



Children's Literature as a Channel for Social-Emotional Learning: Reading Israeli Children's Literature Written in Arabic and Hebrew

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Abstract

Children's literature is considered a channel for providing socioemotional skills. This study examined the way social-emotional learning (SEL) is reflected in the Hebrew and Arabic children's literature in Israel, based on a content and semiotic analysis of 50 works included in the state program "March of Books", for Jewish schools, and its sister program for Arab schools. The findings indicate that world literature works translated into either Hebrew or Arabic have established socioemotional skills more than the original works in either language. Moreover, Hebrew works have established such skills more than have Arab ones. Finally, whereas the Hebrew works have established individual skills such as self-management, in addition to social awareness skills designed to strengthen individuals' attachment to their country, the Arab works have established interpersonal skills designed to strengthen individuals' attachment to their immediate social environment. These differences suggest that the determination of skills to be provided by children's books is affected by external, sociopolitical factors, and by divergent cultural perceptions of childhood. Children's literature may be used to promote SEL when integrated in government educational programs that strike a balance between local and world literature, represent the sociocultural diversity in the learner's immediate environment, and promote multicultural values. The current findings can help decision makers determine the contents and select the titles most appropriate for SEL. Finally, they may inform a practical guide, helping authors of children's books to integrate socioemotional skills in their works.

Keywords Social-emotional learning (SEL) · Children's literature · Socialization · Israeli society · Hebrew and Arabic children's literature

Introduction

Acquiring socioemotional skills is particularly important in preschool, as it provides a solid basis for the children's development, contributes to their well-being, and helps them perform effectively, particularly in pluralist societies (Cline, 2019; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Children's literature

is considered a major channel for providing such skills—it is an effective way of educating the whole child through multidisciplinary teaching that facilitates the development of both academic and socioemotional skills (Heath et al., 2017; Sandell, 2020).

The learners' sociocultural context is relevant to structuring social-emotional learning programs (Kopelman-Rubin, 2020). Israeli society is highly diverse and deeply conflicted, as the relations between its various cultural communities are characterized by inequality, lack of dialogue, and mutual denial (Smootha, 2010). This is particularly so regarding the Jewish majority and Palestinian-Arab minority (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). Recently, an expert committee recommended that the Israeli education system cultivate SEL to deal with these cultural conflicts and adjust its programs to the particular sociocultural characteristics of each group (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

Given the dearth of studies in this area, it is important to examine the effectiveness of programs based on children's

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literature in establishing socioemotional skills in the Israeli education system, as well as to compare Arabic and Hebrew books in this regard. Examining children's books included in government programs is particularly important, as they serve as major socialization agents (Frevert et al., 2014) and are accessible to large populations. Thus, making the right choice of books has the potential to facilitate the acquisition of socioemotional skills countrywide. Accordingly, the present study examines the following question: How is social-emotional learning reflected in Arabic and Hebrew children's books included in two government programs for Jewish and Arab schools, respectively?

Social-Emotional Learning

The term social-emotional learning (SEL) was coined in 1997 by a group of US experts interested in strategies to promote students' non-academic skills (Elias et al., 1997). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2013), which promotes SEL, has divided these skills into five categories, as follows: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness.

Recent decades have seen growing interest in socioemotional skills, particularly in education (Wentzel, 2019). This is understandable given recent global changes, including the blurring of the dichotomous distinction between cognitive skills and knowledge and socioemotional skills, changes in the division of roles between education systems, the family and community, and the demand for improved socioemotional skills in the job market (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

Emphasizing the acquisition of socioemotional skills in schools is essential, as these skills contribute to the child's well-being (Durlak et al., 2011). Various studies have found that children who master socioemotional skills get along better with others and achieve greater academic success. As adults, moreover, they develop more successful careers, and show greater social engagement and better physical and mental health, with fewer risk behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, SEL activities are often marginalized by the growing presence of technology in students' lives, affecting their ability to acquire various socioemotional skills. They are also marginalized by educational policies that stress academic skills at the expense of socioemotional ones (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). According to Walker (2020), most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced students' socioemotional skills due to the transition to distance learning and the reduced social interactions among students.

SEL is particularly important during the early childhood years (Cline, 2019), since children at that age often arrive in school without sufficient experience in interacting with

their peers and teachers. Miller (2005) discussed the contribution of various academic experiences to the cultivation of socioemotional skills among young children, including forming social relations with adults, exploring nature, arts, and storytelling.

Children's Literature and Social-Emotional Learning

Israeli poet Lea Goldberg defines children's literature as "a branch of literature in prose and poetry suitable in its content and style for the understanding of children aged 5–13" (1978, p. 55). At these ages, literature is particularly important as a socialization agent and as the starting point for normative education, given the fact that moral maturity is a structural development (Frevert et al., 2014). Moreover, Rose (1984) suggests that while children's literature addresses children, it is written by adults, and therefore reflects the world of adults, with their longings, fears and moral codes. Finally, according to Mashlach (2006), children's literature is not detached from the political context, which is present in their lives.

