate to a problem the child is dealing with, also ensuring that the books are sensitive to a child’s developmental and emotional needs (Pardeck, 1995). Then, the teacher reads the book with the children, letting them know it was carefully selected to address a particular problem (Prater et al., 2006). Because a single reading of a particular book is insufficient to help children make changes in their lives,
teachers then plan and involve children in follow-up activities that are essential in helping children make personal applications to their own lives (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). Follow-up activities, such as creative writing, art, discussion, and role-playing, are especially beneficial (Pardeck, 1995).

A developmental bibliotherapy intervention aims to help children pass through three vital stages: (a) identification, (b) catharsis, and (c) insight (Brock, 2021). As teachers present books to children, they should help them see similarities between themselves and the book’s characters, a phase referred to in bibliotherapy research as identification (Pardeck, 1995). Identification occurs as children connect with book characters and connect to their own experiences, discovering that they are not alone (Brock, 2021). Planning and implementing follow-up activities are essential in the developmental bibliotherapy process. Engaging in these activities leads children to undergo the next phase, catharsis, which is a release of tension that occurs as students relate to the actions and emotions of book characters. Finally, follow-up activities can lead children to experience insight or expanded knowledge about themselves, enabling them to make positive changes (Brock, 2021). Effective planning enables teachers to lead students through identification, catharsis, and insight, allowing them to benefit from the bibliotherapy sessions.

Research on the effectiveness of developmental bibliotherapy is limited, but it has been used successfully by classroom teachers in some studies (e.g., Chai, 2011; Elley, 2014; Fettig et al., 2018). In fact, Brock (2021) urges teachers to incorporate bibliotherapy into language arts instruction to support children’s mental health at school. Chai (2011) found that kindergarten and first-grade students who received bibliotherapy sessions from classroom teachers in school settings showed significantly higher use of social problem-solving skills than students in a
control group. In another study, Elley (2014) used bibliotherapy in her third-grade classroom, where children received bibliotherapy sessions over the space of 6 weeks. The literature and book discussions seemed to improve students’ social skills and their ability to participate in self-reflection, and this seemed to lead to a more positive classroom atmosphere. Fettig et al. (2018) also found that using shared group reading of picturebooks with social-emotional learning content in an after-school group led to growth in children’s communication skills and self-regulation.

While there is limited empirical evidence of bibliotherapy’s effectiveness in classrooms, research has been done with children by mental health professionals (e.g., Newman, 2015; Rapee et al., 2006). Newman (2015) used bibliotherapy as an intervention for aggressive elementary-aged children in a residential treatment center. Despite a small sample size ($n = 6$), participants and therapists deemed the sessions enjoyable, and a decrease in aggressive behavior was observed in four of the six participants.

In another study, researchers explored the effectiveness of using bibliotherapy to relieve childhood anxiety by placing a group of school children, ages 6 through 12, into three groups: one group participated in a therapist-led treatment called Cool Kids; one bibliotherapy group led by parents; and one wait-list group of children who were asked to wait 3 months before beginning any treatment (Rapee et al., 2006). The bibliotherapy and therapist groups showed a more significant decrease in anxiety behavior than the wait-list group. However, participants in the therapist-led group reported a significantly greater decrease in anxiety behaviors than the parent-led bibliotherapy groups. These results led to recommendations of bibliotherapy as an interim treatment, particularly when waiting for more intensive therapy provided by the mental health professional.


**Interactive Read-Aloud**

Interactive read-aloud is an instructional practice where a teacher reads a text to students, and students participate in the read-aloud, moving from a passive to an active role (Barrentine, 1996). Teachers read stories interactively, encouraging their students to interact verbally with peers, the text, and the teacher. Further, teachers ask questions throughout the reading, and the questions “enhance meaning, construction, and also show how one makes sense of the text” while students offer “spontaneous comments as the story unfolds” (Barrentine, 1996, p. 36). A teacher who engages students in interactive read-aloud sessions does not abandon authority but shares it with the children (Smolkin & Donovan, 2002) because sharing ideas and authority is central to implementing interactive read-aloud in the classroom.

Fisher et al. (2004) identifies seven components in the standard practices of interactive read-alouds. First, a book should be selected that is appropriate to students’ interests and matches their developmental, emotional, and social levels. Second, the teacher should preview and practice selections, enabling them to plan for opportunities to question students, model fluency, and select vocabulary for discussion. Third, a clear purpose for the read-aloud is established. The fourth component involves teachers modeling fluent oral reading as they read the text. The fifth component is using animation and expression to engage students in the read-aloud. Sixth, teachers stop periodically and thoughtfully question students to focus on the specifics of the text. Seventh, connections are made to independent reading and writing.

During effective interactive read-alouds, teachers use their voices to engage student participation. One major call from Fisher et al. (2004) focused on teachers being more engaged in the preview and practice reading, preparing them to model fluent reading to their students. Teachers must also become good orators so that they can “tell the story” as they read it and be
able to read with clarity and expression, using “natural voice modulation to illustrate key points and changes in emotions” so students can visualize the story and develop personal responses to the text (p. 15). This attention to the read-aloud quality sets a foundation for increased student engagement with intentional and stimulating discussions, enhancing both thinking and talking about books with teachers and peers.

Interactive read-aloud sessions provide academic benefits to children. Children draw from their own lived experiences to participate and contribute to shared knowledge while reading the text (Wiseman, 2010). Further, interactive read-aloud can promote complex thinking and learning as students create their own understandings. Lennox (2013) found a positive influence on children’s overall academic achievement, reading skills, and interest in literacy. Oral language was also enhanced through exposure to vocabulary and grammatical structures. Read-alouds also enhance children’s comprehension, vocabulary, and meaning-making (Leung, 2008), providing a venue for different perspectives.

**Using Interactive Read-Alouds to Support Specific Students**

Interactive read-alouds have been used with a variety of different groups to support specific students (e.g., Labadie et al., 2013; López & Friedman, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2016). During interactive read-aloud sessions, books can serve as the windows, mirrors, and doors (Bishop, 1990) that give children a broader view of the world and people around them. This also enables children to learn more about themselves. Labadie et al. (2013) conducted a classroom study where culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse kindergartners engaged in interactive read-aloud sessions, using books covering social class issues in various settings and highlighting characters of many races, genders, and cultures. Students “made deep and meaningful intertextual connections between books in their discussions, writing, and drawing”
Many students used their background experiences to make solid and personal connections to the stories while inferring characters’ perspectives in situations beyond their lived experiences. Interactive read-alouds enabled children to connect to their own lived experiences and the world around them.

Interactive read-alouds have also been used in classrooms to highlight children with disabilities. In another study, Wilkins et al. (2016) sought to determine how third- and fourth-grade students responded to interactive read-aloud sessions using 12 books with accurate portrayals of characters with disabilities. Three groups of students from different elementary schools participated in four interactive read-aloud experiences. Participants seemed to extend their knowledge and develop more curiosity about people with disabilities, particularly if the students had some prior knowledge about the disability (Wilkins et al., 2016). This trend was enhanced if the disability was overt (e.g., a character using a cane or reading with Braille) instead of a less overt physical disability like autism. Additionally, participating students seemed to demonstrate more empathy toward the characters within the story.

Interactive read-alouds have also seemed to help children foster social-emotional learning skills. López and Friedman (2019) conducted a case study in a second-grade classroom implementing interactive read-aloud sessions of the book *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012). Students participated in read-alouds each day after lunch for 15 to 20 minutes. The teacher used previously prepared questions to help students consider their feelings and choices. After each read-aloud session, students would respond by drawing or writing about their reactions to the reading in a notebook. López and Friedman (2019) included the teacher in the analyses of lesson plans, student responses, and journals; interviews were also conducted with the students. The read-alouds seemed to foster a greater sense of community, and children began to show
increased empathy toward their peers (López & Friedman, 2019). As the readings progressed, the students started to speak out against bullying and social injustice, themes found in the text. Children seemed to connect with their feelings and experiences as well as those of others. This study, along with others detailed above, highlights the power of interactive read-aloud sessions to teach specific content to specific students.

**Picturebooks**

Picturebooks are commonly found in early elementary school classrooms and are essential to the language arts curriculum. In fact, Jalongo (2004) explains, “Teachers who share quality picturebooks with young children are promoting literacy in the fullest sense of the word. For this reason, exemplary early childhood educators have always made high-quality children’s picturebooks a central part of their curriculum” (p. 1). Further, she emphasizes that this is not limited to academic learning, adding that experiences with picturebooks can help young children develop “socially, personally, intellectually, culturally, and aesthetically” while also enabling children to “explore interpersonal relationships and human motives” (p. 8). Experiences with picturebooks nudge children towards self-acceptance while modeling how to cope with big emotions effectively (Jalongo, 2004).

Research has posited why picturebooks, in particular, affect young children’s emotional literacy (e.g., Harper, 2016; Nikolajeva, 2013). Harper (2016) attributes this to how picturebooks contain authentic characters who face realistic problems, validating children’s emotions while showing ways to manage them. This identification with characters in picturebooks can be linked directly to developmental bibliotherapy (Brock, 2021), which helps young children identify with the characters in books. This identification with characters occurs because young children have limited life experience with emotions, and picturebooks offer children a “vicarious emotional
experience” (Nikolajeva, 2013, p. 250). Additionally, the images in picturebooks, including characters’ facial expressions, body movements, and spatial positions, as well as design elements such as colors, motion lines, and thought balloons, help young children understand people’s emotions in real life (Nikolajeva, 2013, p. 251). As teachers gain a more in-depth knowledge of how picturebooks contribute to emotional literacy, they can deliberately use this powerful tool in their classrooms.

