

## Teaching Social and Emotional Learning to Young Learners Through Short Stories: A Conceptual Framework and Practical Guide

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**Abstract:** This study provides a foundational framework for how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can be taught to young learners through short stories. SEL teaches five important skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. This research specifically investigates teaching these skills using the short story “The Little Black Fish”. It aims to evaluate how effectively short stories can develop SEL competencies, thereby enhancing the social and emotional well-being of young learners. The study provides valuable insights into the practical application of SEL competencies in educational settings by providing a framework and a lesson plan sample. Qualitative content analysis was employed, complemented by quantitative analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the samples in the short story. This analysis was based on a template designed around the five competencies developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Thirty-one passages from the story were analyzed according to the template. The findings suggest that short stories are an effective tool for promoting SEL skills among young learners. Additionally, the designed template and lesson plan offer a practical guide for teachers teaching SEL through short stories.

**Keywords:** Social and Emotional Learning, The Little Black Fish, Young Learner, Lesson Plan

### 1. Introduction

American Psychological Association (APA) (Uwa, 2023) defines emotion as “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioral, and physiological elements” (para. 2). According to Cherry (2023), a psychological specialist, “Emotions are reactions that human beings experience in response to events or situations” (para. 1) There are different types of emotions. Cherry writes that they depend on the situation that activates the emotion. For instance, human beings are happy when they hear good news and frightened when threatened.

Psychologists attempt to define emotions in a variety of ways. Psychologist Paul Eckman (as cited in Cherry, 2022) suggests that all humans have six basic emotions. The six emotions are happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, surprise, and anger.

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However, he added more emotions to the six later, such as pride, shame, embarrassment, and excitement. Another theory puts emotion in eight categories. Psychologist Robert Plutchik (as cited in Karimova, 2023) proposed that joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, fear, anger, surprise, and anticipation are the eight primary emotions.

On another level, Don Hockenbury and Sandra E. Hockenbury (as cited in Cherry, 2023), in “Discovering Psychology,” put emotions under three main distinct categories. The three distinct components are a subjective experience, a physiological response, and a behavioral or expressive response. According to Iasevoli (2023), every emotion starts with a subjective experience, also referred to as stimulation. Subjective experience can be different from one person to another. For instance, a person might feel intense grief at the loss of a beloved one, whereas another one may experience feelings of regret and rage. A physiological response is a response in our body towards an emotion. For example, when our heart beats very quickly with fear. Also, facial expressions have an important effect on the way the human body responds to an emotion in a physical sense.

Iasevoli (2023) asserts that the actual expression of the emotion is the behavioral response which forms part of the emotional response. The notable behavioral responses might be a smile, a grimace, a laugh, or a sigh, among many other reactions. Iasevoli refers to many studies that demonstrate facial expressions. She says that there are universal expressions like a frown to express sadness. Also, there are behavioral reactions that are influenced by individual upbringings and sociocultural conventions. For instance, there are cultural and individual differences in the ways that people express their love.

Educators have recently believed that schools should prepare young people for complex life rather than just provide instruction on academic content and skills such as mathematics, science, social sciences, English language arts, and other subject areas (Issues, 2022). For that reason, developing a healthy emotion is focused on in education. There are different ways that students' social and emotional sides are being addressed. One way to help students develop a strong emotional side is through an approach called “Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).”

This study aims to develop a framework for teaching young learners SEL using short stories. It seeks to establish a foundation for selecting short stories that effectively promote the five SEL competencies among young learners.

There is a need for effective and engaging methods to teach SEL to young learners, as these competencies are important for their overall development. However, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks that integrate SEL into classroom settings in a way that is both practical for educators and impactful for students. This research addresses this gap by exploring how short stories can be used for SEL development in young learners. To achieve its aim, this study addresses the following research question:

- How can social and emotional learning (SEL) be taught to young learners through the use of short stories?

Addressing this question, the study demonstrates the importance of developing SEL in young learners. It provides a practical guide on how SEL can be effectively taught in the classroom using short stories.

## 1.2 What is SEL?

According to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (*Fundamentals of SEL - CASEL*, 2024), SEL is essential to education and human development. SEL is a framework that helps individuals deal with his/her emotions among a group of people. It is the process through which all individuals learn and put into action their knowledge, skills, and mindsets. These are very important for several reasons. They are important to create and maintain good relationships, be compassionate toward others, manage emotions, and reach individual and collective goals as well as preserve healthy identities (CASEL, 2023). Per various research (Simion, 2023; Gubi & Bocanegra, 2015), SEL gives students the tools necessary to succeed academically and have fulfilling and healthy lives. Schlinger (as cited in Iasevoli, 2023), vice president of programs and practice at CASEL reiterates, “We know social and emotional competence can impact attendance, academic performance, and graduation rates.” She believes that prioritizing SEL is important to promote health and well-being.

The framework divides social and emotional learning into five categories. They are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (*Fundamentals of SEL - CASEL*, 2024). The first part of the category is about being aware of one's emotions and how they impact behaviors. The second addresses regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to accomplish objectives and how to act in different circumstances. The third deals with making wise decisions and weighing the consequences. The fourth one talks about building positive relationships and finding a solution to conflicts constructively. The last one indicates having empathy for those around you and being aware of other perspectives. By applying these categories, numerous benefits can be built into every part of daily life.

Scholars and advocates believe that SEL programs can provide immediate and long-term benefits for young people, impacting both their school experience and their future lives (Mahoney et al., 2018).

## 2.3 Benefits of SEL

The advantages of SEL have been well studied, and research shows that SEL in education is beneficial to adults, students, and school communities. The positive effects of SEL on students are demonstrated in academic achievement (CASEL, 2023). Aperture Education refers to more benefits of education in what it calls short-term benefits. SEL, according to the institution, teaches students to “establish and maintain healthy, positive relationships with adults and their peers” and develop positive attitudes toward themselves, others, and school (Aperture Education, 2024).

By developing SEL competencies, students are more capable of controlling their emotions, forming healthy relationships, and making responsible decisions. Additionally, it promotes cognitive development and improves learning abilities, which are keys to academic achievement (CASEL, 2023). Also, students can have an effective relationship with others, and demonstrate empathy and compassion (Aperture Education, 2024).

