

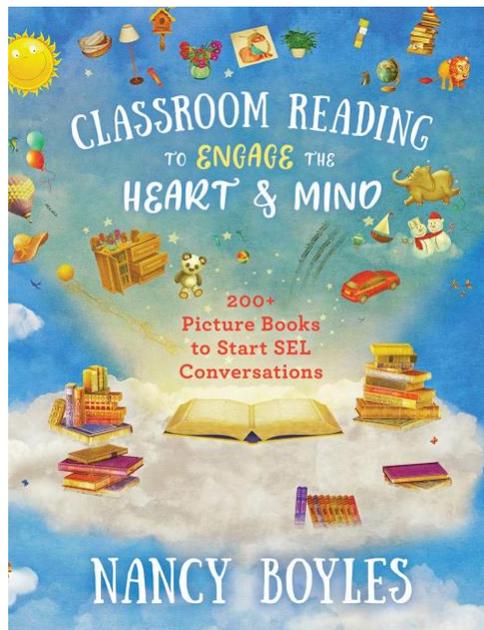
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## *Review of Classroom reading to engage the heart & mind: 200+ picture books to start SEL conversations*

**By Nancy Boyles**

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Having recently become responsible for educating future K-6 teachers, I was keenly interested in reading Nancy Boyles' *Classroom Reading to Engage the Heart & Mind*. The bulk of my own classroom experience was at the upper elementary ages; thus, I am constantly looking for ways to increase my acumen with picture books, a genre with which I do not have extensive experience. Boyles' text promised to profile more than a hundred picture books that exemplify specific Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies. While I chose to read this book for the picture book profiles, as I delved more into this text, I began to see how Boyles' text elaborates and contextualizes the various SEL competencies.

Boyles' book does an excellent job profiling 120 picture books, providing an additional 120 book titles for consideration, and aligning these books with SEL competencies. It also does a competent job connecting SEL lessons with the types of literacy lessons with which many teachers are undoubtedly familiar. As a practical matter, for teachers and teacher educators looking, as I was, to build facility with a large set of picture books and/or buttress their understanding of SEL, this book makes an excellent addition to one's library. The areas in which I found the book lacking were related to balance of academic and social emotional skills as well as the lack of a critically reflexive justification for SEL. The remainder of this review will outline the two parts of the book the circle back for some more general comments about my reading of the text.

### Part One

Boyles' text is divided into two main sections. The first part, titled *Understanding Social Emotional Learning and its Connection to Literacy*, contains the first two chapters. Chapter one explains the urgent need for teaching SEL skills. Here, Boyles skims the research and policy supports that have brought SEL to widespread attention. Citing pervasive adoption

of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) SEL framework, Boyles deploys the CASEL framework across the text.

According to CASEL, SEL is:

...the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, n.d., as cited in Boyles, 2020, p. 7)

The CASEL framework subdivides into five competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making), with each competency then having four to six focus areas. This structure will serve as the organization for the second part of the book. Thus, while Chapter one spends little time on delineating the framework, each aspect of the framework is explained in its relevant section later in the text. Finally, while SEL is focused on student learning, Boyles ends the first chapter with an overview of teacher habits that can support the types of healthy classrooms in which students can best learn and practice SEL skills.

Chapter two attempts to pull disparate skill and knowledge frameworks into concert, and Boyles packs this chapter with brief forays into frameworks that will feel familiar to many readers. The chapter begins by drawing upon Boyles' extensive background in literacy to connect SEL and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Here Boyles provides a concise chart that combines the Common Core reading standards with corresponding applications of SEL skills. For example, the Common Core reading standard seven stipulates that students should integrate and evaluate content across diverse media forms. Boyles appends to this the skills of analyzing picture books for "characters' facial

expressions and body language, and also the color the author uses to bring meaning to the page" (p. 15). While the integration of CCSS skills with SEL competencies are not necessarily profound, they do provide a refreshing change of emphasis from the more abstract and cognitive standards of the former framework. These applications may be of particular use for elementary teachers as they help their students develop an empathic regard for the characters and stories read in class—a form of connection that can sometimes be lost in standards-focused lessons. After all, as Boyles notes, in Common Core-compliant lessons the *standards* drive the *content*. SEL lessons do the inverse.