Picturebooks have also been found to be an effective tool in helping children develop a better understanding of their emotions and the emotions of others (McGrath, 2022). This, in turn, enables them to explore strong emotions safely. In one study, a random sample of students participated in read-aloud sessions involving a reading of the text, giving the children time to look at illustrations and prompting students with open, creative questions (McGrath, 2022). The children also discussed the books freely. Children seemed to develop a larger and more complex emotional vocabulary in the later sessions, using the stories as jumping-off points to discuss their emotions. A primary focus of the study was also how the read-aloud sessions helped students understand and show empathy in response to other children displaying emotionally challenging behavior. The stories and discussions seemed to give students strategies for dealing with emotions.

**Conclusion**

Interactive read-alouds may be one way teachers can provide developmental bibliotherapy to nurture students’ ability to name and understand their emotions. Limited empirical research shows the effectiveness of promoting emotional literacy with picturebooks, especially with young children. However, research shows the power of books to build a sense of community, encourage prosocial behavior, encourage empathy, and promote social-emotional development.
CHAPTER 3

Methods

This self-study aimed to explore my experience analyzing the emotional literacy content in award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks and considering how I might use them to nurture emotional literacy with my first-grade students. I teach students who struggle to label and manage their emotions, yet my rural school offers little in terms of mental health resources. This research systematically chronicled my experience analyzing and connecting with the texts and determining how I could teach this content to my students. Therefore, the research question that guided this study is: “What is the experience of a first-grade teacher working in a rural elementary school when examining picturebooks for possible instructional use in interactive read-alouds?”

Self-Study Methodology

Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) describe self-study methodology as “…the study of one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas as well as the ‘not self’. ... Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known and ideas considered” (p. 236). Self-study practitioners come from various theoretical positions and study various topics (Samaras, 2011). However, teacher educators most often use self-study to better understand themselves, their pedagogy, learning, teaching, and how knowledge develops in relation to these factors (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Self-study researchers seek to better understand and improve their practice and its context through intentional and systematic study (Vanasse & Keltchermans, 2015).

Self-study research not only has a well-established purpose of deepening one’s understanding to improve practice, but it also has a standard set of characteristics. LaBoskey (2004) identifies five characteristics of self-study. First, it is self-initiated and self-focused.
Second, self-study aims to improve one’s teaching practice, ultimately transforming students’ lives and our own social and institutional contexts. The third defining characteristic of self-study research is the interactive nature of the research process. Throughout the study, critical friends ask questions, share different perspectives, and offer constructive criticism. Fourth, the methodology is generally qualitative in nature and often combines different methods. The fifth characteristic is validity, confirmed as researchers prove their trustworthiness in the research community. These five characteristics set self-study apart from reflective practice and other similar research methodologies (LaBoskey, 2004).

According to Pithouse-Morgan (2022), a crucial component of self-study is revealing, studying, improving, and learning from one’s lived experiences. Therefore, self-study is an appropriate research method for this work because I will draw on my lived experiences as a rural early childhood educator and parent to improve my own practice of sharing picturebooks with my students, especially in ways that I hope will help them develop crucial and life-changing emotional literacy skills.

Statement of Positionality

I am the participant researcher in this self-study. I identify as a Caucasian woman, a mother, a wife, and a teacher. I grew up and received my K–12 education in three different rural towns in a southwestern state of the United States. After I graduated from high school, I chose to attend a private university in a neighboring state. I am a first-generation college student. Additionally, I am the first female on both sides of my extended family to have the opportunity to attend college. This was possible through financial sacrifices from my parents and an academic scholarship I worked hard to earn and maintain throughout my time at the university. The initial adjustment from attending a small, rural high school to attending a large university in
a city was difficult. However, I loved meeting and learning from people from diverse places and backgrounds and appreciated the many social and cultural opportunities for learning and growth.

After earning our bachelor’s degrees, my husband and I moved with our young family back to the small town where we had both grown up. We wanted to raise our children in a rural setting, close to family and with a slower-paced lifestyle, away from the noise and bustle of a larger city. I began teaching full-time when the youngest of my five children started full-day kindergarten. I enjoyed teaching in a rural school, especially being part of a tight-knit community where I was often well-acquainted with my students and their families inside and outside of the school setting.

However, as my oldest children began attending high school, I began to feel limitations in this rural lifestyle. Our rural setting lacked the educational opportunities I wanted for my children. The high school offered few electives and no Advanced Placement courses. Budget cuts often resulted in reduced classes for advanced students and performing arts programs. As a kindergarten teacher, I personally experienced such budget cuts when our district chose to eliminate the full-day kindergarten program and move to a half-day schedule. Our town’s rural location was another concern. We lived 4 hours from the nearest metropolitan area, and this became problematic when one of my children needed specialized medical care and mental health assistance that was not available where we lived.

As a result, we decided to accept employment in another state, still in a rural town, but within 10 miles of a well-regarded junior college and within 75 miles of the nearest city. The school district was better situated financially and fulfilled my hopes for more educational
opportunities for my children. However, we found that this school district and community also lacked the mental health resources our child needed.

I have primarily taught kindergarten and first grade in my 15-year teaching career. As a mother of a child who traversed his own difficult social-emotional journey both within and outside of school, I have strived to be aware and understanding of the social and emotional struggles of my students. I have sympathized with and counseled many parents, but I always wished I had more knowledge and ability to help them. Fortunately, our move to another state allowed me to attend graduate school at the same private university where I received my undergraduate degree. This opportunity has been challenging but worthwhile. Many of my courses and readings have enriched my knowledge of teaching, learning, the need for equity in education for all children, and how teachers can meet students’ social and emotional needs. Early in my program, I decided to make this the focus of my study and research.

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) state, “Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does” (p. 13). As the researcher and participant in this study, I recognize that my lived experiences (e.g., as a mother, teacher, member of my rural community, and advocate for children with mental health issues) will influence how I carry out this study and make sense of the data. However, these same experiences will also enable me to find unique connections and insights throughout the study.

**Teaching Context**

I am a first-grade teacher at a rural elementary school in the Intermountain West region of the United States. My school is in a small community with a population of 3,429 people. The town is just over 80 miles away from the nearest urban area. The median household income is $49,167, and 7.4% of the population lives below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau,
n.d.). Situated in this context, my elementary school serves 395 students from preschool to fifth grade with three classes in each grade level K–5. Fifty-two percent of the students are economically disadvantaged, 22% have disabilities, and 2% are English Language Learners. The school population is 87% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 3% Multi-Racial, and 2% Pacific Islander, Black, Asian, or Native American (Utah State Board of Education, 2022). Because I teach in a rural, close-knit community, I am well-acquainted with many of the students and their families. The small size of my school also makes me aware of the social and emotional difficulties of various students across grade levels.

My current class consists of 20 first-graders, all Caucasian children who speak English as their first language. Two students are classified as developmentally delayed and receive special education services for a brief time each day in a special education resource room. Over half of my students qualify for the free/reduced lunch program. Beginning of the year assessments show that over half of the students will need intensive academic instruction to meet grade-level requirements in both reading and math by the end of the school year. Most of the children in my current class display difficulties in social and emotional skills, several of them severe enough to create daily frequent interruptions in learning academic content. My school does have a few resources to help these children, but past experience shows that I am the one responsible for meeting the social and emotional needs of my students.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, my school administration has implemented several resources to help children with social-emotional difficulties. A small room in the school building hosts a wellness room where children can take a break if they feel anxious, overwhelmed, or unable to focus on learning tasks. We also have a skills room for students struggling with classroom or school-wide rules and procedures. Our district employs a counselor who splits time
between two elementary schools. She spends 6 days each month at our school and is considered a Tier 1 mental health resource, visiting classrooms monthly to share a message focused on a specific social-emotional skill. Our district also employs two mental health coordinators. One of these coordinators occasionally spends time with children who need behavioral or emotional support on our campus. She can also refer children to a local counseling center, but there are not enough therapists there to meet our community’s needs. Recently, our district purchased an online counseling/parenting resource which is available to parents free of charge. However, some families needing this service cannot access the internet in their homes, and many choose not to use it.

**Award-Winning Mo Willems Picturebooks**

Mo Willems is an award-winning children’s book author and illustrator. Some of his most popular picturebooks include the Pigeon, Knuffle Bunny, and Elephant & Piggie series. His online biography (Mo Willems Workshop, 2024) states that he has been awarded three Caldecott Honors as well as two Theodor Geisel Medals and five Geisel Honors for books in his Elephant & Piggie series. The engaging nature of Willem’s books, built through humor, simple drawings, and friendly characters who draw the reader into their worlds, make them popular with children and adults alike. Table A1 lists the 10 award-winning books that will be used for the content analysis portion of this study. These award-winning books are readily accessible, as they are commonly found in school classrooms, libraries, and homes.