SEL is especially significant in encouraging cognitive development. Students are better able to manage stress and concentrate on their studies when they improve their emotional management skills (MacCann et al., 2020). Also, students who get involved with SEL learn time management, goal setting, and self-

awareness skills, every single one of which can help them flourish academically. The development of positive behaviors is just as crucial for academic success as cognitive development. With SEL, young children can develop a growth mindset and a positive attitude toward learning (Yeager, 2017). Overall, SEL integration into the educational environment is vital, and using SEL in the classroom has a big impact on academic success for young children. Based on research by CASEL, students who take part in SEL programs outperformed students who did not participate in the areas of academic achievement by 11 percentile points. SEL interventions that focus on the five core competencies improved students' academic achievement (Marvin, 2023).

Several studies show that SEL is an effective part of education. SEL helps young learners to become “healthier, happier people, as well as active and engaged citizens” (Cheramie, 2022, para. 1). When young learners are taught a genuinely caring attitude toward others, they “can make responsible and compassionate decisions that positively impact themselves, others, and the world around them” (Chowkase, 2023, p. 6). When SEL is taught through children’s literature, young learners can have “the possibility to acquire a system of values (educational role)” (Pulimeno et al., 2020, p. 19). (X).

CASEL indicates that SEL approaches have always been effective with all demographic groups, promoting the positive development of learners from diverse backgrounds. The benefits become even greater when SEL implementation is planned with consideration for a specific context or culture in mind, emphasizing the significance of a strategy that is tailored. Also, social and emotional skills help improve lifetime outcomes key outcomes for young adults years later significantly correlate with social and emotional skills learned in kindergarten (CASEL, 2023).

Four large-scale meta-analyses on student outcomes from participation in school-based SEL programs suggest substantial benefits for students (Mahoney et al., 2018). The analysis revealed two key findings. First, students in SEL programs exhibited significantly more positive outcomes, including enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, and academic performance, as well as lower levels of conduct problems and emotional distress. Second, the improved academic performance of SEL program participants indicates that these programs tend to support, rather than detract from, students' academic success (Mahoney et al., 2018).

### **1.3 How to teach SEL?**

While SEL is important when students are exposed to it, the way it is taught is more important. Studies have addressed effective SEL teaching on two levels. The integration of SEL in the education programs and equipping teachers with enough support to teach the program.

Kaiser (2020) refers to an educational framework called a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). The framework was developed to provide students with systematic assistance with their particular social and emotional needs. It has been separated into three tiers, each of which has a specific role in dealing with the behavioral, social-emotional, and academic needs of learners. In the first tier, the purpose is to offer social and emotional learning to the whole class. The emotional skills that are required to meet a school's expectations for positive behavior. In the second tier, small groups are considered. Additional support for the development of social and emotional skills is provided in this tier to certain groups that did not respond to the support provided in the first tier. These could be considered short-term interventions. In the last tier, individualized support is provided. The third tier is on providing students with customized, targeted support that addresses their specific needs as well as any possible reasons for their negative behavior. After following MTSS by the school and teachers, every child should be evaluated as quickly as possible, and MTSS attempts to provide specific support and assess progress to ensure that interventions are effective (Kaiser, 2020).

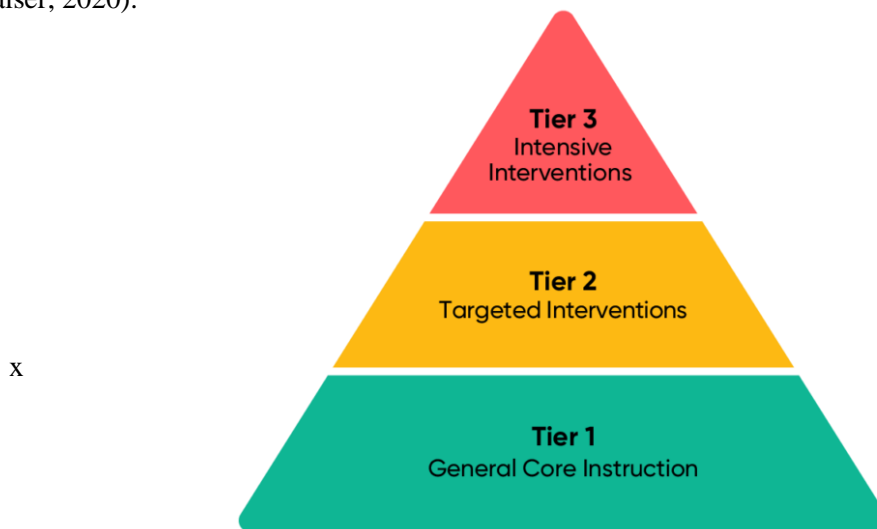


Figure 1: MTSS Framework (Olson, 2023)

Now that SEL is teachable, it needs to be noted that teachers need training to enable them to support student SEL skill development. Kurdi and Meena (2023) stress that “encouraging the exchange of different viewpoints among students is an important responsibility for teachers” (p. 238). The exchange of viewpoints needs to be triggered by the teachers. Markowitz et al. (2018) highlight that teachers need support in identifying the SEL outcomes that school communities aspire to their graduates and in using an SEL perspective to enhance academic outcomes. Markowitz and his colleagues address a framework, Anchor Competencies Framework and Guide, that his institution developed. According to them, the framework’s sessions have proven to be an effective guide for preparing teachers to teach SEL. The session topics cover developing a growth mindset, cultivating perseverance, fostering self-reflection, and establishing a common vocabulary for SEL and culturally responsive teaching.



Figure 2: Anchor Competencies Framework and Guide (Markowitz et al., 2018)

### 1.4 Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (World Health Organization: WHO, 2022), “Mental health is a state of well-being that enables people to manage the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community.” Marshall-Seslar (2024) emphasizes that mental health involves our psychological, social, and emotional health. It has an impact on our behavior, thoughts, and interactions with other people. There is a mind-body connection in humans.