In addition to the discussion of children's literature as a socialization agent, it is also discussed as a SEL channel (Cline, 2019). Heath et al. (2017) describe and recommend children's stories and bibliotherapy as instruments for promoting socioemotional skills. Using literature to teach such skills in early childhood is an effective way to integrate learning and teach the whole child—multidisciplinary teaching that allows students to connect to their learning, and strengthen their academic and socioemotional skills (Sandell, 2020).

The impact of children's literature is achieved thanks to the connection between reader and text, since the reader engages with the reality described in the book. They identify with the protagonists, whose experiences and values may become part of their personal assets (Cohen, 1985), and through them, they interact with the real world (Boyles, 2018). Accordingly, literature "provides a living through, not simply knowledge about" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 38).

Almog et al. (2010) believe that the broader the set of relations between the reader's sociocultural and literary background and the contents of the book, the greater the likelihood of a richer and more intense connection to them. Others suggest that children's literature should not settle for resonating with the readers' cultural background, but need also expose them to different cultures, thereby serving, as Bishop (1990) puts it, as both a mirror and a window (see also Linder, 2021). This literature can arouse modesty and attention to the Other using a complex emotional process of empathizing with the literary figures and becoming attached to their lives (Darr et al., 2007). Accordingly, SEL based on children's literature should be culturally responsive, so that all students feel represented while they also learn about

others and how they come together, both in the classroom community and in the world as a whole (Sandell, 2020). In addition, this learning should integrate the values of equality and social justice, which would among other things ensure that all students have access to learning and developing socioemotional skills (Desai et al., 2014).

The literary characters in children's books may demonstrate socioemotional skills, but also negative, antisocial behaviors (Linder, 2021). Hence, texts selected for SEL purposes must present dynamic characters that cope with challenges, characters that may be treated as heroes and role models, and strong characters that overcome difficulties and learn important lessons along the way (Boyles, 2018). In addition to the proper selection of books, Boyles (2018) suggests focusing on teaching one socioemotional skill in each text, even though several such skills may be reflected in it, enabling students to practice the skill and understand it in depth. Finally, Cappiello and Dawes (2012) suggest diversifying the reading material to include different genres, in both print and digital format, to pique the children's interest and contribute to their motivation, curiosity, engagement, and multiple perspective taking.

In addition to the role of the literary text as discussed above, it is important to address the illustrations in children's book as yet another SEL channel, since visuals are important in shaping young children's consciousness at a time when their written and spoken language has yet to mature (Sitner & Meshulam, 2020). Images are considered equal in importance to the text, and unique in providing a direct channel for conveying normative messages, since the visual aspect builds the book's immediate sensory experience and atmosphere, serving as a primary factor in defining its nature, power and attraction (Gonen, 2000). Finally, Sandell (2020) believes that using images for SEL among young children enhances their interest, attention and engagement.

Social-Emotional Learning in Israel

SEL is affected by the learners' sociocultural context (Kopelman-Rubin, 2020). Hence the need to address the characteristics of Israeli society and the way they affect SEL, and particularly the choice of particular emphases in such learning. Israel is a highly diverse country with multiple and substantially different national, religious and cultural groups (Dahan, 2007). However, most researchers do not consider it multicultural, as it is deeply divided, with relations among the various cultural communities typically characterized by inequality, alienation, and mutual exclusion, and with varying degrees of separation within the communities, particularly in the education system(s) and residential areas (Krak & Perry, 2008; Smootha, 2010).

A particularly deep rift exists between the Jewish-Israeli majority and the Palestinian-Arab minority (hereafter,

"Jews" and "Arabs"). Arabs represent about a fifth of Israel's population. This group has unique ethnocultural characteristics, and their relations with the Jews are marred by an intractable conflict that also involves neighboring Arab countries and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Upon the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, they became a minority as a result of war and uprooting. Israel fulfilled the dream of a Jewish state, while its Arab minority was subjected to both formal and informal discrimination, which persist to this day (Amara, 2018; Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

A committee of experts that examined the cultivation of SEL in the Israeli education system stated in its final report that the system faced two major challenges (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020):

1. Tensions, rifts, racism, and mutual exclusion between groups in Israel: the committee opined that together with promoting SEL in the intrapersonal area (self-awareness and self-management) and in the interpersonal area (relationship skills), emphasis had to be placed on SEL that promoted civic functioning (ability to truly understand and constructively communicate with members of other groups). Such learning is informed by values of equality, human dignity, and social justice.
2. Threatening situations coupled with high exposure to violence: the committee stated that the education system had to address both political and criminal violence by promoting emotionally protective learning spaces and cultivating SEL in order to enhance individual and collective resilience.

Finally, SEL had to be adapted to the unique characteristics of the various groups in Israel (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020). In a similar vein, Agbaria (2020) emphasizes the need for sensitivity to the culture and history of the group to which the student belongs. He further suggests that this is particularly critical in the context of national and indigenous minorities that differ from the majority group in their language, tradition, and lifestyle. Moreover, such minorities often experience discrimination and racism, which heightens their sense of disadvantage, exclusion, and historical injustice, becoming an integral element in their collective identity.