When choosing high-quality children’s literature for the classroom, teachers often turn to award-winning books. The Caldecott Medal, presented by the American Library Association (ALA), was established in 1937 and is awarded to the most distinguished picture book published by an American author the previous year. To be recognized as a Caldecott or Caldecott honor
book, a text must display excellence in artistic technique, appropriateness of illustrations, and high caliber representation of theme, setting, plot, mood, or information (Association for Library Service to Children, 2024a). Three of Willems’ books have been awarded the Caldecott Honor Medal: Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus (2003), Knuffle bunny: A Cautionary Tale (2004), and Knuffle bunny, Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity (2007). Like all Caldecott winners, these books engage readers with their excellence in storytelling and illustrations.

The ALA also presents the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished book for beginning readers published in the preceding year. According to the Association for Library Service to Children (2024b), Geisel Award winners are recognized for both artistic and literary achievement and their ability to engage children in reading through creativity and imagination. This focus on creative and engaging books for young learners makes them especially interesting to early childhood educators. Willems has been awarded a Geisel Medal twice, for There is a Bird on Your Head (2007b) and Waiting is Not Easy (2014). Five additional books from his Elephant and Piggie series have received the Geisel Honor Award.

Data Collection

As mentioned previously, self-study research can involve a variety and/or combination of research methods (LaBoskey, 2004). This study included a process involving content analyses of picturebooks (Hoffman et al., 2011) and the creation of reflective memos (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). In content analyses of picturebooks, researchers analyze the presence of words and concepts, using the relationships between them to form inferences about texts, authors, audiences, and the cultures and periods these are a part of (Hoffman et al., 2011). According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), “research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual
meaning of the text” (p. 1278), with the goal of providing knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The concurrent creation of reflective memos gave me a space to think about each aspect of my research question as I recorded ideas about the picture book content and considered how I related to the readings (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Saldaña (2016) writes that the process of creating memos during data collection also helps with “future directions, unanswered questions, frustrations with analysis, [and] insightful connections” (p. 45). The combination of content analysis of picturebooks and reflective memos provided important data relating to my research question.

Data was collected through a series of three readings and the writing of corresponding reflective memos for each of the 10 award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks. Table A2 outlines the research design including the data sources, data collection, and data analysis. The three readings each had different focus: (a) personal insights/connections, (b) analytic reading focused on emotional literacy content, and (c) potential use in an interactive read-aloud session. Multiple readings enabled me to focus on each specific aspect of my research question and created space to ask higher-level questions about the events and content in Willem’s simple picturebooks. I examined each book from cover to cover, including illustrations and text. Following each focused reading of the picture book, I wrote a portion of a reflective memo that included my insights from each specific area.

After analyzing the first four books, I shared my findings with a professor in my graduate school program who is an expert in children’s literature and content analyses of picturebooks. We discussed my work, thoughts, and questions. This critical conversation helped foster greater trustworthiness in my analyses. Additionally, I met with a second critical friend who is another professor from my graduate program and an expert in self-study and social-emotional learning.
We discussed the memos from the first three books to again inform my data collection. A critical piece of this conversation was to refocus the study on my experiences with the texts and my personal teaching experience. The readings and memos are described in more detail below.

**Reading 1: Personal Insights/Connections**

First, I read each book aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1978; Short, 2019), focusing on what I am living through or have lived through in relation to the text itself. The purpose of this reading was to think about specific insights and/or connections to my own lived experience. This might have been in connection to what was happening in the text itself, the characters, the settings, and/or other elements. In addition, I considered text elements such as “the sounds of words, their rhythmic repetitions, and variations … inner tensions, sensations, feelings, and associations accompanying images and ideas” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 124). Any of the impressions and/or connections from this reading, described by Rosenblatt as transactions, were recorded on a sticky note and placed directly onto the corresponding pages of the text.

**Reading 2: Emotional Literacy Content**

The second reading focused on emotional literacy content, defined by Joseph et al., (2005) as the ability to “recognize, label, and understand feelings in one’s self and others” (p. 20). The purpose of this study was to consider how I could nurture my student’s emotional literacy. Therefore, I analyzed characters’ facial expressions, shape, size, body language, and the author/illustrator’s use of visual elements such as line, color, texture, and shape to consider how these elements identify, express, understand, and regulate six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise (Ekman, 1992). Again, a different colored sticky note was used to record each finding and placed directly onto the book’s pages.

**Reading 3: Interactive Read-Aloud**
The third reading of each book allowed me to consider how I might use the book in an interactive read-aloud with my first-grade students. Before reading each book, I revisited the seven standard interactive read-aloud components described by Fisher et al. (2004). I also considered the current needs of the students in my first-grade class. During this reading, I determined where I might pause to ask a question or how I might emphasize specific words. Specific vocabulary was also examined to determine what the children might need to be more familiar with and how I might explain the meanings of those words. Additionally, I created follow-up activities for my students. Again, these impressions were jotted on sticky notes of a different color than the previous two readings and placed directly on the corresponding pages of the text.

**Memos**

After completing each specific and focused reading of the text, I recorded part of a reflective memo on a template in a Google document (See Table A3). These reflective memos were written informally. My research question was posted at the top of each memo, followed by three boxes. In these boxes, I reflected on each of the three foci from the readings (connections to lived experience, emotional literacy content, and interactive read-aloud possibilities). The reflective memo aimed to promote and record more deep and critical thinking about the data collected during the picture book readings. It also helped me connect each reading to my lived experience as I sought ways to improve my practice and pedagogy.

**Data Analysis**

After the collection procedures described above, data was examined through a process of thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis enables a researcher to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report on themes found within a data set, then generate initial
codes and search for themes that capture important ideas related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves generating initial codes and searching for themes that capture important ideas related to the research question. As analysis continues, themes are refined, defined, and named (Nowell et al., 2017). Throughout the thematic analysis process, trustworthiness is established as researchers carefully document each step of the analytic process.

Readings

First, I looked for patterns within each book. After labeling each sticky note with the book title and page number, I removed the sticky notes from the text and placed them on a large table. Then, I began to group similar ideas and place them on a large whiteboard in my office. I recorded the book title at the top of the whiteboard and continued to sort the sticky notes into common ideas. Then I gave each group a label such as “meltdowns,” “named emotions,” or “relationships.” After placing all the sticky notes on the whiteboard, I took a photograph to document my initial thoughts. These photographs later served as a type of visual tool that was useful in helping me make sense of the data collected (Samaras, 2011).

Memos

Next, I looked for patterns and themes within all 10 memos. I printed each memo and then read each one with a different focus. First, I highlighted content relating to personal connections and used highlighters (correlating to the three foci in my sticky notes) to search for patterns. After a meeting with the two professors from my thesis committee who served as critical friends throughout the study, I grouped common ideas (codes) together in a Google document outline. This enabled me to see visually which ideas would matter most to my research question.
**Integrated Analysis**

After the analyses of the picture book readings and reflective memos, I conducted an integrated analysis to look across all the data for overall patterns and themes related to my experience examining and thinking about these award-winning texts. This process involved an interactive examination of all artifacts (content analysis data and memos) using 11 codes. From these 11 codes (see Table A4), four overarching themes emerged. I then reviewed the artifacts a final time, ensuring that data to support each theme was represented. These four themes represented the overall story (Nowell et al., 2017) of my data set in answering my research question.

Again, the purpose of these analyses and this study was to draw from my own lived experience examining these texts for emotional literacy to inform my practice using interactive read-alouds within my first-grade classroom. I wanted to discover precisely how Mo Willems’s award-winning picturebooks could serve as accessible resources for teachers and students in attending to young students’ emotional needs. These findings informed my own perspective and may add to the limited body of literature surrounding the use of picturebooks to meet emotional literacy needs.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

Elementary schools are often required to play a significant role in providing emotional and behavioral support to students who struggle with mental health issues. This is particularly true in rural schools, where resources are limited, and the burden and opportunity to help children falls to the classroom teacher. This study examined my lived experience reading, analyzing, and considering the application of award-winning picturebooks to foster emotional literacy in my first-grade rural elementary classroom. I used content analysis and self-study methodologies to examine 10 award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks—specifically seeking personal connections, emotional literacy content, and potential for use in interactive read-aloud sessions.

Analyses resulted in four overarching themes: (a) my personal journey b) discovering emotions in characters (c) the importance of relationships, and (d) nurturing and recognizing positivity. Each of these themes will be described in more detail below.

My Personal Journey

Throughout this study, I realized that reading about a pigeon, a bunny, an elephant, and a pig was helping me come to a much-needed, grounded space amid a challenging 2023–2024 school year. I used self-study memos to examine how characters and situations in the texts related to my life and career, recognizing my emotions as I related to the characters and their emotions. This study led to growth and improvement in my own emotional literacy skills, my ability to provide intentionally meaningful read-aloud experiences, and the support I can provide for my students.

Nurturing My Own Emotional Literacy
This study centered on how to build emotional literacy in my students, but I quickly realized that I needed to improve my own ability to recognize, name, and understand the characters’ emotions in the texts. I began my series of readings for data collection with *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2003). As I endeavored to name various emotions the Pigeon was experiencing during the reading, I could describe what was happening to him. I even felt like I could recall experiencing that emotion myself.

Nevertheless, providing a label for most of the emotions was difficult for me. I could give the actual name of an emotion in 12 specific instances in my book analysis. Still, in 24 other instances, I could only describe what I saw in the artwork or describe what the Pigeon was experiencing. I knew I needed more variations in and understanding of names for more emotions (Hemmeter et al., 2021). This was disheartening, as I realized I might be unable to teach my students a skill I did not possess.