Students' mental health is essential because it impacts their ability to study and engage in classroom activities (Marshall-Seslar, 2024). Young learners who have better mental health are better able to learn and are more likely to reach their full potential. One of the most significant elements of the educational system is the mental health of students. In the end, students who are in strong mental health are better able to work with others, make decisions, and build relationships. As students transition into adulthood, these positive effects assist them personally as well as the greater community (Admin, 2024). Also, there are

more benefits to having healthy mental health for students, such as higher self-esteem, positive connections with teachers, coaches, and other students, improved physical health, healthy sleep, exercise, and lifestyle habits (Marshall-Seslar, 2024). Young learners' mental health greatly impacts their education, social life, and emotional well-being (Howard et al., 2019). Many challenges face students who struggle with mental health all through school and adulthood. In contrast, those students who are not struggling might have a higher enthusiasm toward their education and social experiences (Admin, 2024). Young learners who get the support they require from their families, schools, and other social networks usually feel cheerful and eager to engage in extracurricular and social activities. When students progress socially, emotionally, and academically, they may become more involved in their studies, retain information more efficiently, and move on toward graduation more quickly (Admin, 2024). It is proven that experiencing anxiety, stress, depression, aggressive behavior, or addictive conditions is very common among students with poor mental health (Ramón-Arбуés et al., 2020). Students become disinterested or distracted, which impacts their capacity to learn the material addressed in the classroom. Additionally, their mental health affects students' attendance and graduation rates. According to Marshall-Seslar (2024), connecting students to mental health services will encourage them to stay in school and continue their education.

### **1.5 The consequence of Mental Health issues**

Mental health issues can have a negative impact on a student's life in a variety of ways, such as their energy level, concentration, dependability, mental capacity, optimism, quality of life, academic achievement, physical health, and enjoyment with their college experience (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.).

They may also affect their performance and have negative impacts on their relationships with friends and family. Students might suffer long-term consequences from these problems, which affect their overall health, future employment, and earning capacity. According to research, co-occurring anxiety and depression may increase the connection between depression and lower grade point averages. Dropping out of school is also related to depression (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.).

According to research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and WHO (Heath et al., 2017), an estimated 10–20% of youth worldwide and 20% of American children experience a mental illness each year that significantly affects their capacity to function daily. According to Scheiner et al. (2022), “Early adolescence (11-14 years) marks a crucial period for the development and onset of mental health problems” (p. 1). Additionally, numerous college students indicate that their academic performance is negatively impacted by mental health issues. The mental health problems were recognized by college students as hurting their academic performance (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.).

### **1.6 SEL and Mental Health Improvement**

SEL is a successful approach to improving mental health (How Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Can Improve Mental Health, 2023). The method of teaching young learners the skills and knowledge necessary to control their emotions, create healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. Furthermore, SEL shows students how to manage stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges in addition to helping them build skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. All these have a positive influence on mental health (LaBelle, 2023). There are a variety of strategies to implement SEL in the classroom for better

student mental health, according to (How Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Can Improve Mental Health, 2023). The first strategy is to teach students how to identify and express their feelings. Students are more capable of controlling their feelings by being in the present and concentrating on their thoughts and feelings without judgment. Another strategy is to practice gratitude, which includes intentionally emphasizing and showing appreciation for the positive events in a student's life. In addition, SEL teaches students about how to enhance self-care habits such as getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, and doing physical exercise (How Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Can Improve Mental Health, 2023).

### **1.7 The role of short stories in teaching SEL**

Much research highlights the importance of children's literature in teaching SEL. Short stories are crafted to deliver a message on a particular issue, often conveying a moral point that may be subtle, implied, or overtly stated (Kurdi & Nizam, 2022). A great book and a knowledgeable teacher create enthusiastic readers and lifelong learners. Teachers can apply stories to reflect a variety of emotions and social skills in addition to building more empathy, respect for diversity, and peace-making capacities (Middleton, 2023). Children's literature also encourages the growth of literacy abilities along with SEL skills enabling global citizenship (Middleton, 2023).

Good stories include realistic characters with recognized emotions like joy, fear, and frustration, in addition to universal experiences like failure, accomplishment, and loss (Middleton, 2023). They additionally consist of characters with familiar personality characteristics. Children receive the confidence to see themselves as change agents when they observe a character successfully navigating common circumstances and overcoming difficult problems (Middleton, 2023). Young learners have the chance to learn a system of values through children's literature to deal with the inner problems and difficulties in life and to be involved in engaging learning activities (Pulimeno et al., 2020). International research indicates that children's literature, especially storybooks may promote the adoption of healthy choices and provide a beneficial tool for advancing the global well-being of young people (Pulimeno et al., 2020). They can help them better handle social and emotional problems while also demonstrating appropriate behavioral patterns. Children's literature is a helpful tool to educate, teach, and heal (Pulimeno et al., 2020).

Another way to teach SEL is bibliotherapy. While using books as a therapeutic tool has a long history, Bibliotherapy, as a term, was introduced by Samuel Crothers in 1916 (Jack & Ronan, 2008). Crothers proposed giving readings to improve an individual's level of self-understanding and understanding of other people's perspectives (Heath et al., 2017). The theoretical basis of bibliotherapy is grounded in the theories of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which believes that how we feel and think affects our behaviors (Heath et al., 2017). However, bibliotherapy was specifically used with children for the first time in 1936 (Jack & Ronan, 2008). "Bradley and Bosquet (1936) were the first to advise physicians on the use of books for children presenting with behavioral and personality disorders" (Jack & Ronan, 2008, p.168). Thus, since then much research has been done recommending the use of short stories to develop a strong SEL foundation that will positively influence young learners' behavior, instead of expecting teachers to be focused only on controlling young learners' behavior. According to Heath & Heath (2008), stories are sticky because they are "built in emotions," provide "the missing context," and put more "hooks into the ideas" (p. 214).

### **1.8 “The Little Black Fish”**

The story that is chosen for this study is “The Little Black Fish” (Behrangi, 1987) written by Iranian author Samad Behrangi. The book was written in 1967 and published in 1968 by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, just one month before his death. The book received the 6th Children's Book Exhibition award in Bologna, Italy, and was also honored with a diploma by the Biennial of Illustration Bratislava for its illustrations (Taghavi, 2001). The story's characters are animals expressing “their critical thoughts through cultural metaphors, childish expression, and adult conceptualization” (Taghavi, 2001). The language of the characters and their dialogues in a piece of literary work give “insight into the moral issues with which the actions of characters can be measured and evaluated” (Kurdi, 2021, p. 53).