According to the above, a sensitive multicultural approach in SEL at school, with emphasis on minority education—specifically the Arab education system in Israel—requires developing materials in the students' and teachers' mother tongue. It also requires allowing for authentic expression of the students' cultural identities, historical experiences, sociopolitical realities, and the social distress and cultural challenges they experience. In particular, it requires legitimizing experiences of racism and alienation (Agbaria, 2020).

The Current Study

The review of the literature raises an important question: How is SEL reflected in Israeli children's literature, in Hebrew and in Arabic? To answer this research question, we need to study that literature academically, with particular emphasis on the way socioemotional skills are established in that literature, even more so given the lack of relevant studies in the context of Israeli children's literature, and specifically books included in state educational programs. We also lack studies comparing Arabic and Hebrew children's literature in that regard.

The study of the books included in educational programs is particularly important since they meet two conditions. The first, effectiveness, refers to the fact that children's literature serves as a socialization agent, and therefore affects young children. The second condition, accessibility, refers to the fact that most children are exposed to these books and hence, choosing them wisely will promote socioemotional skills on a large scale.

The present study seeks to narrow the gap in the research literature by explaining the way socioemotional skills are reflected in Arabic and Hebrew children's books in Israel, focusing on works included in the educational program "The March of Books", intended for Jewish schools where the language of instruction is Hebrew and Arab schools where the teaching is in Arabic. The program is part of a project led by the School Library Department at the Ministry of Education, designed to encourage students from grades 1–12 to read selected books, and participate in related activities. The list of books, selected by a committee of experts, is publicized at the beginning of each schoolyear (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The objective of the present study is thus to provide educational and practical suggestions for establishing socioemotional skills through children's literature, thereby helping policymakers, teachers and authors regarding the most effective way to promote SEL in children's literature. For this purpose, I have selected CASEL's (2013) frequently cited theoretical framework, as it maps children and adolescents' socioemotional skills with a practical aim in mind—to help enhance them. This model examines how a variety of educational activities affect children and adolescents' performance. It addressed practical questions, and the answers it provides for them are focused on educational objectives, and less on explaining and predicting personality traits and psychological variables and their effects on human behavior, as proposed for example by the Big Five model offered by the OECD (Sperling, 2018).

Methods

Design and Approach

This is a qualitative study that combines two methods or approaches: content and semiotic analysis. *Content analysis* is designed to describe and analyze systematically messages conveyed in a certain text and derive conclusions applicable to broader contexts. And *semiology* focuses on analyzing photos and other visual images (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). In this study, the content analysis method was used for the analysis of the written texts in the children's books participating in the study, and the semiology method for the analysis of the visual images in these books. Combining these two methods can help the researcher overcome the difficulty of determining absolute visual criteria for describing normative messages and arrive at conclusions that are more reliable and less likely to be affected by selection and subjective biases (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

Procedure

This study was conducted in four stages. In the *first stage*, the books to be studied were selected: 25 each from the Arabic and Hebrew programs for the 2020/21 schoolyear for grades 1–3, for a total of 50. All 25 books in the Hebrew program were included; in the Arabic program, the total number of books was 59, and 25 were randomly selected to maintain an equal number of books from both (see Appendices A and B for the full respective lists).

In the *second stage*, the texts and illustrations in those books were analyzed. First, those contributing to developing the skills in the CASEL's (2013) SEL model were identified. Next, they were classified into themes and subthemes: every theme related to one socioemotional skill (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, or social awareness), and the subthemes referred to the subskills included in each skill [see Online Appendix C for details on the categories and related subskills determined by CASEL (2013)].

The *third stage* involved quantitative analysis—counting and comparing the socioemotional skills and subskills reflected in the books' contents. Finally, in the *fourth stage*, the findings were interpreted, including reporting the themes and subthemes, and describing the texts and illustrations that were most demonstrative of each theme. The findings were explained and practical suggestions for improvement were provided.

Validity and Reliability

The *reliability* of this study was examined using interrater reliability and test–retest techniques: in the first stage the

books were reanalyzed 2 months after the first analysis, and in the second stage the analysis was reviewed by the two researchers, and a high degree of correspondence was found between the two analyses in the two stages. In addition, the richness of recurring findings related to the same theme is another way of affirming the research instruments' reliability (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1990).

Validity was assured by creating a coding table that represented the theory underlying the analysis (construct validity) (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). The table included themes, each represented one of the skills in the SEL model, as well as the texts demonstrative of each. It also included comments, hypotheses, clues, and proofs for the researcher's use.

In order to establish the *trustworthiness* of a qualitative study, a common approach is to present the researcher's "self". The unique perspective of qualitative researchers is affected by their cultural background and personal experience and training (Ely et al., 1997). In turn, this is supported by Foucault's (1984) emphasis the analytic importance of the authors and their affinity to the text.

The first researcher in this study is a Palestinian-Arab with extensive research experience in the sociology of literature. Her acquaintance with Arab society has contributed to the interpretation of the findings. In addition, her experience as a former teacher and lecturer on Arabic language and literature, particularly for children, contributes to the reliability and authenticity of her analysis. Finally, as a lecturer in a Hebrew-speaking college, she is also well aware of the literature and cultural sensitivities and literature of the Jewish majority culture in Israel. The second researcher in this study is a Palestinian-Arab with extensive research experience in children's literature.