It was also disheartening to consider how my inability to name my emotions may have impacted how I have managed them throughout my life. I have never been good at expressing my emotions, preferring to bottle them up to avoid inconveniencing my family, friends, or coworkers. I did not want to experience difficult emotions, so I intentionally avoided confrontations or situations that might bring guilt or shame. Many times, I even wished my emotions away. For most of my life, I have been like Trixie in the Knuffle Bunny books, unable to communicate my needs and emotions to my loved ones. Participation in this study helped me realize the importance of increasing my own emotional vocabulary. I learned that naming and experiencing my emotions and considering their root causes has removed much of the power that bottled-up emotions have held over me for much of my life. This reiterated to me how this practice might benefit my young students.
An experience with a student also showed me the power of naming emotions. This child was experiencing separation anxiety, which made coming to school each morning traumatic for him and his mom. His feelings were real and terrifying to him. This student and I were already well-acquainted before school started, so this situation was unexpected. Because I was learning about the power of naming emotions, I began to draw a monster for him every morning that we labeled anxiety. He learned to enjoy drawing mustaches or silly hair on the monster. We also pounded the monster or wadded it up into a ball. He began to see that it was ok to feel scared and that he was strong enough to overcome it. Naming the emotion was an essential step in helping ease the anxiety that was preventing him from coming to school with confidence.

**Meaningful Read-Aloud Experiences.**

Another area of personal growth found in my analyses centered on my ability to provide students with meaningful read-aloud experiences. While working with the student mentioned previously, who continued to struggle with coming to school and separating from his mom, I had the idea to read *The Kissing Hand* (Penn, 1998). Surely, this story of a little raccoon who overcomes his fear of leaving his mother would solve my student’s problem. We read the book together as a class, and he smiled and listened attentively. However, he returned to feeling anxious as soon as the story was over. I believed that books could help students, but I now know I lacked the knowledge and ability to prepare a purposeful interactive read-aloud experience for my students.

Part of my analysis for each book in this study involved creating an interactive read-aloud plan inspired by Fisher et al.’s (2004) research. I considered how to use animation and expression to help relay the emotional literacy content of the Willems books to my students. I considered which emotions were found in each book and learned about the importance of follow-up activities in both bibliotherapy and interactive read-aloud sessions. This led me to plan
purposeful experiences to help my students recognize and label emotions related to the characters. The hope is that they will consider the lessons learned long after the completion of reading the book. My learning and growth about emotions and bibliotherapy seemed to improve my ability to plan meaningful interactive reading times with my students.

**Supporting Students**

The 2023–2024 school year was one of the most challenging of my career. I began the year confident that I could effectively meet the needs of many struggling students, but by winter break, I felt consumed by feelings of apathy and defeat. I wholeheartedly related to the picture in Figure 1 of Gerald in *I Broke My Trunk!* (Willems, 2011), as he tries with all his might to hold a hippopotamus, two rhinos, and a piano on his trunk. Like Gerald, I chose to carry heavy things in my life, such as a rewarding but demanding career, graduate school, and my family’s needs. All of it was important to me and needed to be balanced. I also felt weighed down by my perception that I carried the burden of my students’ social and emotional needs alone, believing that an effective teacher should be strong enough to do so.

**Figure 1**

*A Heavy Load*

*Note. Willems, Mo. (2011). I Broke My Trunk! (M. Willems, Illus.). Hyperion Books for*
As I continued with my data collection, I saw in the book characters examples of the ways I could improve my ability to support my students. I knew that my apathy was not improving the classroom situation, and the books served as a wake-up call to support my students emotionally and intentionally. The Pigeon reminded me to regulate my emotions before they explode and to keep dreaming in the face of disappointment. The Knuffle Bunny books showed me that when students cannot communicate their needs and emotions, those things might manifest in unpleasant ways. Even though providing help might feel inconvenient to me, it is essential to build trusting relationships with my students. Elephant and Piggie helped me see that I needed to put big problems in perspective and acknowledge the emotional pain behind some of my students’ outbursts and angry feelings. I felt encouraged as I realized that sometimes ruined plans or surprises can lead to great adventures and that children desperately need the happiness and humor in picturebooks to help them cope with the world in which they live. These simple stories have turned a challenging year into one of growth and possibility.

**Discovering Emotions in Characters**

The characters within Willems’ books provide examples for readers to connect to and learn from as the books are read. I found the examples powerful not only in my own readings but also while thinking of reading the books with my first-grade students. Analyses highlighted examples of how I grew in my ability to recognize, name, and manage emotions, how I discovered the ways characters display both simple and complex emotions in a wide range of contexts, and how I am affected by the emotions of students in my classroom.

**Growing in my Ability to Name and Manage Emotions**

As previously mentioned, I noticed a change in my ability to name and recognize
emotions through the experience of reading the texts throughout my study. Our school counselor introduced an emotion wheel to us in a faculty meeting, and I wanted to know if it could help me give names to the emotions I recognized in the books. This led me to use Google to find an emotion wheel. Though many are available, I chose a simple, child-friendly wheel (see Figure 2) that featured the six basic emotions central to my study and then branched out to more complex emotional states.

Figure 2

Emotion Wheel

![Emotion Wheel Image]


With the names of emotions in view, I grew more adept at labeling the character’s emotions, finding examples of sadness, fear, anger, surprise, happiness, and disgust in each of the 10 picturebooks. As I considered what the character was feeling and identified a primary
emotion to match, I could then use the wheel to see if a more complex emotion was appropriate. Complex emotions such as anxiety, despair, disappointment, loneliness, joyfulness, excitement, and confusion were found across the 10 books when using this wheel as a guide. My abilities to identify simple and more complex emotions seemed to improve throughout the experience of reading these books. This encouraging step gave me the confidence to create lessons to help my students strengthen their emotional literacy skills.

Recognizing and naming emotions has proven helpful as I have had to manage my own big emotions during the 2023–2024 school year. One memo from this study described an experience when one of my students returned from recess quite upset about how several other students treated him on the playground. As other students started giving their own versions of the incident, this student became angrier, pushing his classmates and yelling in their faces. At first, I felt paralyzed by the scene unfolding before me as the student’s behavior escalated. I quickly came to my senses and tried to calm him while we waited for the principal to come. After this student was removed from the classroom, my students and I sat down to process what had just happened. I told them I get angry sometimes, too, but I have learned to call it what it is so I can help myself feel peaceful again. One student raised his hand and asked, “Is that why sometimes you roll your eyes and take deep breaths when we’re doing stuff that makes you mad?” I felt slightly chagrined that he had noticed this. However, I realized that instead of bottling up the anger I sometimes felt, I had developed the habit of quickly talking myself through what I felt so I could quickly move on, not dwelling on the problematic emotion all day and feeling emotionally unavailable for my students.

Displays of Emotions in Analyzed Texts

Willems’ picturebooks contain rich social and emotional learning content, especially
regarding emotional literacy. There is abundant emotional content for children to recognize and label. In the texts’ dialogue, there are few instances where a character names the exact emotion he or she is experiencing. Still, examples of Ekman’s six basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise) were found across each of the 10 picturebooks.

In a general sense, most of the emotions experienced by the characters were not explicitly named in the texts. For example, Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! (Willems, 2003) features a droopy, defeated pigeon, but the text does not use the words sadness or disappointment. The Pigeon never says what he feels or uses a word to label his emotions. In Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity (Willems, 2007a), a spread near the middle of the text shows a restless Trixie in five different frames, along with the words, “But a few hours later … Trixie realized something.” Her eyes are wide, and she looks distressed, but emotion is not conveyed through words. In We Are in a Book! (Willems, 2010), Gerald realizes he is in a book that will soon end. On pages 48–51, he tells Piggie he has more to give (words, jokes, and bananas!) and does not want the book to end; he never says outright what he feels. This trend of illustrating rather than naming emotions was found throughout the 10 analyzed texts.

There were limited instances where emotions were explicitly named in the text. In Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale (2004), Trixie and her daddy are described as “unhappy” on the tenth spread of the book, as they make their way home from the laundromat. On the second spread in Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity (Willems, 2007a), Trixie is “excited” to take her one-of-a-kind Knuffle Bunny to school. Later, at the end of the same text, Sonja and Trixie both admit they were “worried” about their bunnies. In A Big Guy Took My Ball! (Willems, 2013), Piggie says, “I am so upset!” (p. 10). In There is a Bird on Your Head (Willems, 2007b), Gerald is “afraid” to ask why two birds are making a nest on his head (p. 27).
When rain or the lack thereof ruins her plans in *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008), Piggie says, “I am not a happy pig.” (pp. 20, 52), an instance where a character describes what she is NOT feeling rather than what she is feeling. Other than these specific examples, the emotional content is seen through pictures on each page or needs to be inferred through Willems’ use of color, font size, facial expressions, and body language to create vivid displays of emotion.

**Range of Emotions**

Like young children, the texts’ picture book characters experience a wide range of emotions. This range includes the changing of emotions and the intensity of the emotions experienced. The Pigeon illustrates this in *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2003), which begins with the Pigeon being happy and optimistic about his chances of driving the bus. As his hopes are dashed, he experiences tremendous disappointment that finally manifests in large emphatic print, red eyes, and wild wings flapping: “LET ME DRIVE THE BUS!!!” (see Figure 3). At the end of the book, however, his disappointment and frustration transition back to optimism as he dreams of driving a semi-truck.