“The Little Black Fish” is narrated by an old fish to its many children and grandchildren during a long night of winter. It follows a little black fish who, unhappy with his small, confined life in a stream, decides to explore where the stream ends. Ignoring warnings from his mother and other fishes, the little fish begins a journey filled with challenges and encounters with various creatures, like frogs, lizards, crabs, and humans. Along the way, the little fish goes through a range of emotional and behavioral experiences. Eventually, he reaches the sea, where he meets other fish who have also dared to explore.

## **2. Method**

While there are many sources recommending books for promoting SEL (Cours, 2023; Ludwig, 2024; Olson, 2023), several factors make “The Little Black Fish” distinct from the previously recommended books. Notably, other recommended short stories often focus on only one SEL competency or skill and are typically age-specific, meaning they are suited to a particular age group and not easily adaptable to others. Additionally, the cultural aspects of these stories, including their characters and settings, may not resonate across different cultures. In contrast, “The Little Black Fish” encompasses all SEL competencies and skills. Its themes allow it to be adapted to various age groups, and the universal nature of its characters and setting transcends cultural boundaries.

An intensive reading of the story showed that the story was rich ground for teaching SEL competencies. A qualitative descriptive approach was used to select specific paragraphs, dialogues, or excerpts from “The Little Black Fish”. Then, these were categorized according to the five competency areas of CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (see Appendix B). Following this, a quantitative method was applied to quantify the number of texts selected for analysis, providing clearer insights into the findings within the short story.

Subsequently, a sample lesson plan (see Appendix A) was developed, incorporating the short story passages with the identified SEL skills. A step-by-step guide was also created to outline how the lesson could be taught. The sample can be used as a model and similar lesson plans for all the skills can be replicated accordingly.

## 2.1 Procedures

Several steps were taken to identify and integrate the highlighted SEL skills in the short story. First, the story was thoroughly reviewed multiple times to gain familiarity with its content and themes. Next, specific dialogues and passages that aligned with the five competency categories of CASEL were selected. Then, these excerpts were systematically categorized under each competency and corresponding skill. Later, a total of 31 excerpts were chosen and analyzed thematically for each skill within each competency. Finally, a sample lesson plan was developed to show how the short story and the identified SEL skills can be taught in an integrative way.

## 2.2 Research Instrument

A table was designed for the five competency categories of the CASEL (see Table 1). Under each category, the potential social and emotional skills that children can learn were listed. Under each category, four sets of skills were listed. The skills highlight the most important cores of social and emotional learning. Then, “The Little Black Fish” was analyzed in light of the skills and competencies.

Table One provides a comprehensive breakdown of the five SEL competencies and underlines the multifaceted nature of them. The four skills under Self-awareness emphasize the importance of internal reflection. They enable them to understand themselves better and also provide a foundation for other SEL competencies. Self-management focuses on individuals' emotional regulation. They equip them to face emotional and behavioral challenges. Once individuals are aware of their emotions and have the capability to manage them, they can deal with their social environment. Social Awareness focuses on the outward world. The skills under this competency highlight the importance of understanding different perspectives have positive social interactions. Effective interpersonal skills are important when interacting in the outer world. Relationship Skills help individuals form healthy relationships. They reinforce the importance of mutual support within social networks. Finally, Responsible Decision-making helps individuals with ethical and thoughtful choices in outer-world interactions. The skills under this category are important for making decisions that are considerate of both individual and collective well-being.

Table 1: Five CASEL competencies and their skills

CASEL Competency	Skills
<b>1. Self-awareness</b>	1.1 Recognizing and naming emotions
	1.2 Identifying personal strengths and weaknesses
	1.3 Developing a growth mindset
	1.4 Building confidence and self-esteem
<b>2. Self-management</b>	2.1 Setting and achieving goals
	2.2 Managing stress and anxiety
	2.3 Regulating emotions effectively
	2.4 Developing organizational skills
<b>3. Social Awareness</b>	3.1 Empathy and understanding of others' perspectives

	3.2 Respect for diversity and inclusion
	3.3 Recognizing social norms and cues
	3.4 Appreciating and celebrating cultural differences
<b>4. Relationship Skills</b>	4.1 Effective communication (listening and speaking)
	4.2 Cooperation and teamwork
	4.3 Building and maintaining friendships
	4.4 Offering and seeking help
<b>5. Responsible decision-making</b>	5.1 Ethical and responsible decision-making
	5.2 Analyzing situations and potential consequences
	5.3 Problem-solving and critical thinking
	5.4 Reflecting on and evaluating past decisions

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The passages were analyzed descriptively, emphasizing the themes of each skill. For the quantified results, MS Excel was used to assign the tables and graphs. For the discussion part, the content of each content was analyzed thematically based on the SEL skill presented.

### 3. Results

Analyzing the content of the short story, “The Little Black Fish”, proved to be a useful resource for teachers to teach. The short story had examples of all the important skills that students need to improve their emotional and social skills. The four skills that we listed under self-awareness competency are the following: Recognizing and naming emotions, identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, developing a growth mindset, and building confidence and self-esteem. The story had at least one example for each of the skills. A total of ten examples were found under each skill (see Appendix B, No. 1, Self-awareness).

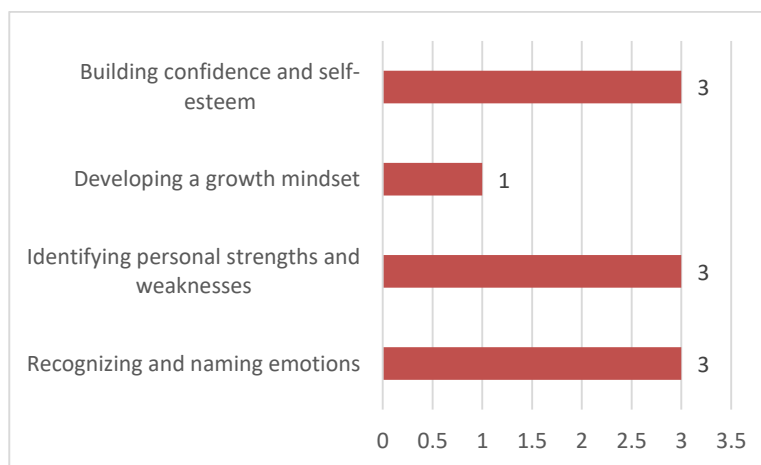


Figure 3: Self-awareness skills

For the second self-management competency, there are also four different skills: Setting and achieving goals, managing stress and anxiety, regulating emotions effectively, and developing organizational skills. Two examples were found for managing stress and anxiety and one example for the other skills (see Appendix B, No. 2, Self-management).