Results

Socioemotional Skills in the Two Programs

All skill categories identified by CASEL were reflected in both the Hebrew and Arabic programs, albeit to a greater extent in the former (203 instances) than in the latter (174). Moreover, in most categories, the number of relevant instances in the Hebrew program was higher, with the greatest gap identified in the self-management category (52 vs. 35). This category was in fact the most frequent in

the Hebrew program, with relationship skills leading in the Arabic one (see Table 1).

An overview of the subskills reflected in the two programs indicates that in most cases, 21 out of 39, they are reflected in the Hebrew program to a greater extent than in the Arabic, with the largest gap observed in the social awareness ability of "understand[ing] broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings" (7:1 instances). Conversely, the ability to recognize "family, school, and community resources and supports", included in the same category, was reflected seven times in the Arabic program compared to one in the Hebrew, and "Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school" (9:2). The subskills most frequently reflected under each category, in the Hebrew and Arabic programs respectively, are presented in Table 2.

Literary Aspects Relevant to Social-Emotional Learning

(1) **Genres** *In the Hebrew program*, all books are prose works with a plot and characters. In terms of length, most belong to the short story genre, and one is a novel. In terms of contents, the books include fictional stories, historical stories, folktales, biographies, sci-fi stories, realistic stories and adventure stories.

In the Arabic program, there was one poetic work and the rest were prose works. All were short stories, with frequent use of musical elements. In terms of content, the books included fictional stories, folktales, sci-fi stories, realistic stories, and adventures. Note that many of the works in the program had multiple grammatical and spelling errors.

(2) **Plot and characters** Among the works studied, particular attention was devoted to books with strong socioemotional qualities, that is, those that established socioemotional skills at a higher level than did other books in the same program (see Online Appendix D). The leading characters in these books were young and physically small, but nevertheless managed to form healthy and rewarding relationships, withstand pressures, and affect events around them. Importantly, they were also dynamic, as they developed by interacting with others and undergoing certain experiences, and could therefore be considered round characters. They also shared several traits, including curiosity, openness, creativity,

Table 1 SEL categories as reflected in the two programs

SEL category program	Self-awareness	Self-management	Responsible decision-making	Relationship skills	Social awareness	Total
Hebrew	34	52	35	47	35	203
Arabic	36	35	30	43	30	174

Table 2 SEL subskills most frequently reflected in the two programs

SEL category program	Self-awareness	Self-management	Responsible decision-making	Relationship skills	Social awareness
Hebrew	A well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose. [...] Experiencing self-efficacy (9)	[Set and] accomplish personal and collective goals (11)	Identifying solutions for personal and social problems (9)	Communicate clearly, listen actively (9)	Understand [...] & empathize with others, including those from diverse [...] contexts (11)
Arabic	Understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts (11)	[Set and] accomplish personal and collective goals (10) Showing the courage to take initiative (10)	Recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school (9)	Communicate clearly, listen actively (9) [...] healthy & supportive relationships (9)	Understand [...] & empathize with others, including those from diverse [...] contexts (10)

independence, confidence, self-efficacy, bravery, and initiative, and could thus be seen as role models.

The plot in these stories is based on a main plotline, centered on the protagonists. In the beginning, they run into certain difficulties or set challenging individual or collective skills, and thanks to their highly developed skills, manage to overcome them eventually and achieve their goals. Note that in most Hebrew books, the goal set by the protagonist is individual, and accordingly, these books center on one or two lead character. Only in one book, *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep* (Zaidman, 2019), does the protagonist face a collective goal—the mass immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Conversely, collective goals are emphasized more frequently in the Arabic program, in four books, which accordingly have several lead characters rather than one. Another key difference between the programs is that the Arabic one includes books where the lead character is helped by others, such as relatives or adults with authority, in coping with his or her challenges, as for example in *A Letter to the Queen of the Forest* (Maddah, 2015). In the Hebrew program, on the other hand, the characters cope with these challenges independently, without external direction or assistance.

- (3) **Proposals for educational activity and emphasis on a particular socioemotional category** Most books, in both programs, do not propose any class or family activities conducive to SEL, apart for three books (12%) published by the Hebrew Pajamas Library, and five (20%) published by Lantern Library (these libraries are part of educational programs for Jewish and Arab preschools, respectively). Moreover, only a few books in either program were found to emphasize a particular socioemotional category, as in *What Pet Should I Get?* (Seuss, 2019) in the Hebrew program, which clearly

stresses responsible decision-making, despite addressing all other categories as well.

Original vs. Translated Works

Both programs included both original and translated works. In the Hebrew program, they were almost evenly balanced, with 14 books (56%) by Jewish-Israeli authors, and 11 by foreign authors, writing in English, German, Swedish, Spanish, and Russian. The Arabic program was not so balanced, with most books (18, 72%) written by Arab authors, including 17 in Arabic and one bilingual book in Arabic and Hebrew. The remainder were written by Israeli Jews and translated from Hebrew (4), and three books were translated from Swedish (see Table 3).