**Figure 3**

*Meltdown*

> LET ME DRIVE THE BUS!!!

Gerald and Piggie also display wide ranges of emotion, often contrasting with one another as the stories unfold. Gerald’s emotions are usually big. In *A Big Guy Took My Ball!* (Willems, 2013) he feels angry that someone big would steal a ball from Piggie. *Waiting is Not Easy!* (Willems, 2014) shows his displeasure at waiting for Piggie’s surprise, and *We Are in a Book!* (Willems, 2010) illustrates his anxiety when he learns the book is almost over. In response to Gerald’s worrisome emotions, Piggie is usually calm and happy. One exception is Piggie’s anger when the rain ruins her plans for outdoor play in *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008). Gerald then takes on the role of problem solver and helper. In each of the texts, Gerald and Piggie’s emotions always contrast with one another; one character is in an elevated emotional state, while the other can use his or her sense of calm and happiness to reduce the size of the other’s emotions.

Along with wide ranges in emotions due to change or in contrast to one another in one text, another common occurrence throughout the picturebooks was bold, out-of-control displays of disappointment, despair, or anger. My analysis of the 10 texts revealed that a significant emotional outburst, or meltdown, was a tipping point in every story except for *Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity* (Willems, 2007a). Willems uses oversized fonts, flapping wings or arms, wide open mouths, tears, and upturned heads to indicate that a particular character has reached his or her breaking point. Each of the four main characters from the analyzed texts, the Pigeon, Trixie, Gerald, and Piggie, all display this loss of control at some point, and the reader can watch emotions grow until there seems to be no other outlet than an eruption.

As a part of my analyses, I considered the purpose of these intense emotional outbursts both within the picturebooks and within a child experiencing the emotions. The emotional
tipping points are the place in the story where the character can express an immense feeling and then calm down, allowing the supporting characters to help them find a solution to their distress. I thought back to when one of my own children were not doing well in school. I ignored warning signs and small instances of distress, hoping the trouble would disappear. Then, one morning, my son had a meltdown reminiscent of the characters in my texts. In a rare instance, I lost my temper and yelled back at him. This surprised us both and served as the wake-up call that I needed to help my son with situations at school and home. As I considered this situation, I wondered if I would be more helpful to my students if I noticed earlier signs of building emotion and provided help before the outburst was their only option.

**The Effects of Emotions**

Throughout the books, big emotional displays from one character significantly affect another character. The Elephant and Piggie books provide many instances where either Gerald or Piggie’s emotional state affects the other friend. On page 47 of *There is a Bird on My Head!* (Willems, 2007b), Piggie is upended when Gerald loudly exclaims that he wants the birds to go “SOMEWHERE ELSE!!” In *Let’s Go for a Drive!* (Willems, 2012, pp. 52–53), we see Piggie in midair, along with a map, suitcase, sunglasses, and an umbrella, as Gerald despairs over not having a car for his well-planned drive. In *Waiting is Not Easy!* (Willems, 2014), Gerald grows tired of waiting for Piggie’s surprise and lets out a big GROAN (see Figure 4) that crushes Piggie under its weight (pp. 20–21, 30–31, 38–39).
Throughout my teaching career, there have been times when my students’ emotions have metaphorically sent me flying through the air in shock, surprise, or helplessness. Sometimes, I have even felt crushed under the weight of a student’s sadness, anger, or impatience. This was highlighted in some of my memos and annotations as I considered the many emotions that exist naturally in a classroom full of children.

In *A Big Guy Took My Ball* (Willems, 2013), Gerald feels quite sure that he can get Piggie’s ball from the “big guy” who took it. I started the school year as confident as Gerald because of my graduate school training and desire to help children with emotional difficulties. Still, an angry, defiant child in my class has worn me down emotionally and often given me the feeling of flying through the air, and hoping I could land on my feet and knowing that for his sake, I had to. As soon as Gerald and Piggie realize the big blue whale is just sad and lonely, they can move past their misjudgment of the whale and begin a friendship with him. Likewise, it has taken an earnest effort not to see this child as a metaphorical mean, giant blue whale and
instead see him as a sad, lonely little boy with an unstable home life, desperately in need of my caring and support.

**The Importance of Relationships**

With the exception of *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2003), all the picturebooks in this study centered on supportive relationships between characters. This includes both relationships within families (e.g., Trixie is situated in a loving family) and friendships (e.g., Gerald and Piggie are the best of friends). These bonds between characters demonstrate that relationships are the key to building emotional literacy and regulation and highlight how support systems are built through these relationships.

**Key Role of Relationships**

Several years ago, a child was moved from another first-grade classroom into mine. By the middle of March, the relationship between him and his teacher had deteriorated. He was also causing some understandable distress to other children in the classroom. I had observed this child throughout the year and often felt sad because he reminded me of my own son, who experienced tremendous anxiety that often impeded his ability to function well at school. I empathized with the tears on his mother’s face as she left him crying in the hallway, curled up into a protective stance. This young boy could not control his emotions, especially anger, and it was not always clear what made him angry and volatile. It was necessary to secure his desk to the classroom wall and strap his chair to his desk so he could not throw it. I had a weekend to prepare for this child’s entrance into my classroom.

Since my son’s success or failure in school often hinged on a positive relationship with his teachers, I spent most of the time considering how to build a relationship with him quickly. I knew he was an advanced, voracious reader, so the answer was books. Throughout his first few
weeks, I gave him some of my favorites to read. As a class, we often read Elephant and Piggie books, and this read-aloud experience was one way he could participate happily with his classmates. The books seemed to build a relationship that enabled him to trust me so we could work through some of his big emotions.

My experience analyzing Willem’s picturebooks highlighted the key role of relationships in helping children build emotional literacy and regulation. Relationships provide a venue for identifying and working through emotions. Analyses emphasized the vital role relationships play in enabling me to work with children. Also, they highlighted the power of vital relationships across the 10 picturebooks, particularly within the Knuffle Bunny and the Elephant and Piggie books.

The family relationship in the Knuffle Bunny texts is the cornerstone of the events and growth within each story. The loving family relationship enables Trixie to use and develop her emotional literacy and regulation. In Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale (Willems, 2004), Trixie is a toddler, unable to use words to tell her daddy what she needs. She attempts to show him with unintelligible, loud vocalizations and distressed body language, and she is rather disgusted when her Mommy realizes right away that Knuffle Bunny is missing. Though Daddy is initially upset by Trixie’s outburst, he quickly reverses course as soon as the situation becomes clear. He immediately races to the laundromat to look, and then look again, for Trixie’s bunny. Trixie is several years older during the events of Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity (Willems, 2007a). She now has the voice and vocabulary to tell her parents that the bunny she is holding is not her own special Knuffle Bunny. Trixie’s parents show her they are willing to help in both instances. Her ability to manage her emotions has grown, along with her ability to speak. The events from both books illustrate the importance of her loving relationship with her parents,
who meet her needs. This support enables Trixie to achieve two important milestones—saying her first words and making her first best friend.

The Elephant and Piggie books illustrate the critical role of relationships with friends. Gerald and Piggie have a strong, loving friendship and find purpose in caring for each other, and this is evident in all seven books. While Piggie usually helps Gerald by listening, laughing, and helping him see delight in silly situations, there are also times when Gerald takes the lead in caring for Piggie. He exhibits righteous indignation and plans to make things right for Piggie in *A Big Guy Took My Ball!* (Willems, 2013). Gerald is especially caring as Piggie expresses her disappointment and anger when rain ruins her plans in *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008). Moreover, his friendship encourages her to enjoy the rainstorm. They both find contentment and joy in their friendship, in spite, or perhaps because of, each other’s quirks.

**Support Systems**

I began my teaching career in 2008 and walked into a classroom filled with little more than basic classroom furniture. Still, I felt the same excitement Piggie feels as she plans a fun-filled day in *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008). I scrounged for teaching manuals, brought our family’s picturebooks to school, and tried to create an inviting classroom on a limited budget. The team leader told me that if the principal hired me, I would not need any help from her because I must know what I was doing. I quickly learned that I did not, in fact, know what I was doing. Panic ensued on the very first day of school when I realized during my lunch break that I had no idea how any of my students were getting home or which bus they needed to get on.

The books in my analysis caused me to reflect on the vital importance of support systems throughout my career and in my relationships with my students. I was reminded of this eye-
opening moment when I studied the fifth spread of *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008) found in Figure 5, where the first drop of rain hits Piggie’s head with a “PLINK!” My first teaching year continued to be challenging in many ways, and I did not have an administrator, mentor, or supportive team to provide that little bit of shelter that Gerald gives Piggie as the rain begins to fall harder. My feelings of incompetence and loneliness were persistent, and I related to Piggie when she yells, “I DO NOT LIKE THE RAIN!” (Willems, 2008, pp. 18–19).

**Figure 5**

*Plink!*


Fortunately, I had the opportunity to change grade levels and teach kindergarten the next school year. The entire experience was different from the moment I walked into my new, colorful, inviting classroom, filled with all the supplies, books, and teaching materials I needed. The two veteran teachers on the team quickly took me under their wings and, in so many kind and helpful ways, showed me how to be an educator. Just as Gerald protects Piggie from the rain
until she finds the courage to learn to enjoy it, their vital support enabled me to move from an initial distressing situation to a rewarding teaching career.

