Raising Self and Safety Awareness of Primary Grade Girls Through Extensive Reading Materials

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This study investigates the impact of extensive reading materials, in particular of fairy tales, on primary school Grade 3 female students' self awareness and safety awareness as part of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills. The mixed method data collection was applied to identify girls' self and safety awareness skills before and after the intervention. The results show that when intervention of appropriate SEL questions is assured the extensive reading materials can increase girls self-awareness and safety awareness.

Keywords: fairy tales, self-awareness, safety awareness, primary school girls, social-emotional learning

Gender abuse is a serious problem that affects millions of girls around the world. According to a 2018 analysis by the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 1 in 3, or 30%, of women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence (WHO, 2021). As an action WHO promotes teaching young people about equal rights and opportunities for all genders, as part of their life skills and gender education classes (WHO, 2021). According to the UNICEF report (2012), globally 8 out of 10 children aged 2-14 years old are subjected to some form of violent discipline at home. In the meantime, Uzbekistani educational authorities argue that gender education should be included in the education system starting from preschool ages (Narbayeva, 2020). Gender education teaches children essential social emotional learning (SEL) skills including self-awareness and safety awareness. Self-awareness and safety awareness skills can help to prevent sexual abuse. Children should learn about their rights and boundaries, and be empowered to speak up if they are being mistreated. East Tennessee State University (ETSU) suggests everyone be responsible for their personal safety. They claim that reporting suspicious activity, being alert to potential danger and anticipating possible problems are key safety awareness rules. Also, they emphasize that safety awareness comprises awareness of all your surroundings and avoiding anything that does not feel safe (East Tennessee State University, n.d.). UNICEF suggests teachers can create a safe school, school policies, curricula and action plans to proactively create a culture of kindness and inclusion. Teachers are advised to deepen students' understanding of violence against children, discuss bullying with them and how they can protect themselves from it, as well as help their peers facing it (UNICEF, 2012). Self-awareness and safety skills are a part of social emotional learning programs which are integrated in western countries and play a critical role in preventing gender violence against young girls.

Social emotional learning

There is a range of definitions and frameworks for describing SEL. SEL skills are also referred to by educators as 21st century skills, 4Cs competencies, life skills, soft skills, or whole child education. Social-emotional learning describes the mindsets, skills, attitudes, and feelings that help students succeed in school, career, and life. At its core, SEL focuses on students' fundamental needs for motivation, social connectedness, and self-regulation as prerequisites for learning (Panorama Education, n.d.). One of organizations that is

helping make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The CASEL addresses five broad and interrelated areas of competence as self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills and social awareness (CASEL, n.d.):

1. Self-awareness teaches recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and challenges.

2. Self-management highlights skills for managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals.

3. Responsible decision-making outlines making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior, developing responsibility for their behavior and academic performance.

4. Relationship skills develop learners' skills for forming positive relationships, working in teams, dealing effectively with conflict.

5. Social awareness is showing understanding and empathy for others.

Figure 1

Casel outlines five main aspects for SEL framework

The need for social emotional instruction is increasing and if interventions are put in place at a younger age the social emotional strategies taught to children could benefit them throughout their lives (Igoe, 2015). Although the advanced educational standards of global education have moved to incorporate SEL skills into educational curricula, the existing educational standards and teaching learning materials of Uzbekistan remain subject-specific and include scarce attention to critical topics of SEL and safety. The compulsory programs limit teacher opportunities to introduce life skills related topics to children in class.

One promising opportunity to bring the matter of self-awareness and safety to class can be extensive reading materials. Extensive reading is a type of reading that is done for pleasure and enjoyment. It is typically done at a relaxed pace and involves reading a variety of different texts. However, these purposes do not limit the reasons why extensive reading is important for young learners, especially for young girls. Extensive reading materials can also be used to teach specific SEL skills if the proper approach is applied.

Extensive reading materials

Extensive reading materials, particularly fairy tales, provide young learners with a setting which they can substantially benefit from. Through visualizing, young learners develop their imagination to comprehend the situation, stories and characters introduced in the story. They observe the way episodes are staged and interconnected, and how the characters interact with each other and solve problems to go further. In addition, the learners go on to analyze, evaluate and criticize the characters and stories. They assess the decisions of the characters, give reasons for why or why a particular action was not the best choice for the character. After reading, children reflect scenarios of fairy tales to their life and learn the moral of the story which is an initial purpose of fairy tales.