Comparing the original and translated children's literature indicates that in both programs, the latter establishes socioemotional skills to a higher degree. In these terms, the children's literature were ordered as follows: titles translated into Hebrew (average number of socioemotional skills: 10), titles translated into Arabic (8.2), original Hebrew literature (6.6), and original Arabic literature (6.4). Note that the gap between Hebrew and Hebrew-translated titles in the Hebrew program (3.4) is wider than that between Arabic and Arabic-translated titles in the Arabic program (1.8).

Otherness, Equality, and Social Justice

- (1) *The Hebrew program* In order to examine the cultural belonging of the lead characters in the Hebrew titles, two books (8%) were examined, with protagonists that had distinct individual and collective identities: *Zaha Hadid* (Iraqi-British; Vegara, 2020) and *Miriam Yalan-Shteklis* (Jewish-Israeli). In addition, we examined five

Table 3 Original vs. translated works in the two programs

	Hebrew program	Arabic program
No. of original titles	14 (56%)	18 (72%)
No. of translated titles	11 (44%)	7 (28%)
Authors' countries of origin	Israel (Jews): 14 US: 6 Germany: 2 Sweden, Spain, Russian: 1 each	Israel (Palestinians): 14 Israel (Jews): 4 Sweden: 3 Palestinian Authority: 1 Syria, Lebanon, Jordan: 1 each
Original language	Hebrew (14) English (6) German (2) Swedish, Spanish, Russian (1 each)	Arabic (17) Hebrew (4) Swedish (3) Bilingual, Arabic & Hebrew (1)

books (20%) that included lead characters with only a distinct collective identity: *The Moon's First Friends* (American; Hill, 2019), *Whirlpool* (Jewish-Israeli; Rony, 2020), *Troya's Holiday Dress* (Ethiopian-Jewish), *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep* (Ethiopian-Jewish-Israeli), and *Winter's Broom Dance* (German-Jewish). The remaining books (72%) featured child characters that were not associated with any specific individual or collective identity, or symbolic animal characters suitable for any sociocultural context.

These books tend to establish pluralist values given that the skill of “taking others’ perspectives and identifying with them” is reflected most frequently in this program (see Table 2). These books try to establish social justice using various strategies, based on empowering marginalized groups or individuals. The first is highlighting minority

Jewish cultures to establish equality within the various Jewish ethnic groups. Two of the books highlight the culture of Jews of Ethiopian origin, as a minority group at the margins of Israeli society: *Troya's Holiday Dress* (Gabey, 2017) and *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep* (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1 depicts the initial encounter between Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia with Jerusalem. In it, the city's cultural diversity is illustrated—ultra-Orthodox, secular and Ethiopian Jews are shown, but no Arabs. All are shown as living together in the same place, which has powerful national-collective resonance. Highlighting Jewish figures characters with the Ethiopian minority in this story contributes to establishing ethnic equality among members of the Jewish majority in Israel.

The second strategy is describing a female character as powerful in order to establish gender equality. Gender equality and partnership is a recurring theme in the Hebrew



Fig. 1 *The Magic Flute and the Dancing Sheep* (Zaidman, 2019): Ethnic equality (Used with permission of Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing)

program: nine books (36%) describe a powerful and self-efficacious female protagonist, another six books (24%) describe two protagonists, a boy and a girl (usually a brother and sister) as having highly developed talent, and who are equal partners (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2 allocates equal space to the two protagonists, brother and sister, and shows how both collaborate (one holds the basket and the other scissors in order to pick lemons) and communicate positively (by maintaining eye contact and smiling), reflecting the values of gender equality and partnership.

In addition to ethnic and gender equality, the Hebrew titles try to establish age equality by presenting characters of small children (or animals) as heroes with special talents and exceptional skills in order to provide the young reader with a sense of confidence and self-efficacy and establish the concept that every individual can contribute to others and to the environment (20 titles, 80%). The adult reader, as well, learns from this to respect the child, attend to their needs, believe in their abilities, and allow them space for initiative and independent activities (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3 shows the two protagonists, having opened a lemonade stand. Their grandmother observes them from a distance, highlighting their ability to set their own goals and act to achieve them, with adult supervision that allows for freedom of action.

As a humanitarian historical issue, the Holocaust also carries relevant messages: fighting against racism and accepting and including the Other, in addition to the specific identification with the pain and suffering of the Jewish people. *Winter's Broom Dance* (Leibowitz, 2020) describes the lives of Jews in Berlin during the Nazi era, and specifically,



Fig. 3 *Lemonade* (Zelichov-Relevy, 2019): Independence (Used with permission of Yedioth Books Publishing)

events in a workshop where most employees are blind and deaf Jews. The book establishes the values of tolerance for all human beings, and accepting people with special needs:

"Is everyone in your workshop a Jew?," I dare ask [...] He stops and then bends over and says with a solemn look on his face, "What's important is that everyone here is a human being" (n.p).