The Elephant and Piggie books also draw on friendship for support. Gerald and Piggie support each other in many ways. In *There is a Bird on Your Head!* (Willems, 2007b), Piggie supports Gerald by letting him know what is happening with the birds and the nest on his head. He also gently encourages him to change the situation by asking the birds to leave. In *I Broke My Trunk!* (Willems, 2011), Piggie listens to the point of frustration to Gerald’s long, crazy story, realizing at the end that he broke his trunk while hurrying to tell her about an experience of which he was proud. *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008) shows how Gerald takes a turn to support Piggie as he uses his enormous ears to shield her from the rain and then his trunk to create a rainstorm for his friend, who has decided she likes the rain.

Additionally, the Elephant and Piggie books reveal another aspect of support in what is not said and done between characters. Across the texts, we find that Piggie is never bothered by Gerald’s quirks. For example, in *There is a Bird on Your Head!* (Willems, 2007b), she does not instruct him to calm down and enjoy the bird’s nest on his head. In *I Broke My Trunk!* (Willems, 2011), she does not tell him that carrying a large load on his trunk is not a good idea or that he should quit complaining about waiting for the big surprise in *Waiting is Not Easy!* (Willems, 2014). In turn, Gerald does not tell Piggie that a little rain never hurt anyone or that she should be grateful for the rain and change her attitude. In every Elephant and Piggie picture book, one of the main characters stays calm in opposition to the big emotion from the other character, providing validation and acceptance that enable the characters to trust and care for each other.

The lack of relationship and support is found in *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2003). Aside from a bus driver who only appears at the beginning and end of the book
and a reader/audience who are most likely giving the Pigeon an emphatic “No!” to all of his requests, the Pigeon is left to his own devices. Pigeon experiences more sadness, disappointment, disgust, and anger than any other character in my analysis, and he also takes center stage in the most significant emotional outburst in all 10 books.

During this study, I reflected on my school’s lack of support for children. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my school implemented three resources: a wellness room, a skills room, and a part-time counselor. The skills and wellness rooms provide temporary respite to children needing services but have not been particularly effective in changing a child’s behavior or meeting their emotional needs. The part-time counselor visits each classroom once a month but lacks the time or qualifications to counsel young students. School administration is willing to help when emotional disturbances are extreme, but otherwise, little support is offered.

Fortunately, I have found a support system with my coworkers that calls to mind Gerald’s support for Piggie in *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008) as seen in Figure 6. My coworkers have provided me with a safe place to express emotions and concerns, enabling me to refocus my thoughts and energy in more positive directions as I support my students’ emotional needs.
Nurturing and Recognizing Positivity

After a particularly challenging day in my classroom, I analyzed the sixth book in my study, *We Are in a Book!* (Willems, 2010). I was struck by the idea that I had been analyzing the books for what are usually considered negative emotions in a school setting. I had initially thought that kids who struggled with their emotional literacy would improve if I could encourage them to recognize and name difficult emotions experienced by the book characters. For example, I created an interactive read-aloud lesson plan for *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2004), I planned to use the disappointment and anger displayed by the Pigeon to help my students recognize and manage these emotions in themselves. In each book, I found characters experiencing difficult, big emotions, and I planned to help my students identify and learn from how characters in the texts managed those emotions.

However, my perspective changed to consider the possibility of helping children discover positive emotions in the pages of the texts. The vital and often under-recognized impact of
positive emotional content was a significant finding of this study. As I considered the sense of apathy and discouragement I was feeling as a teacher, along with the difficulties faced by my young students, I began to see that it was a missed opportunity not to consider and highlight how happiness can be nurtured through interactive read-alouds. I became acutely aware of how focusing on the books’ positive aspects could help me and my students realize that there is always hope for a happy ending.

**Nurturing Happiness**

In the fall, one of my students was removed from his home and placed in foster care. He returned to the classroom after a 2-month absence and was withdrawn and sad. On one particularly emotional day, I took a few minutes to visit with him. He told me he was so scared he would have to leave his mom again that he wanted to die. I tried to say a few comforting words, reaffirming his parents’ love for him, and helping him see how hard they were working to create a safe home for him. I wished I could offer more than reassurance to this struggling little boy.

Then an unexpected opportunity to help came in the form of a casual read-aloud session. The next day, I read *We Are in a Book!* (Willems, 2010) with my class. On page 29 (see Figure 7), Gerald and Piggie realize they are being read and, therefore, have the power to make the reader say funny words like “Banana!” On the following seven pages, they laugh hysterically over this newfound discovery. My first-grade students found this equally humorous, especially my student struggling with his family situation. Later that day, we had a few minutes of free writing time, and he and several other students got right to work on writing their own little banana books. The next day, he greeted me in the morning with a big smile and the word “BANANA!” Bananas began appearing in everyone’s writing journals, on parent-teacher
conference folders, and in little empty spaces of assignments. Of course, the word banana did not remove all the hurt of family separation, but it has brought happiness and light to a little boy and helped foster a positive classroom community from which he could benefit.

**Figure 7**

Banana!

![Image of banana and elephant]

*Note. Willems, Mo. (2010). We are in a Book! (M. Willems, Illus.) Hyperion Books for Children. Copyright 2010 by Hyperion Books for Children.*

I found similar positive content in the form of humor in each of the 10 analyzed texts. Humor is abundant in *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Willems, 2003), as the Pigeon uses bribery, flattery, and thoughts from his own vivid imagination to coerce the reader into letting him drive the bus. The Elephant and Piggie series uses humor to draw children into their world. The stories include various silly situations, such as the one found in *Let’s Go for a Drive!* (Willems, 2012), where Elephant and Piggie put earnest effort into preparing to take a drive before they realize they do not have a car. Another book my students have always found humorous is *There Is a Bird on Your Head!* (Willems, 2007b), in which they delightfully watch
two love birds build a nest and hatch three eggs on Gerald’s head.

Positive emotional content in the form of love and belonging is also a focal point in both Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale (Willems, 2004) and Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity (Willems, 2007a). The end pages of both texts are filled with picture frames that display sweet, essential events in Trixie’s life, illustrating the loving family relationship. Additionally, using a favorite comfort object in the texts evoked positive associations and feelings as Trixie’s parents go to great lengths to retrieve Trixie’s Knuffle Bunny.

Nurturing happiness through a comfort object was found in the Knuffle Bunny texts, but I also found its power in my classroom. One day, a student greeted me in the morning with a thumbs down and a sad face. I knew her father was ill and that she needed comfort. Unfortunately, I was worried about one of my own family members and felt stressed about many of the tasks I needed to accomplish that day. I wanted to help her. I wanted to make her laugh or say just the right words, but I felt tired and discouraged because part of me did not even want to help her. I asked her if she would like a “stuffie” to keep on her desk that day, and she replied that she would like that. Interestingly, she chose a stuffed Gerald. She took him to her desk and rested her head on him for a few minutes. This gave me the time I needed to evaluate and calm my emotions so I could talk with her about her worries. She was fine within a few minutes, but I cannot help but think that the stuffed animal was the real helper that day.

Finding Hope

As I analyzed Waiting is Not Easy! (Willems, 2014), the possibility of happy endings seemed especially poignant. In this story, Piggie tells Gerald she has a surprise for him. Unfortunately, the surprise is a long time in coming. Gerald grows impatient and unkind to Piggie as darkness begins to fall across the pages. I recorded in my memo that great patience is
required as a mother and a teacher. Growth in my children and students has often seemed impossible to detect. Caring relationships require time and effort to build. There have been times when I have felt hopeless—would I ever find an effective therapist who could help with my son’s anxiety and depression? Would the patience and love I endeavor to show an angry young student ever be enough to get through his rough exterior? Would I ever be able to see growth in myself? It often feels like I take two steps forward only to feel set back by a lapse of judgment or mistake. I was struck by the beauty of the night sky, illustrated by Willems in the final spreads of the book. I felt a sense of hope creep into my heart, along with a reminder that the best things take time and patience but are worth every effort.

Hope is another critical positive characteristic found within and evoked from the texts. The characters in Willems’ picturebooks go through various challenging situations and experience the joy of happy endings. Throughout my analysis of 10 picturebooks, characters experience minor problems such as a lost bunny, a rainstorm, a ball taken away, or not having everything they need for a grand adventure. In real life, children deeply feel the impact of economic hardship, family tragedy, political unrest, social injustice, and a global pandemic—all loom large around them. Reading about the experiences these characters have and the positive outcomes they attain may give them hope for happy endings and small victories.

Perhaps being reunited with a one-of-a-kind bunny in *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* (Willems, 2004) or watching a good friend provide shelter in the rain in *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* (Willems, 2008) could show students that happy endings are also possible for them. The Pigeon does not get to drive the bus, but he does move on to a new, bigger dream of driving a semi-truck. Other significant happy endings are found in *A Big Guy Took My Ball!* (Willems, 2013) as Elephant and Piggie play whale ball with their big new friend, and when Gerald and
Piggie turn the disappointment about not having a car into the perfect playful adventure in *Let’s Go for a Drive!* (Willems, 2012). Hope is an essential aspect of the positive content within the books that is often overlooked but should play a prominent role in our teaching of emotional literacy.