Figure 4: Self-management skills

Empathy and understanding of others' perspectives, respect for diversity and inclusion, recognizing social norms and cues, and appreciation of cultural differences are the four skills of the third competency, social awareness competency. Five examples were found in the story which can be highlighted by the teacher to show and promote the skills (see Appendix B, No. 3, Social Awareness).

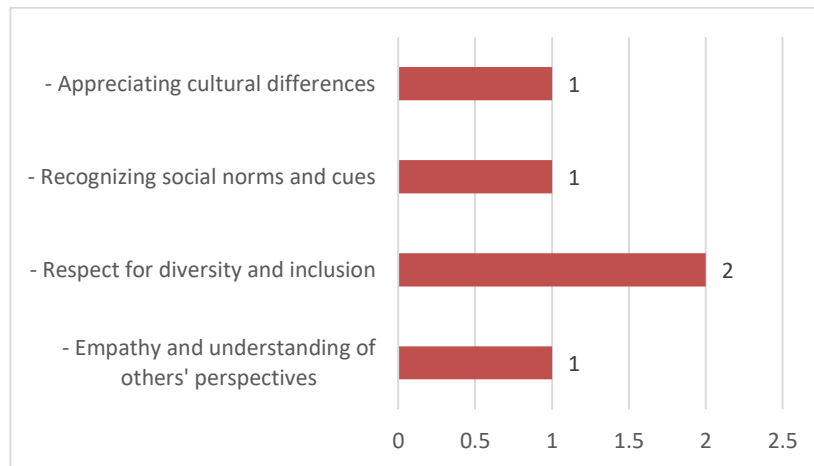


Figure 5: Social awareness skills

Under relationship skills competency, one example was found in the story for each of the four skills which are effective communication (listening and speaking), cooperation and teamwork, building and maintaining friendships, and offering and seeking help (see Appendix B, No. 4, Relationship Skills).

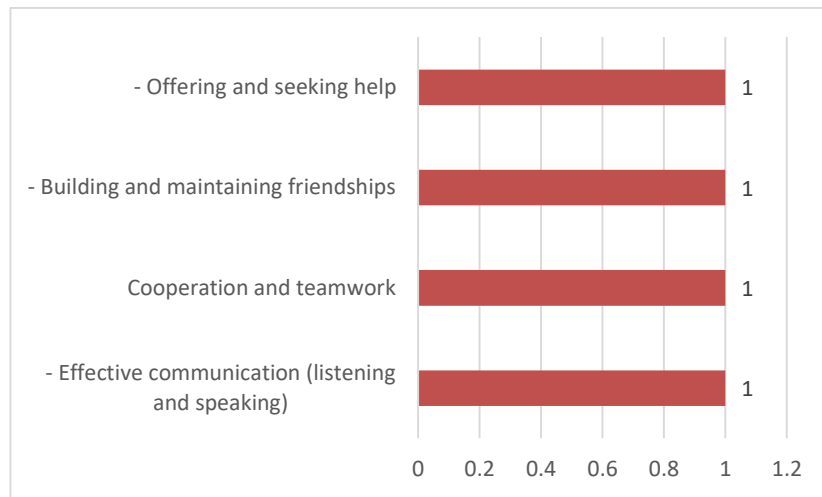


Figure 6: Relationship skills

Various examples were found for Responsible decision-making competency. Ethical and responsible decision-making, analyzing situations and potential consequences, problem-solving, and critical thinking, and reflecting on and evaluating past decisions are the skills (see Appendix B, No. 5, Responsible Decision-making).

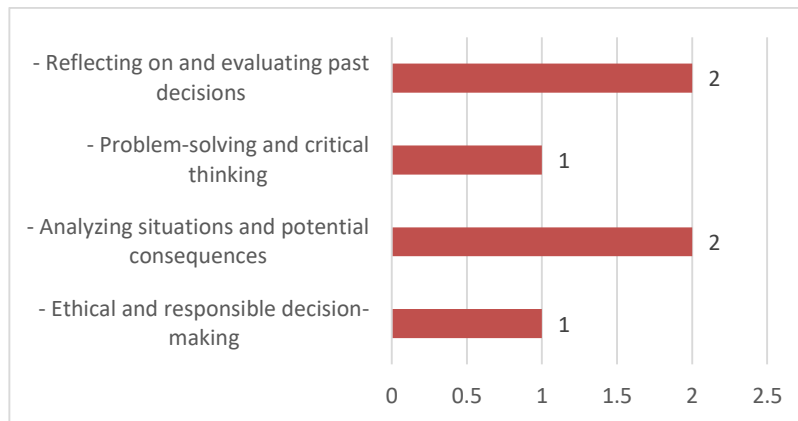


Figure 7: Responsible decision-making skills

A lesson plan sample (see Appendix A) has been designed to teach SEL through “The Little Black Fish”. The sample is designed only for the first skill, Recognizing and Naming Emotions, of the first SEL competency, Self-awareness. The sample helps the students discover the emotions of the characters and comprehend the abstract concepts of SEL. Additionally, the sample plan provides a model for integrating short stories with the CASEL framework, serving the teacher with a conceptual foundation on how to teach young learners SEL effectively. It follows a practical step-by-step outline of how to teach the self-awareness concept through recognizing and naming emotions as the first step in the SEL competencies. The lesson plan combines structured activities and guided discussions, connecting the lesson to the young learners’ everyday experiences.