Despite the attempt to reflect otherness in Israeli society and beyond, as well as gender, age and ethnic equality, the participating books fail to represent the Arabs' culture, despite the fact that they represent about one-fifth of Israel's population. Indeed, the Hebrew program does not include even a single work by an Arab author from Israel, or any



Fig. 2 *Lemonade* (Zelichov-Relevy, 2019): Gender partnership and equality (Used with permission of Yedioth Books Publishing)

work translated from Arabic, nor does it include bilingual works in Arabic and Hebrew combined. Moreover, the program does not include any literary character clearly associated with the Arab collective, nor does it describe any intercultural encounter between Jewish and Arab characters based on mutual acceptance and respect. This lacuna is indirectly exemplified by the following text from *Miriam Yalan-Shteklis* (Gani, 2019):

Miriam felt the sorrow of children in distress all her life. After the establishment of the State of Israel, many new [Jewish] immigrants arrived. There were not enough houses for everyone, and some lived in tents and shacks [...]. One winter day, Miriam published an editorial letter for all children of Israel: You, who live in dry and warm houses [...] how could you forget those children? [...] Kids, rise up and make your statement, tell your parents: we have brought our brethren to the Jewish State, and we must now help them. [...] Miriam herself hosted a girl who arrived in Israel without her family in her own home (n.p).

This quote demonstrates the value of ethnic social justice within Jewish society in Israel, as the protagonist, herself of European origins, encourages assistance for new immigrants in distress—most of whom arrived from Asia and Africa—and also serves a role model in that regard, all the while ignoring the distress of Arab children in Israel, who, as part of their group, have suffered collective historical injustice due to war and uprooting. Defining the state here as “Jewish”, designed to include all Jewish ethnicities, excludes indigenous non-Jewish Israeli citizens, i.e., the Arab minority.

- (2) *The Arabic program* included no books that presented characters with a distinct individual or collective identity. Nevertheless, symbolic group belonging was examined in three titles (12%) by presenting mainly folklorist elements associated with Palestinian-Arab culture, such as olive picking and folk poetry in *The Magic Olive Seed* (Asli, 2019). The remaining books featured child characters that were not identified with a distinct identity, or symbolic animal/ plant characters suitable for any sociocultural context.

As in the Hebrew program, the ability “to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others” (social awareness category) was frequently established (see Table 2). Unlike the Hebrew program, however, the books in the Arabic program tried to inculcate the values of equality and social justice using different strategies, primarily through protest against discrimination and social injustice. The lead characters faced unjust behaviors or stereotypes designed to belittle, exclude or disenfranchise them, but

eventually managed to withstand the social pressure, criticize prejudices against them, stand up for their rights, and resist those who threatened them; this strategy was identified in nine (36%) of the books. This explains why the ability of “recognizing how critical thinking skills are useful both inside and outside of school” (responsible decision-making category) was reflected in the Arabic program much more frequently than in the Hebrew program. Note that not a single title has been identified that presents, let alone protests against any historical or social injustice, other than by way of indirect allusion (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4 shows angry children hugging the trees to protect them against the bulldozers intent on uprooting the trees planted by their forefathers in their beloved forest. Although the adults had failed to keep the bulldozers at bay, all the little children have come together to protect the forest and to protest against its destruction by hugging the trees, thereby forcing the bulldozers away. This story may be interpreted as symbolic of the Palestinian national struggle, as it is reminiscent of the events of the Nakba, when entire villages were destroyed and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were uprooted from their homeland. At the same time, it is also connotative of the widespread house demolitions in communities of the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel by the government, with emphasis on the younger generation’s duty to protect their homeland and heritage.

As in the Hebrew program, the Arabic program establishes age equality by presenting young characters as powerful and capable of changing reality—a strategy used in nine (36%) of the books. In certain books, the children’s capabilities are compared to those of adults, and even presented as superior (see Fig. 5).

This figure is taken from a story that portrays the granddaughter’s cooperation with her grandmother. As she participates in all the stages of olive picking. This image reflects



Fig. 4 *Children Hugging Trees* (Mlatjalyan, 2014): Protest against discrimination (Used with permission of The Child Cultural Center, Aswar Publishing—Akka)



Fig. 5 *The Magic Olive Seed* (Asli, 2019): Age Equality and Powerful Young Characters (Used with permission of Kul Shee Publishing—Haifa)

the value of age equality since it shows the children's ability to take part of hard work that was previously the responsibility of adults only.

In three (12%) of the books, the additional values of equality, respect and social justice were established in the Arabic program by presenting characters showing caring, empathy and willingness to help the needy, whether creatures in distress or animals and humans with physical

disabilities. As it identified for example in *I Started Hearing You* (Hatib, 2019):

She explained to them about writers and geniuses suffering from hearing or sight or speech impairments, and with the help of these tools, they were able to overcome their problems. All those, and other geniuses, were suffering from a deficiency that hurt them. We must accept each other and love each other so that God will love us (*I Started Hearing You*, Hatib, 2019, p. 23).

Together with the various strategies for establishing the values of equality, respect and social justice, the Arabic program established intercultural encounter with the Jewish Other through the exposure to Jewish-Israeli authors in books translated from Hebrew, in addition to exposure to the Other's language as a cultural element in the bilingual *The Children are Laughing* (Mlatjalyan, 2014; Zakkariya, 2017). However, the program did not expose children to fictional characters belonging to the Jewish majority group. Thus, no title in either program presented a positive encounter between Arab and Jewish characters, grounded in mutual acceptance and respect (see Fig. 6).