**Conclusion**

My lived experience analyzing 10 award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks and examining my own connections and reflection resulted in four overarching themes: (a) my personal journey, (b) discovering emotions in characters, (c) the importance of relationships, and (d) nurturing and recognizing positivity. In the context of a challenging school year, analyses enabled me to identify meaningful ways to nurture my students’ emotional literacy, an essential component of social and emotional learning. It also helped me overcome feeling overwhelmed and apathetic, leading me to positive growth in my personal life and classroom.
CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Several weeks after the 2023–2024 school year began, I met with the mother of one of my students. Her child was having meltdowns—screaming, crying, and throwing himself down on the floor in frustration nearly every day. I hoped his mom could provide insight into how I could help him. He sat with us at the table, and while she explained his diagnoses of anxiety and ADHD and informed me about some issues they were having at home, her son responded forcefully, “I just have big emotions, okay?!!” Emotions are a universal part of the human experience, and our ability to name, understand, and manage our big emotions, as well as those of the children in our care, can influence our success and happiness.

As a teacher of young children in a rural school district, I realize my essential role in helping children with emotional struggles in my classroom. In my rural community, children face limitations in available resources, stemming from a lack of family support, professional mental health resources, or school resources that can genuinely give them the support they need. Additionally, I understand that many teachers feel constrained in their ability to scaffold learning and provide support for students regarding social-emotional development. Therefore, this study examined my lived experience reading and analyzing emotional literacy in picturebooks with the desire to improve how I teach and interact with students.

I found it coincidental and ironic that I studied how to nurture emotional literacy in my students through interactive read-alouds during a school year when I was challenged by more than the usual number of students with profound and impactful emotional difficulties. Throughout the year, I felt an urgency to improve my teaching practice, often accompanied by feelings of helplessness and discouragement that I was not making progress or providing genuine
care for my students. Despite this, there was power in analyzing the texts, considering the needs of my current students, and planning interactive read-aloud experiences specific to them.

Through my analysis, four overarching themes emerged (my personal journey, discovering emotions in characters, the importance of relationships, and nurturing and recognizing positivity). These findings informed four critical and impactful implications for teaching and teachers related to social-emotional learning: (a) teaching is a personal act, (b) children need and deserve meaningful interaction with rich and engaging picturebooks, (c) these interactions can provide an essential sense of hope and possibilities, and (d) the critical need for teachers to be supported in their work with children. In this chapter, I will discuss these critical implications, address limitations to the study, and suggest ideas for future research. I will also specifically highlight how these implications might impact teaching and schools in rural contexts.

**Teaching is a Personal Act**

Analyses and findings from this study emphasize that teaching is a personal act. Bullough (2008) writes, “As testimony, teaching flows out of the inner life of the teacher, affecting not only what is taught but what is learned” (p. 9). Teaching a particular group of children provided benefits and challenges as I examined the possibilities of using a set of texts within my classroom. Personal experiences related to family and teaching also served as venues to explore emotional literacy learning and teaching. My experience conducting this study, and the findings in particular, emphasize that the personal and professional contributed to how I see myself as a teacher and how I want to teach my students. This work has informed my teaching practice regarding the opportunities, strategies, and skills that might prove helpful in learning and
teaching emotional literacy; it has also helped me to see my own learning and growth regarding emotional literacy on a personal level.

Throughout this study, I considered and reflected on my role as an educator in a rural, close-knit social setting. I have spent my entire teaching career in two different rural school districts, and I often question if I have the experience or knowledge to speak out on educational issues that are important to me. I see myself as a rural teacher with a minimal circle of influence, and I have often felt as small as the community where I live and work. Thus, I seem to have unknowingly taken up a rural stereotype perpetuated in society that Petrone and Wynhoff-Olsen (2021) describe as positioning those from rural communities as irrelevant, unintelligent, or backward. But then I contemplate their own response and wonder, “In the light of the harmful stereotypes associated with rurality, it is worth considering: ‘Who is being allowed to tell the story of rurality?’” (Petrone & Wynhoff-Olsen, 2021, p. 5). This provides me with the confidence and resolve to advocate for these rural communities of which I am a part.

My study enabled me to move from seeing my rural school through a deficit lens to considering one of its greatest strengths, which Tieken and Montgomery (2021) describe as “social capital” (p. 8), or the resources that come from relationships. Teachers in rural schools can develop long-standing and meaningful relationships with students and families because of our closeness and familiarity, leading to greater care and concern when a child needs help. This experience helped me to understand that my personal and professional experiences in rural communities, my personal act or journey, informed this study, my teaching, and my position to do this work and share my growth and learning. Rural schoolteachers must be allowed to tell the stories of rurality. I am a rural teacher of young children, and I care about rural communities.
Meaningful Interactions with Text

Another implication of my study is that young learners need and deserve transformative and meaningful experiences when interacting with texts. Two years ago, we held an all-school read-a-thon, where children had time to enjoy reading independently and participate in read-alouds with teachers and guest readers. During our lunch period, one second-grade teacher expressed her gratitude that this event was held on an early release day so she would not have to read to her students in the afternoon. She complained that she had read four books that morning, which was four more than she had read to them all year. She saw the entire day as a loss of instructional time and was concerned about how this would impact her students on end-of-the-year reading benchmark testing. Another teacher at our school boxed up most of her picturebooks and took them home. She was also concerned that she did not have time to read to her class while meeting the district’s curriculum requirements. I have also attended a professional development seminar where the presenter encouraged teachers to remove classroom libraries and rely only on decodable text for instruction until children had mastered decoding skills and could read text fluently and independently. This study emphasizes that choosing to remove quality, engaging picturebooks from elementary classrooms robs children of the meaningful experiences they could have with texts.

Today’s reading instruction centers on decoding and comprehension skills that can be quantified and assessed, and these skills are vital. However, my research reiterates the importance of attending to young children’s developmental and emotional needs through intentional and joyful reading of picturebooks. Rosenblatt (1982) advocates that taking an aesthetic stance with reading “feeds the growth of the individual, who can then bring a richer self to further transactions with life and literature” (p. 274). I experienced this growth first-hand
throughout the course of this study, which emphasized my personal growth and journey with aesthetic, meaningful readings of the Mo Willems picturebooks.

This study also demonstrated the power of teaching and supporting social-emotional learning with high-quality picturebooks. It is not uncommon to find social-emotional instruction using scripted lessons and didactic texts. However, my findings reiterate that texts do not need to be didactic to be influential, and lessons do not need to be scripted. The key is for teachers to capitalize on the power and opportunity found within picturebooks to help students develop crucial emotional literacy and other social-emotional learning skills.

Meaningful interactions with text may be particularly important in rural communities where children often come to school with limited life experiences and exposure to books. In these educational settings, picturebooks can provide vital windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) that help children see their life experiences while learning about different places, cultures, and people. For example, reading *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* (Willems, 2004) and *Knuffle Bunny, Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity* (Willems, 2007a) can give my students a glimpse into Trixie’s life in the city. While the setting might be new to them, they can still relate to Trixie’s love of her bunny, her parents’ loving care, and the universal emotions displayed in the texts. Young children in rural schools can connect what they know and their lived experiences to the universal human experiences found in these and other texts.

**Hope Through Interactive Read-Alouds**

As previously discussed, I began this study focused on children’s emotions that are generally considered negative or problematic in school settings. I initially wondered how I could help my students see their own anger, sadness, fear, or disappointment in a carefully selected set of Mo Willems picturebooks. My paradigm shifted mid-study as I wondered how these books
could help children see joy, hope, and possibilities for happy endings. As I watched several of my students struggle with difficult life situations, I became more convinced that focusing on hope could be a powerful influence on my young students. I saw this come to fruition as the simple word “Banana” (Willems, 2010, p. 29) lifted the spirits of one of my students. As we engaged in further discussions and reread the book together several times, a sense of community and happiness filled our classroom. This experience profoundly affected me as I saw firsthand the benefits of highlighting hopeful emotions and remembered that happy endings are always possible.

Massey et al. (2022) wrote that “books and activities do not create hope. Rather, they provide the environments and opportunities where teachers and students build hope through intentional practice” (p. 575). In my study, intentional practice involved considering how developmental bibliotherapy could be implemented through interactive read-aloud sessions. For developmental bibliotherapy to be effective, students must undergo identification, catharsis, and insight (Brock, 2021), and these phases could be encouraged through carefully planned interactive read-aloud sessions. This intentional practice seemed to build hope for my students, and perhaps more importantly, relating my emotions to those of the picture book characters brought me hope for my ability to support and teach my students. Examining the intersections of developmental bibliotherapy and interactive read-aloud gave me a newfound advocacy for using picturebooks to encourage children’s growth in small but profound ways.

This study enabled me to experience and then try to craft aesthetic reading experiences (Rosenblatt, 1982) with picturebooks. My renewed perspective to emphasize the positive and hopeful seemed to contribute to an overall aesthetic and impactful reading experience. Rosenblatt (1982) explains that taking an aesthetic stance when sharing books with children
enables them to draw on past experiences with other texts, people, and the world; they experience the sensations and emotions in a story, helping them to identify with characters and share their conflicts and feelings. Exposure to these types of aesthetic reading experiences should be a central practice in classrooms because they provide personal, meaningful interactions with text and can provide a perspective of hopefulness to both children and teachers.