#### 4. Discussion

Connecting the findings to the research question, “The Little Black Fish” can be an effective short story for children to learn SEL. Learning SEL is best taught when it is put under the five competency categories known as CASEL. The short story has examples that improve children’s social and emotional skills. The four skills under self-awareness competency were highlighted clearly in the story. Recognizing and naming emotions is one of the skills that is very important for kids to have healthy social and emotional behavior. The excerpt from the exposition of the story, says, “For several days the little fish had been deep in thought and had talked very little. She swam slowly behind her mother around the pond and did not play with the other fish” (p.1), is an example that teaches children to get familiar with their emotions. The excerpt shows that the little fish recognizes her feeling of dissatisfaction with being in the pond and doing the same thing every day repeatedly. This example, when emphasized by the teacher within a solid lesson plan, teaches children to recognize and express their feelings. Another example, in the story, stresses the same point. When the little fish says, “I’ve just gotten tired of these swims. I don’t want to continue this boring stuff and be happy as a fool until one day... etc.” (p.1-2), she expresses her feelings. With the same token, this is a good example of teaching kids to express their emotions. There are examples of the other four skills of self-awareness such as identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, developing a growth mindset, and building confidence and self-esteem. For instance, “I’m going to find the end of the stream” (p.8), emphasizes the little fish’s willingness to learn about the world beyond the pond, and this goes under the skill of developing a growth mindset.

The second SEL competency is self-management. One of its skills is setting and achieving goals. In the story, the little fish sets a clear goal to discover where the stream ends, when she says, “I want to go see where the stream ends” (p. 2). This skill is essential in that the children can learn how to establish certain goals that they want to achieve and ultimately put them into action by making careful choices. Another skill that is also related to self-management is Managing stress and anxiety, which is certainly very important for children and adults too. The little fish acknowledges the discomfort and restlessness that led to sleepless nights, she says “I didn’t sleep a wink all night. At last, I decided to go and find where the stream ends” (p.2). So, in this part, we can see that she wants to manage her stress and anxiety, and for that she decides to solve her emotions.

The third competency is social awareness, which is empathy and understanding of others’ perspectives skill. In a part of the story, the little fish speaks with her mother and says, “But mother dear, isn’t it true that everything comes to an end? Nights end, days end, weeks, months, years ...” (p.2). In this part the fish tries to understand why her mother and others believe life is limited to the pond, this skill when taught effectively by the teacher, can help children to be aware of their surroundings and deal with others’ perspectives compassionately, especially when it comes to the loved ones. Another skill of this competency is respect for diversity and inclusion, the little black fish says, “I want to know what’s happening in other places” (p.2). The little fish values different perspectives and wants to explore beyond her place of living to understand how others live. By teaching this skill to children, we encourage their growth into respectful individuals who accept diversity.

The fourth competency is Relationship Skills. Effective communication (listening and speaking) is a skill that makes children become successful communicators and express themselves confidently. In the story,

the little black fish says, “I’m going to find the end of the stream” (p.2). The little fish conveys its intentions and arguments when communicating with other sea creatures. Another skill of this competency is offering and seeking help. In the story the little black fish tells the lizard “Dear lizard, I’m a little black fish who’s going to search for the end of the stream. I think you’re wise, so, I’d like to ask you something” (p.7). The little fish asks for the lizard’s advice and help before continuing its journey.

Responsible decision-making is the fifth and last competency. Ethical and responsible decision-making is an important skill that teaches children respect, honesty, and empathy. In the story, we can see that the little black fish tells the tadpoles “Don’t fall for his tricks...” (p.11). This shows us that the little fish makes the ethical decision to warn the tadpoles about the pelican’s deceitful intentions. For problem-solving and critical thinking skills, here is an example highlighting it. “Then the lizard crawled into a crack in the rock and returned with a very sharp dagger” (p.7). The little black fish keeps a dagger he had from the fish and then he uses the dagger responsibly when the time comes to use it. She uses it to escape from the pelican’s pouch. A skill like this can teach children to think of different solutions.

These analyses underscore the studies that have been mentioned in the literature review. As indicated by Middleton (2023), stories include realistic characters with recognized emotions like joy, fear, and frustration, in addition to universal experiences like failure, accomplishment, and loss, and children receive confidence to see themselves as change agents when they observe a character successfully navigating circumstances and overcoming difficult problems. When teachers apply stories to teach these varieties of emotions and social skills, children build empathy, respect for diversity, and peace-making capacities. Pulimeno et al. (2020) support the same findings, they stress that young learners have the chance to learn a system of values throughout children’s literature to deal with the inner problems and difficulties in life and to be involved in engaging learning activities.

The examples in the short story will have an effective impact when integrated into a comprehensive lesson plan. The lesson plan sample (as shown in Appendix A) provides teachers with a solid conceptual foundation for effectively teaching SEL to young learners. It not only serves as a practical guide but also aligns with the Anchor Competencies Framework and Guide discussed in the literature review. When prepared by a department, it would be a significant support tool for teachers teaching SEL through short stories. The lesson plan offers a clear, step-by-step outline for teaching skills and competencies. It ensures that students can connect the lessons to their everyday experiences, thereby making abstract concepts of SEL more tangible and accessible.

## **5. Limitations**

Although this study gives relevant insights into teaching SEL through short stories, the research has some limitations. The first limitation is that in this study, only one single qualitative analysis of a short story, “The Little Black Fish,” has been undertaken. Despite the universal characteristics of the story, some of the contingent cultural and narrative aspects of this story may not appeal equally to all students or serve equally well in different classroom settings. Quantitatively, useful as the analysis might prove, it suffers from the fact that it only counts how many times themes occur and therefore may not reflect student-level engagement or depth of understanding of SEL concepts. Lastly, this study relies on a pre-designed lesson

plan the researcher deems useful and practical but may not be effective in every classroom environment and needs some kind of adaptation in different classrooms.

## 6. Conclusion

Integrating SEL into the school curriculum provides a solid framework to support young learners, aligning with the first and second tiers of MTSS support: universal support for all students and targeted support for some. This research demonstrates that the five essential SEL competencies-self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making- can be effectively taught through short stories. “The Little Black Fish” is an effective example of a story that can be used to teach SEL, as it includes all the skills children need to develop the competencies.

This study demonstrates a conceptual framework for teaching SEL through short stories; it gives a foundation to any SEL course that may be designed, incorporating literary works as teaching tools in its delivery. More importantly, the lesson plan designed for this research affords teachers a practical step-by-step guide to effectively implementing SEL in the classroom.

However, though the research provides a strong conceptual framework, it also points out the necessity to conduct further studies exploring the application of SEL through a broader range of stories and in more diverse educational settings. Further studies should consider the long-term effects of integrating SEL through literature using longitudinal research designs and exploring how such interventions are adaptable for different age groups and cultural contexts.