Figure 6 features visual elements that promote implicit pluralist messages of inclusion, equality and partnership. It is painted contiguously over two pages, so that it is perceived as a shared space for both languages, Arabic and Hebrew (inclusion and partnership). The texts in both languages are located at the same height at the center of the two pages, in the same font size (equality). This way, the reader is exposed to the language of the Other as a major cultural element, while at the same time receiving implicit messages regarding multiculturalism.



Fig. 6 *The Children are Laughing* (Mlatjalyan, 2014): Exposure to the other's language in a bilingual work (Used with permission of Courtesy of Maktoob books series, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Olam Hadash Publishing House)

Discussion

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is particularly important for younger children, since it forms a basis for further development, helping students function effectively in school and elsewhere (Cline, 2019). Accordingly, this study examined the way socioemotional skills are reflected in Israeli children's books published in Arabic and Hebrew through content and semiotic analysis of fifty titles included in two government educational program for Arab and Jewish schools, respectively. Overall, the findings indicate that the literature examined can be used for SEL, since all socioemotional categories and skills defined by CASEL (2013) are reflected in it, both textually and visually. This makes for a profound and fascinating learning process, since combining images in SEL for young children heightens their interest, attention and engagement (Sandell, 2020).

Nevertheless, most of the books included in this study, of both programs, lacked emphasis on a specific socioemotional skill or competency. This makes SEL more difficult, since such focus can provide students with opportunities to practice the skill and understand it more deeply (Boyles, 2018).

Another shortcoming found is that both programs lack of diversity in literary genres (In both, 24 out of the 25 works are short stories). This reduces the opportunity of piquing the students' interest and meeting their individual differences. Indeed, according to Cappiello and Dawes (2012), the diversity in literary genres can contribute to students' interest, motivation, engagement, and perspective-taking ability.

Moreover, most books lacked suggestions for educational activities in school or at home, based on a set of socioemotional concepts. This affects SEL since such suggestions can help both teachers and parents teach and practice the requisite skills. In addition, cooperation between the school and family is essential for successful SEL (CASEL, 2013). Various book-related activities can contribute to internalizing socioemotional skills as well as to the students' social interactions with peers, teachers and family members.

If they combine literacy acquisition, such activities can strike a balance between academic and socioemotional skills, making for multidisciplinary teaching that addresses the whole child (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Sandell, 2020). However, the grammatical errors found in the Arabic children's books affect the academic aspect, violating this important balance.

The various books included in the programs were found to be different in terms of conveying socioemotional skills. International works translated into Hebrew or Arabic

established socioemotional skills more than did the original works in both programs. Among the latter, the Hebrew books did so more than the Arabic ones. These differences are affected by external sociopolitical factors and by cultural perceptions of childhood (Shikhmanter, 2016). The more the literary text established socioemotional skills, the more it emphasizes the need to equip children with tools to cope with the various challenges they face, thereby lending support to the view of children as being responsible and capable of doing so with greater independence.

Out of the various SEL categories, "self-management" was established most strongly in the Hebrew program, supporting the conclusion that Hebrew literature emphasizes the need to consider children as independently capable of managing their lives. Conversely, "relationship skills", the most strongly established category in the Arabic program, reflects a more traditional view of children as dependent on the authority of adults who guide them and help them cope with various challenges. This can also explain the finding that the ability to recognize "family, school, and community resources and supports" (in the social awareness category) was reflected seven times in the Arabic program, as opposed to only once in the Hebrew program. Another supportive finding is related to the representation of the characters in the two programs: in the Hebrew program, the lead characters usually managed to overcome their challenges independently, whereas in the Arabic program, they tended to rely on external forces.

Unlike the Arabic program, which was imbalanced in terms of the ratio of original and translated works, the Hebrew program was balanced in presenting local and global cultures. Accordingly, the books in the Hebrew program may be used as a mirror and a window, to paraphrase Bishop (1990). This meets the recommendations of various researchers who support the selection of texts reflecting the reader's sociocultural background to ensure a rich connection (e.g. Almog et al., 2010), while also exposing the reader to other cultures in order to cultivate empathy with the Other (Bishop, 1990; Darr et al., 2007; Linder, 2021).

Most crucially, however, the Hebrew program avoided encounters with the national Other's culture—the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel—which I find to be a glaring omission that almost defeats the purpose of the entire endeavor. In none of the 25 books included in the program was there a literary character identifiable as a Palestinian-Arab. Moreover, no book was translated from Arabic or presented as a bilingual text, so that the program provided no opportunity for a positive intercultural encounter between Jews and Arabs. This finding is a product of the structure of Israeli society, where the minority Arab culture is marginalized by the majority Jewish culture (Mautner et al., 1998). Indeed, this exclusion was reflected in both the textual and visual aspects, supporting Desai's (2000) claim that the

meanings elicited from visual representations are deeply connected to history, power, and control.