Providing developmental bibliotherapy to children to show them hope and happiness helps children who are struggling emotionally and can also provide preventative benefits to all children. According to Merrell and Gueldner (2010), social-emotional learning efforts should be seen as small doses of prevention that strengthen children’s ability to navigate life’s challenges. Developmental bibliotherapy may reduce instances of social-emotional issues, and it may also empower a child with strategies to self-regulate emotions in such situations. This illustrates that developmental bibliotherapy is not just for children who are suffering but can also have benefits in the classroom as a prevention measure (Catalano, 2008). Therefore, all children can benefit from meaningful interactions with picturebooks that instill hope in what is to come.

This hope is just as important for children from rural communities and may be seen as particularly crucial. I chose to raise my own children in rural areas and appreciated the educational benefits of close relationships with teachers and a strong sense of community. However, as a teacher and parent, I have also seen the hopelessness that stems from the lack of mental health resources or stigma in small communities surrounding mental health issues. As mentioned previously, picturebooks such as the Elephant and Piggie series can become sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990), and this enables children to enter worlds where characters experience universal emotions and still find hope and happiness in the end. Picturebooks can also serve as important windows to the larger world, helping rural school children to view lives and stories
different than their own. In both instances, rural children can access and learn about new worlds, lives, and stories while still seeing positivity and happy endings.

**Supports for Teachers**

As I observed how the characters in the analyzed texts were able to provide emotional support to each other within the context of strong relationships, it led me to consider the types of support teachers need as they seek to teach and care for the children in their own classrooms. This work can be daunting and exhausting, and teachers are on the front lines of working with children. Therefore, teachers must feel supported and sustained in these endeavors. Support can come in many forms, including school administrators actively providing support and enabling teachers to have a voice in social-emotional learning issues and decisions at their schools. This can help them to feel supported and heard, possibly motivating them to continue this hard work. Zembylas (2003) writes that when teachers perceive a school’s emotional rules as repressive, requiring them to control inner anxieties, wishes, and emotions, they often begin to feel like failures as teachers. School administrators and other supports can ensure that teachers feel heard and understood rather than the recipients of trite statements or strict policies.

Many teachers experience frustration from a lack of resources and support to help struggling students, but this frustration may feel particularly acute for those in rural communities. My rural school did not provide any mental health resources until the COVID pandemic, and I have previously discussed how these resources did not stretch far enough or seem adequate to meet the needs of an ever-growing population of children who needed assistance. When resources are limited, a caring, understanding system of support from the school administration could help to lessen feelings of isolation and helplessness. Also vital are coworker relationships that can provide encouragement, mentoring, and support in small schools.
where teachers are familiar with students and their families. Rural teachers need to feel supported, and this will enable them to reach out to their students.

**Limitations**

There are a few limitations to this work. First, the text set used in this study came from one author, Mo Willems, and only included his award-winning texts. Other texts may highlight different insights and applications, but this text set was determined to be accessible and engaging for students and teachers, even within a rural setting. Second, this study only considered the possibilities of using interactive read-alouds rather than implementing them with children. This helped me examine and improve my own teaching practice, but there was no way to determine how changes in my perspective and practice might influence my students.

Additionally, teachers’ use of developmental bibliotherapy in the classroom is one limited way to address social-emotional learning in schools. Heath et al. (2017) describe developmental bibliotherapy as “psychological first aid” (p. 545). *Medical first aid* is a basic solution applied by laymen; a stopgap treatment that keeps a patient alive until qualified medical personnel can intervene. Similarly, psychological first aid puts effective mental health strategies such as bibliotherapy in the hands of teachers and other caring adults only until professional mental health care workers can take over (Heath et al., 2017). Developmental bibliotherapy applied through interactive read-alouds can provide initial support to children and help establish caring relationships between teachers and students. However, teachers should not be expected to solve complicated and severe mental health issues.

Finally, it should also be noted that emotional literacy is a single, foundational piece of social-emotional learning. The development of emotional literacy has a variety of benefits for young children, such as helping them develop empathy and establish positive relationships with
others (Hyson, 2004). Strengthened emotional literacy skills also enable children to regulate difficult emotions instead of acting out in harmful ways (Hemmeter et al., 2021). While this focus on emotional literacy is one part of social-emotional learning, it is again foundational to more complex learning and growth.

**Future Research**

Insights from this study could be used in future work regarding teaching and supporting social-emotional learning concepts for young children. Possible research could involve examining other teachers’ experiences reading and considering the use of picturebooks to teach social-emotional teaching in the early childhood classroom. Studies could also involve planning and implementing interactive read-aloud lessons along with examinations of children’s growth and learning after exposure and experience with classroom developmental bibliotherapy. Researchers could also use different sets of texts to examine how children respond to the works of different authors or genres of children’s literature.

**Conclusion**

Government agencies, physicians, school personnel, and parents cite concerns about the increasing number of children who struggle with mental health issues (AAP et al., 2021; Boydell et al., 2006; CDC, 2016; Lee et al., 2009). Teachers are often on the front lines working with children and seeking solutions to help children succeed in the classroom and beyond. This self-study explored my lived experience reading award-winning Mo Willems picturebooks and considering their use in interactive read-aloud sessions to build emotional literacy skills. My analyses of the texts took me through a personal journey of emotional literacy growth, enabled me to discover a wide range of emotions in picture book characters, highlighted the importance
of supportive relationships to social-emotional learning, and revealed the possibilities and beneficial nature of nurturing and recognizing positivity.

A significant portion of this study focuses on hope—hope in the text, hope within the classroom, and hope beyond the context of schooling. The happy endings of Mo Willems’ powerful stories led me to reflect on my own happy endings and seasons of growth and change. It is my hope that engaging and quality picturebooks can return to a central place in classrooms and that the possibilities of using these books to teach children about emotions can be considered, especially by teachers in rural school districts where mental health services are limited. I also hope teachers receive vital support from school administrators and decision-makers to work with children in need, and that teachers can use developmental bibliotherapy to provide important initial aid to students. As Maich and Kean (2004) emphasize, “If one child in a classroom is able to face a social-emotional problem with new strength and greater skills, the very use of bibliotherapy will have been its own reward” (p. 11). Thus, it is my hope that this work and the power of picturebooks can bring happy endings to more significant numbers of teachers and students.
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Children’s Literature References


### Table A1

**Award-Winning Mo Willems Picturebooks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Award</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus</em> (2003)</td>
<td>2004 Caldecott Honor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>There is a Bird on Your Head</em> (2007)</td>
<td>2008 Theodor Seuss Geisel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Are You Ready to Play Outside</em> (2008)</td>
<td>2009 Theodor Seuss Geisel Honor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Let’s Go for a Drive</em> (2012)</td>
<td>2013 Theodor Seuss Geisel Honor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Big Guy Took My Ball</em> (2013)</td>
<td>2014 Theodor Seuss Geisel Honor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Waiting is Not Easy</em> (2014)</td>
<td>2015 Theodor Seuss Geisel</td>
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Table 22

Research Design

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Table A3

*Memo Template*

“What is the experience of a first-grade teacher working in a rural elementary school when examining picturebooks for possible instructional use in interactive read-alouds?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Insights</th>
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<tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emotional Literacy Content</th>
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<tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactive Read-aloud Potential</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Books match student interest and developmental, emotional, and social needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Books are previewed and practiced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Clear purpose is established.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Fluent reading is modeled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Teachers use animation and expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Teachers stop to ask thoughtful questions about the text</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Connections are made to independent reading and writing</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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### Table A4

**Data Codes**

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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Characters (CC)</td>
<td>How I saw myself or my students in the characters’ actions and emotions</td>
<td>“Could my students see themselves in Trixie’s inability to express her needs?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness (H)</td>
<td>Content that was positive and hopeful, happy conclusions</td>
<td>“With the help of friends, disappointing situations might turn out even better than planned.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Systems (SS)</td>
<td>Ways characters supported each other through big emotions</td>
<td>“Daddy is upset by Trixie’s outburst, but as soon as he realizes her need, he is quick to help.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Judgment (NJ)</td>
<td>Allowing other characters to feel and express emotions</td>
<td>“Piggie never tells Gerald to speak softly or calm down.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Growth (PG)</td>
<td>Examples of my own personal growth, specifically relating to emotional literacy or teaching practice</td>
<td>“Learning as an adult to name my emotions has removed some of the negative power emotions have had in my life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping Kids (HK)</td>
<td>Looking at character exemplars for ways to help students</td>
<td>“Trixie’s mom did not see her outburst as unruly behavior. In my classroom, I need to see big emotions and ‘bad behavior’ as the inability to communicate something important.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are Key (RK)</td>
<td>Ways that relationships enable characters to help each other</td>
<td>“A previously built relationship enabled me to talk with and console a student who was dealing with a troubling family situation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big and Little Emotions (B&gt;L)</td>
<td>Examples of emotions that are big, little, or move between the two in the story</td>
<td>“Gerald moves from excited to anxious several times, and then experiences major disappointment followed by happiness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions Affect others (EO)</td>
<td>Content showing how the big emotions of one character affects the characters around him or her</td>
<td>“Piggie is crushed under Gerald’s big groan.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming Emotions (NO)</td>
<td>Places where character’s name the emotion they are experiencing</td>
<td>“Piggie names her emotion explicitly: ‘I am upset.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meltdowns (M)</td>
<td>Extra-large displays of emotion</td>
<td>“LET ME DRIVE THE BUS!!!”</td>
</tr>
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