These skills are essential in younger ages when one's personality is being shaped. Reading can help us to better understand ourselves and the world around us. When we can see ourselves and our experiences in the context of a larger world, it can help us to feel more connected to others and to feel better about ourselves. Effective theme comprehension through reading or listening to stories can shape the SEL skills in young children. Reading is a powerful tool for developing self- and social-awareness. It can help us to develop empathy. When we read about the experiences of others, it can help us to understand and appreciate different perspectives. This can lead to more compassionate and understanding relationships with others. However, the comprehension of the morals of fairy tales and stories does not come by itself through mere reading for fluency or reading for enjoyment. Based on her research, Narvaez (2002) concluded that children do not understand the moral message of a narrative in the way adults expect them to understand it. She suggests that just reading stories with a moral content, supposing that their message is obvious, may not have the expected efficiency in the moral education of the children. Children's general reading comprehension level is not clearly delineated with theme comprehension (Narvaez, 2002).

To stimulate theme comprehension skills the social emotional learning questions are exceptionally effective. Carnine et al., (1982) concluded in their research that structured questions before, during, and after reading would facilitate comprehension of moral themes. When children are asked to think about the implications of what they have read, they must be able to go beyond the literal meaning of the text and make inferences about the characters, setting, and plot. They must also be able to draw conclusions based on the information that they have gathered. When proper questions accompany the reading process such as 'How did the character feel when that happened?' 'How would you feel in that situation?' 'What could the character

have done differently?' it helps children develop self-awareness and safety awareness skills. Another researcher, Emery (1996) also supports this view suggesting that teachers can help students understand characters' perspectives through questions. She suggests using story maps to focus on character motives and reactions to the event.

Based on the review of the literature we argue that there is a crucial need for integrating social emotional learning skills in schools to help all students, particularly girls, with self-awareness and safety awareness. Extensive reading materials along with SEL-stimulating questions are the effective means for raising self-awareness and safety awareness among girls in primary schools. This short term study was designed to investigate the impact of SEL questions on SEL skills of girls in primary school.

Method

Background information

Mainstream lessons in public schools use fixed curriculums and teaching learning materials provided by the government. As these curriculum materials are framed, teachers are limited in integrating any additional sources. For this reason, the study was conveyed during extracurricular lessons which are also compulsory at school but allow teachers to use self-developed programs and materials. These lessons are conducted twice a week, one of which is numeracy, and the other is literacy with each lasting 45 minutes. The study intervention lasted for 8 subsequent weeks.

Participants and ethics consideration

Overall, 14 girls aged 9-10 participated in the study. Different ethical considerations were taken into account. The researcher assured the participation in the study was voluntary, and both parents and girls of Grade 3 who were willing to contribute to the study stayed at school after classes for

extracurricular literacy lessons. The parents were also informed through group social media and submitted their written consent. The names of participants were kept confidential. The researcher together with the homeroom teacher made sure the questions were clear and appropriate for Grade 3 girls.

Intervention

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of a fairy tale-based intervention on the social-emotional learning (SEL) skills of third-grade girls. The quantitative data were collected using pre- and post-tests of the girls' SEL skills. The qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions between the girls and their homeroom teacher. Overall, the following fairy tales, one per lesson, were used as intervention:

1. *The Little Red Riding Hood*

2. *Cinderella*

3. *Pinocchio*

4. *Zumrad-Kimmat* (Uzbek analogy of "Mother's daughter and father's daughter")

5. *The Round Bun*

6. *The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats*

7. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

8. *The Snow Queen*

Quantitative data collection

This study used two pre- and post-tests to measure the impact of the fairy tale-based intervention on the girls' SEL skills, which were administered in a quiet and private setting. Each test consisted of five open-ended questions designed to assess the girls' self- and safety awareness, using their personal experiences and the context of their favorite fairy tale. In particular, the

test questions were designed to identify girls' favorite characters, reasons why girls appreciate them, perception of important personal traits the girls value and strive to develop. Also, the tests checked girls' understanding on best safety rules in and outside school and home. Each test took approximately 30 minutes to complete, allowing the girls sufficient time to read and comprehend the questions and to provide thoughtful responses reflecting their unique perspectives and experiences. This provided the researcher with a richer understanding of the girls' SEL skills and how they developed over the course of the intervention. The following are some examples of the open-ended questions used in the pre- and post-tests:

- Self-awareness: *What is the trait that you admire most in your favorite fairy tale character? Why?*

- Safety-awareness: *What would you first do if a strange man talks to you?*

Qualitative data collection

A homeroom teacher was provided with a printed version of fairy tales texts. Every text was divided into several chunks so that the teacher could pause for questions to stimulate a group discussion among girls. The questions focused on the girls' comprehension, SEL and critical thinking skills. Each discussion lasted around 5-7 minutes and was audio recorded for future use. The contribution of every respondent was controlled through inviting them to speak out. The following are some examples of the questions used in the discussions:

- Self-awareness: *What do you think Cinderella could do to change the attitude of her stepmother and her step sisters to her? How?*

- Safety-awareness: *Was it safe for Red Riding Hood to respond to the Wolf? Why? Why not?*

Results

For the aspect of self-awareness, the pre- and post-intervention data showed that the girls valued different personal traits in their favorite fairy tale characters. Before the intervention most of the respondent girls indicated they value personal traits such as kindness (9) and intelligence (5). Three respondents said they appreciate that the characters they love are hardworking, and only two girls admire bravery and beauty in characters. However, after the intervention the results shifted to favor intelligence and bravery each with 7 voters. Kindness was now appreciated by 6 girls only and many fewer girls mentioned they value hardworking and modesty.

For the aspect of safety the pre-test data showed that most girls said that they would communicate with a stranger talking to them not understanding the threat of being cheated. This suggests that most of the girls were not aware of the dangers of talking to strangers before the intervention.

The post-test data showed that only 2 girls said that she would communicate with a stranger. Additionally, the number of girls who said that they would ignore or ask for help from others increased significantly after the intervention. These results suggest that the fairy tale-based intervention had a positive impact on the girls' safety awareness skills.

Focus group discussion data revealed that girls are open to critical feedback on the actions of fairy tale characters. They suggested that Red Riding Hood could have taken a different approach when she encountered the wolf, or that Cinderella could have attempted to compromise with her stepmother and stepsisters. They appreciated the bravery in Gerda from *The Snow Queen*, and highlighted the naive personality of Pinocchio. Many respondents perceived the characters as unaware and poor decision-makers who lack critical thinking and self-defense skills. They also expressed skepticism regarding the possibility of fairy tale tropes such as meeting a prince on a white horse, or receiving a chest of gold for being obedient and hardworking, which they viewed as unrelated to reality rewards.

Girls also shared critical perspectives on safety. Many girls emphasized the importance of having a backup plan to change the outcome for better results, even after making a mistake in the case of Red Riding Hood. They also argued that Red Riding Hood should have tried to reach her grandmother before the wolf to save them both, even if she made a mistake. Pinocchio, Round Bun, and other characters were similarly evaluated, with girls emphasizing the importance of taking responsibility for one's mistakes and seeking help from others.

Discussion

The results suggest that the fairy tale-based intervention had a positive impact on the girls' SEL skills and awareness. This is evidenced by the increase in the number of girls who valued the traits of "smart" and "brave" after the intervention. These traits are important SEL skills that can help children to succeed in school, work, and relationships. It is also important to note that the number of girls who valued the traits of "kind," "hardworking," "beautiful," and "modest" remained relatively stable after the intervention. This suggests that the intervention did not have a negative impact on the girls' appreciation of these important values.

The results of this study are consistent with findings of Narvaez (2002), Carnine et al. (1982), and Emery (1996) that have shown that fairy tales can be used to teach self-awareness and safety skills to children. Our study suggests that using fairy tales to teach girls about child abuse was effective in increasing their knowledge and awareness of the issue. In addition, we found that using fairy tales to teach young girls about stranger danger was effective in increasing their safety behaviors. The results also show that fairy tales can be used to teach safety

skills to girls. This is important because girls are often at risk of being targeted by strangers. Additionally, the findings of this study demonstrate that fairy tales can be used to teach safety skills to children of all ages and genders.

Conclusions

One limitation of this study is that it was conducted with a small sample size. Future research should be conducted with larger sample sizes and with children of different ages and genders. Additionally, future research should investigate the long-term effects of using fairy tales to teach safety skills. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study suggest that using extensive reading materials, in this case fairy tales, to teach safety skills is a promising approach. Future research should continue to explore the effectiveness of this approach and to develop evidence-based interventions that can be used to teach safety skills to children in a variety of settings.

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