This program addressed historical issues from a Jewish-national perspective, based on the hegemonic majority's narrative, ignoring that of the Indigenous Arab minority group. As suggested by Yona (2015), the latter is seen as competing against the former, denying the very legitimacy of Zionism—an approach that has always been central to the Israeli education system's curricula. Thus, “instead of encouraging openness, criticism, and tolerance among the students, the education system promotes militant and nationalist views” (Yona, 2015, p. 45).

In the Arabic program, on the other hand, an attempt has been made to bring the two cultures together by exposing learners to Hebrew (in one bilingual book) and to Hebrew authors. This encounter, however, is not significant enough due to the absence of Jewish literary characters from the program and the lack of positive intercultural encounters between Arab and Jewish characters. According to Allport's (1954) classical contact theory, such an encounter is essential for reducing prejudices and promoting acceptance of the Other. Consequently, it may reduce stereotypes and fear of and hostility towards the Other (Ratner, 2020). This trend dovetails with Haj Yahya's (2020) conclusion that the exclusion of Jewish characters from Palestinian literature is seen as a kind of avoidance of criticism from both sides: on the one hand, criticism by the Israeli establishment (in case of the Jewish character is presented negatively), and on the other, criticism of “betrayal” and “collaboration” on the part of Arab readers (in case of a positive presentation).

According to Desai et al. (2014), SEL should contribute to equality and social justice. While not applied to the most crucial area of the Jewish–Arab conflict in Israel, this is applied in the Hebrew program in the context of equality between different Jewish ethnic groups, between the genders, and across ages. This is done by granting space and power to characters identified with marginalized population. Thus, the Hebrew program attempts to establish a pluralist and multicultural approach within Jewish society, but not beyond. Similarly, the Arabic program tries to establish equality and social justice using different strategies, including protesting against injustice or resisting threatening external elements. This finding supports Agbaria's (2020) conclusion that indigenous minorities often experience racism and discrimination, which become integral to their collective identity.

Note that the Arab program did not directly address discrimination and exclusion by the Israeli establishment. This finding is consistent with the previous studies showing that Arab children's authors in Israel avoid any direct reference to the conflict, and prefer an indirect approach through animal characters, thereby avoiding censorship by the Ministry of Education (Haj Yahya, 2021; Mousa, 2021). More generally, the present findings are consistent with Keren-Yaar's

(2007) argument that despite its current emphasis on humanism and the complex emotional world of the child, Israeli children's books still deny identity politics in Israeli society, and in particular ignore controversial issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thereby contributing to viewing the national Other as an enemy. Haj Yahya's (2021) study of social messages in Israeli children's books, both Arabic and Hebrew, supports this argument, and suggests that the current approach in Israel compromises the development of multicultural education.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was based on a sample of fifty literary works for young children, included in two programs by the Israeli Ministry of Education for the 2020/2021 schoolyear, in Arabic and Hebrew respectively. Future studies should rely on a broader selection of works included in those programs over a period of several years. We also recommend studying other Israeli educational programs based on children's literature, in addition to similar programs from other countries with a high degree of cultural diversity, and see how the education systems in those countries provide socioemotional skills while facing the issue of cultural difference. Finally, future studies should examine SEL as reflected in state programs for older children in elementary, middle and high schools.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Children's literature can be used to promote SEL when integrated in a government educational program that meets the following recommendations:

1. The program includes books that reflect all socioemotional learning skills proposed by CASEL (2013). Each book will place particular emphasis on one skill or SEL category, allowing for in-depth discussion, understanding, and practice of that category.
2. The program will include books from diverse literary genres, in both print and digital format. Central to these books should be a protagonist serving as a role model in the context of the skill to be acquired. Moreover, these books must be accompanied by suggestions for practical educational activities, in the school and family context, which can contribute further to SEL, integrating both socioemotional concepts and literacy acquisition. Finally, these suggestions should establish cooperation between the school and family in teaching the skill in question.
3. The program will strike a balance between local literature in the learners' native language and global, translated literature, while maintaining high editing standards. This combination will expose the readers to their

own particular culture as well as to others. Accordingly, the characters in the books should include both representatives of the local culture and others, with emphasis on representing sociocultural diversity in the learners' own environment, establishing values of equality and social justice, and showing respect to the Other.

4. Finally, the program will be an integral part of a long-term SEL process stretching throughout the K-12 years, with appropriate emphasis for each developmental stage.

Such a program will meet the recommendations of the expert committee on cultivating socioemotional learning in the Israeli education system, which has pointed to the fact that coping with tensions and rifts among the various groups in Israeli society represents one of the key challenges that the Israeli education system needs to address in cultivating socioemotional learning. In addition, it must be adapted to the particular sociocultural characteristics of the various learner groups (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020).

Conclusion

The current findings and recommendations can contribute to the various stakeholders in state reading programs: policy-makers, educators and authors. Ideologically speaking, they contribute to persuading decision-makers of the importance of teaching socioemotional in addition to cognitive skills. Practically, the findings contribute to decision makers in determining the contents and selecting the titles as well as educational activities in class and at home most appropriate for SEL. Finally, the above findings may inform a practical guide helping authors of children's book to integrate socioemotional skills in writing for children both Arab and Jewish.

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