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### Appendices

#### Appendix A: Lesson Plan: Self-Awareness Through Recognizing and Naming Emotions

<b>LESSON TITLE</b>	<b>SELF-AWARENESS THROUGH RECOGNIZING AND NAMING EMOTIONS</b>
<b>GRADE LEVEL</b>	Appropriate for ages 6-10 years
<b>SUBJECT</b>	Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)
<b>DURATION</b>	50 minutes
<b>LESSON OBJECTIVES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Cognitive:</b> Students will be familiarized with the concept of self-awareness and the importance of recognizing and naming emotions.</li> <li>- <b>Affective:</b> Students will develop empathy by reflecting on the emotions of characters in a story and relating them to their own experiences.</li> <li>- <b>Behavioral:</b> Students will practice identifying and expressing their own emotions through guided discussions and activities.</li> </ul>
<b>MATERIALS NEEDED</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The short story 'The Little Black Fish'</li> <li>- Whiteboard and markers</li> <li>- 'Emotions Chart' with different faces showing various emotions (happy, sad, scared, curious, etc.)</li> <li>- Index cards or worksheets for drawing or writing about emotions</li> <li>- Crayons or markers</li> </ul>
<b>INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Hook:</b> Begin with a simple question: 'Do you ever feel a certain way but aren't sure what to call it? Like when you're really happy or sad, or maybe when you're curious about something?'</li> <li>- <b>Explain:</b> 'Understanding and naming our emotions is important because it helps us know how we're feeling and what we can do about it. Let's see how the Little Black Fish talks about her feelings.'</li> </ul>
<b>DIRECT INSTRUCTION (10 MINUTES)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Read Aloud:</b> Read selected excerpts from 'The Little Black Fish'. Focus on passages where the Little Black Fish expresses dissatisfaction, curiosity, fear, and anxiety.</li> <li>• Example from the text:                      "For several days the little fish had been deep in thought and had talked very little. She swam slowly behind her mother around the pond and did not play with the other fish."</li> <li>- <b>Guided Discussion:</b> Discuss each instance where the Little Black Fish recognizes and expresses her emotions. Use guiding questions to encourage students to think about why the character feels the way she does and how she expresses those feelings.</li> </ul>

<p>GUIDED PRACTICE (15 MINUTES)</p>	<p>- <b>Discussion Prompts:</b> Lead students through discussions on the three main instances:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognizing Dissatisfaction and Curiosity</li> <li>2. Expressing Dissatisfaction with Life</li> <li>3. Expressing Fear and Anxiety</li> </ol> <p>- Example from the Text: Provide specific examples from the story for each instance. Discuss the importance of naming and expressing these emotions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion Prompt example: “The Little Black Fish starts to feel that swimming in the same pond every day isn’t enough for her. She begins to wonder if there’s more to life outside the pond. She feels dissatisfied and curious.”</li> <li>• Guiding Question example: “How does the Little Black Fish feel about living in the pond? What words would you use to describe her feelings?”</li> </ul>
<p>INDEPENDENT PRACTICE (10 MINUTES)</p>	<p>- <b>Activity:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotions stickers: Distribute the Emotions stickers and ask students to put the emotions into the different parts of the story.</li> <li>- <b>Sharing:</b> Allow students to share their drawings or writings with the class if they feel comfortable.</li> </ul>
<p>CLOSURE (5 MINUTES)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Group Reflection:</b> Recap the lesson by asking: ‘What did we learn from the Little Black Fish and the tiny fish about emotions?’</li> <li>- <b>Connecting to Self-Awareness:</b> Reinforce the skill by explaining: ‘Being aware of our emotions and naming them is called ‘self-awareness.’ Next time you feel something strong, like happiness, sadness, or fear, try to name it. Then, talk about it with someone you trust.’</li> </ul>
<p>ASSESSMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Informal:</b> Monitor student participation in discussions and their ability to match emotions to the story.</li> <li>- <b>Formal:</b> Collect and review the index cards or worksheets where students drew or wrote about their emotions.</li> </ul>
<p>EXTENSION HOMEWORK (OPTIONAL)</p>	<p><b>Emotion Drawing and ‘Emotions Chart’:</b> Ask students to draw a picture of themselves feeling a specific emotion (e.g., happy, sad, excited, scared). And, on the “Emotions Chart” sheet that is given to them, circle the emotion they chose. Encourage them to share their drawing with a family member and explain why they chose that emotion.</p>
<p>REFLECTION (FOR TEACHER)</p>	<p>- <b>After the Lesson:</b> Reflect on the effectiveness of the lesson. Did students engage with the material? Were the objectives met? What could be improved in future lessons?</p>

**Appendix B: CASEL Competency Table Excerpts and Analysis**

<i>SEL Competency</i>	<i>Skills</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Excerpts from the text</i>
<i>1. Self-awareness</i>	1.1 Recognizing and naming emotions	<p>1.1.1 The little fish recognizes and expresses her feelings of dissatisfaction and curiosity about life beyond the pond.</p> <p>1.1.2 The little black fish acknowledges its dissatisfaction with its life in the pond.</p> <p>1.1.3 This vivid expression of fear and anxiety helps children learn to name and express their own fears.</p>	<p>“For several days the little fish had been deep in thought and had talked very little. She swam slowly behind her mother around the pond and did not play with the other fish.”</p> <p>“I’ve just gotten tired of these swims. I don’t want to continue this boring stuff and be happy as a fool until one day I wake up and see that like all of you, I’ve become old, but still am as dumb as I am now.”</p> <p>““You there...Who are you?” responded the tiny fish. ‘Can’t you see? ...I’m ...dy...ing. O, me ...oh, my ...oh, oh ...mama ...I ...I can’t come with you...”</p>
	1.2 Identifying personal strengths and weaknesses	<p>1.2.1 The little fish acknowledges its strengths and beliefs in its ability to see beyond its immediate surroundings.</p> <p>1.2.2 The mother’s reluctance to explore beyond her known world reveals a weakness in openness to new experiences and understanding. This can help children recognize the limitations of being overly cautious or closed-minded.</p> <p>1.2.3 The tiny fish’s quickness to blame others and their inability to think independently highlights their weakness in self-reliance and courage. This instance can</p>	<p>“I have a reason, and intelligence and understanding. I have eyes and I can see.”</p> <p>“My dear child, are you crazy? World! ... World! What is this other world! The world is right here where we are. Life is just as we have it...”</p> <p>“There’s no way to escape! It’s your fault since you influenced us and led us astray.”</p>