Chapter two then connects SEL to the close reading process advocated by CCSS organizations. In a chapter filled with familiar frameworks, the section covering Boyles' Seven Thinking Boxes stands out as both novel and important. The Seven Thinking Boxes comprise a framework for analyzing any text through the SEL framework. These seven boxes are basic thinking, puzzling details, feelings, creative thinking, problems and issues, something to treasure, and author's tools. These boxes—each represented by a memorable pictogram—then provide the basis for SEL/text discussion prompts. They also serve as a key tool in the chapters contained in the second, and much longer, section of the book.

## Part Two

Boyles' second part presents the 240 books profiled and categorized within the five CASEL SEL competencies. The SEL competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. In the interest of brevity, and because each competency chapter follows the same format, I will outline a single chapter here.

Chapter six deals with relationships skills. Boyles begins by providing an overview of the CASEL definition of the competency and its focus areas—in the case of relationship skills these are social engagement, relationship-building, teamwork, and communication. The chapter is further organized by covering each competency focus area sequentially. Thus, the first focus area—social engagement—is given a detailed description, including the ways it can manifest in the classroom, questions teacher can ask themselves about their students' skills relative to the focus area, and a note about how readers can identify further books appropriate to the focus area.

The bulk of each chapter then presents what I believe will be most interesting for a majority of readers: the picture books. Each SEL focus area is illuminated with five books chosen by Boyles that exemplify and enact that focus area. Each book is related to a message—essentially the moral or theme statement. These themes provide an easy way for the reader to locate potentially relevant books for their practice. Boyles also provides a concise summary of each book as well as potential ways for readers to extend their use of the book with their students. For example, Boyles connects the message "Sometimes just 'hanging out' with friends is the best fun" with the book *The Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant (Boyles, 2020, p. 160). In Rylant's book, extended family come together for a gathering. Boyles suggests teacher point out that the family members in the story are so engaged with conversation and enjoying each other's company that there are "no visits to Disney World, no major league baseball games, and not even any video games" (p. 160). Boyles suggests teachers challenge their own students to consider potential ways to have fun with friends that don't involve spending money or using technology. Finally, each focus area presents an extended analysis of one of the five books, including discussion prompts for the book that align with Boyles' Seven Thinking Boxes. The

section then concludes with a chart that provides general Thinking Box questions that can be applied or adapted to any book connected with the particular SEL competency focus area. These two charts, in particular, can serve as valuable pedagogical supports for teachers who wish to engage in thoughtful discussion with their students.

### **Reflection on Book Organization**

As the previous paragraphs make clear, the book's organization is consistent and thoughtful. Because of this, readers will be able to rapidly pinpoint picture books that relate to specific SEL skills they may wish to emphasize. On the other hand, the use of ample text features such as headings and bolded book titles enable easy skimming. Put another way, this book is well suited to both hunting and fishing—to quickly isolating valuable material as well as to browsing for potentially valuable leads. More broadly, the book's formatting reflects a style I wish more publishers would adopt. It features wide margins and generous font spacing, making for easy annotating and referencing. Further, the books' charts are clear and helpful. Readers can gain much from this book by simply scanning the charts for content—frameworks, discussion questions, book titles and/or messages—that catch the eye. Thus, Boyles' book is an excellent compendium of picture books and guide to aligning them to SEL concepts and lessons. For many teachers and teacher educators, as well as parents, part two of this book will easily justify its purchase. As a source for books to introduce to my own teacher candidates, I can envision sharing part two in my literacy courses.