		teach children to recognize when they are relying too much on others instead of their own abilities.	
	1.3 Developing a growth mindset	1.3.1 The little fish shows a willingness to learn about the world beyond the pond despite the discouragement from others.	“I’m going to find the end of the stream.”
	1.4 Building confidence and self-esteem	<p>1.4.1 The little fish stands firm in its beliefs even when other fish threaten to harm it</p> <p>1.4.2 Despite being mocked by the neighbor fish, the little black fish confidently defends her decision to pursue a different life. This shows how standing up for one's beliefs can build self-esteem and resilience against criticism.</p> <p>1.4.3 The recognition from her peers after she successfully embarks on her journey reinforces the little fish's confidence and self-esteem.</p>	<p>“If you weren’t ignorant,” replied the fish, “you’d know that there are many others in the world who are pleased with their appearances.”</p> <p>“Madam,” answered the little fish, I don’t know what you mean by ‘scholar’ and ‘philosopher,’ I’ve just gotten tired of these swims. I don’t want to continue this boring stuff and be happy as a fool until one day I wake up and see that like all of you, I’ve become old, but still am as dumb as I am now.”</p> <p>“You’ve awakened us from a deep sleep. You’ve taught us many things that we had not even thought about before. We hope to see you again, learned and fearless friend.”</p>
2. <i>Self-management</i>	2.1 Setting and achieving goals	2.1.1 The little fish sets a clear goal to discover where the stream ends.	“I want to go see where the stream ends.”
	2.2 Managing stress and anxiety	<p>2.2.1 She acknowledges the discomfort and restlessness that led to sleepless nights.</p> <p>Despite being caught by the pelican, the little fish remains calm and thinks of a plan.</p>	<p>“I didn’t sleep a wink all night. At last, I decided to go and find where the stream ends.”</p> <p>“I have a plan...”</p>
	2.3 Regulating emotions effectively	2.3.1 The little fish keeps its composure while being criticized by other fish.	“Don’t fall for his tricks...”

	2.4 Developing organizational skills	<p>2.4.1 The little fish creates a structured plan to escape the pelican.</p> <p>2.4.2 Throughout her journey, the Little Black Fish encounters various challenges, such as the pelican, the swordfish, and the heron. Instead of giving up, she devises strategies to overcome these obstacles, demonstrating resilience and perseverance—key aspects of self-management.</p>	<p>“I’m going to start tossing back and forth in order to tickle the heron. As soon as she opens her mouth and begins to laugh, you jump out.”</p> <p>“We’ve been caught in the pelican’s pouch, but there’s a chance to escape.”</p>
3. <i>Social awareness</i>	3.1 Empathy and understanding of others' perspectives	3.1.1 The Little Black Fish tries to understand why its mother and others believe life is limited to the pond.	“But mother, dear, isn’t it true that everything comes to an end? Nights end, days end, weeks, months, years ...”
	3.2 Respect for diversity and inclusion	<p>3.2.1 The Little Black Fish values different perspectives and wants to explore beyond her immediate surroundings to understand how others live.</p> <p>3.2.1 The Little Black Fish speaks to the tadpoles despite their different appearances and behaviors.</p>	<p>“I want to know what’s happening in other places.”</p> <p>“Please don’t insult me. My name is Little Black Fish.”</p>
	3.3 Recognizing social norms and cues	3.3.1 The Little Black Fish understands the social norm of conforming to the group’s belief in the pond’s boundaries.	“Soon a rumor spread among all the fish that a little black fish had come from far away and wanted to find the end of the river.”
	3.4 Appreciating cultural differences	3.4.1 The little fish learns from other fish and creatures it encounters, understanding their different perspectives.	“We’ll leave that for tomorrow night,” said the old fish. “Now, it’s time for bed.”
4. <i>Relationship skills</i>	4.1 Effective communication (listening and speaking)	4.1.1 The little fish conveys its intentions and arguments when communicating with other fish and creatures.	“I’m going to find the end of the stream.”
	4.2 Cooperation and teamwork	4.2.1 The little fish collaborates with others to escape the pelican’s pouch.	“The others went forward and said, ‘Your Excellency, Mr.

			Pelican, we strangled the meddlesome black fish ...”
	4.3 Building and maintaining friendships	4.3.1 The little fish maintains a friendship with a snail despite the disapproval of its mother and other fish.	“He was my friend.”
	4.4 Offering and seeking help	4.4.1 The little fish seeks the lizard’s advice and help before continuing its journey.	“Dear lizard, I’m a little black fish who’s going to search for the end of the stream. I think you’re wise, so, I’d like to ask you something.”
5. <i>Responsible decision-making</i>	5.1 Ethical and responsible decision-making	5.1.1 The little fish makes the ethical decision to warn the tadpoles about the pelican’s deceitful intentions.	“Don’t fall for his tricks...”
	5.2 Analyzing situations and potential consequences	5.2.1 The little black fish considers the implications of staying in the pond versus exploring the stream’s end, weighing the potential risks and rewards.  5.2.2 The little fish assesses the potential risks and rewards of its journey.	“I want to know if life is simply for circling around in a small place until you become old and nothing else, or is there another way to live in the world?”  “If only the pelican doesn’t catch me! Is it true the swordfish enjoys killing and eating its own kind? Why is the heron our enemy?”
	5.3 Problem-solving and critical thinking	5.3.1 The little fish uses the dagger to escape from the pelican’s pouch.	“Then the lizard crawled into a crack in the rock and returned with a very sharp dagger.”
	5.4 Reflecting on and evaluating past decisions	5.4.1 The little black fish reflects on its experiences and questions whether living in a small pond, as generations before it did, is the best way to spend its life.  5.4.2 The little fish reflects on the experiences it encounters and evaluates whether it will continue its journey.	“For instance, I know that when most fish get old, they complain about everything.”  “I’d like to travel around first, then I’ll come join your group.”