### **Critical Reflection**

And yet, as a reader craving a purposeful and critical engagement with SEL, I found two areas of the book lacking. First, I struggled at times to grasp the balance between the traditional academic skills and

SEL skills outlined in part one. SEL is presented as a counterweight to the cognitive skills standards and high stakes testing often emphasized in contemporary schooling. I found myself, especially in Chapter two, struggling to clarify the appropriate ordering of heart and mind. Boyles clearly wishes to emphasize the former, going so far as to end Chapter two with a section titled "Books that engage the heart" (p. 27). But coming as it does after rapid-fire treatments of four non-SEL frameworks, this chapter feels heavily tilted toward the head. My guess is that Boyles wants to introduce the SEL texts within frameworks with which teachers may already have familiarity. Further, and pragmatically, should a teacher face a challenge to implementing SEL, Chapter two does provide teachers with clear alignments between SEL and the types of standards and pedagogical tools appreciated by school boards and administrators generally, namely the CCSS, close reading, and Webb's Depth of Knowledge.

The more pressing concern in my reading is the framing of SEL as a concern for the individual student and classrooms at the expense of connecting SEL to the wider world. This is reflected in Boyles' argument for the importance of SEL at the very beginning of the book. Boyles advocates for SEL as addressing "pervasive environmental issues have continued to take their toll: substance abuse in some students' homes, poverty, hunger, and so forth. And for all students, there's the constant lurking threat of school violence" (pp. 3-4). Boyles then lists deleterious classroom behaviors that interrupt learning. The reasoning in these sections strikes me as decidedly instrumental—students are in school to learn, schooling happens in classes that should be run a certain way, social/emotional problems disrupt learning, and these problems can be ameliorated by SEL instruction. What is missing in this text is (1) a critical reflexiveness that questions the very conditions of the classrooms in which these behaviors happen, and (2) sufficient discussion of

the conditions that lead to the pervasive social ills that Boyles identifies. If SEL is the "softer side of schooling" that can benefit students' emotional and social development, then issues of cross-cultural empathy and social justice should be well-represented within any work that tackles SEL. Thus, I was disappointed that the macro contexts in which schools exist and in which students live—the social, economic, and political worlds that directly impinge on students' emotional states—receive scant focus.

This oversight does not seem to be isolated to this text. Observe this statement from CASEL's webpage:

SEL is driven by what the research says, what families want, and what is best for children—not by politics on any side. But when political agendas are prioritized over children's healthy development, students risk losing out on an education that will help them succeed in school and in life.

Communities across the political spectrum recognize that all students deserve a high-quality education that fully supports their social, emotional, and academic learning. (CASEL, n.d.)

I am at a loss to understand the political agendas with which CASEL is concerned. I can imagine no sensible mainstream politician who would oppose teaching children skills that essentially boil down to civility, kindness, and self-control. (Now whether those same politicians themselves enact those skills is another story, of course!) What I do notice, however, is a lack of critical reflexiveness in Boyles' text. These SEL skills are innocuous enough, and as a previous review of an SEL book in this journal indicated, they align well with self-help stalwarts like Steven Covey's *Seven Habits* (Bedingfield, 2021).

But in Boyles' book, SEL skills are framed almost exclusively within the need to have well-functioning classrooms. Nowhere in this text is the question asked about why classrooms are as they are and what social forces are causing the "pervasive environmental issues" Boyles identified as reasons to teach using SEL in the first place. Put another way, at the micro level, SEL-aligned picture books seem like an appropriate way to help students develop the basic skills of civility and responsibility necessary for success in the wider society. But the questions as to what social, emotional, and personal success means in a society that is structurally inequitable is left unquestioned. While I do not wish to run afoul of the CASEL's critique of advocating political ideology, I do believe that literacy scholarship has come to the point where issues of equity, representation, and justice deserve a larger hearing in a book meant for use by teachers of literacy—especially when that book is about a framework meant to ensure more socially and emotionally attuned pupils.

### Conclusion

In sum, Boyles' *Classroom reading to engage the heart & mind: 200+ picture books to start SEL conversations* is an excellent overview of SEL and of hundreds of picture books that can be aligned with it. It features tools that can help teachers quickly construct their own repertoire of inspiring books and SEL lessons. For classroom teachers, teacher educators, and parents, part two of this text is well worth reading. For teachers who need to frame their SEL work within dominant standards, part one of this text can be of use. Despite my qualms about the lack of critical reflexiveness, Boyles' text does indeed live up to its aim of helping teachers understand how to better engage students' *hearts* and *minds*.

### References

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