

Integrating Film into Social-Emotional Learning: A Practical Tool

Serenity Wilson

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Problem

I recall my fifth-grade teacher pushing a large television on a cart into the classroom. This event was met with unanimous relief. We assumed this meant that a movie would replace formal educational instruction while the teacher graded papers at their desk. As students, we focused on the screen, enthralled by the bright colors and humorous characters. At the time, I believed that movies were shown simply because teachers did not wish to teach that day— a perception that was reinforced throughout my early instructional experiences. Films such as *A Goofy Movie* (Lima, 1995) were shown at school and taught me that self-identity can differ from family traditions. These films served an instructional purpose, even if it was not immediately apparent to students. While we saw the movie as a distraction or a temporary escape, my teacher intentionally used it to connect classroom learning to the environment beyond the classroom.

Film and visual media are encountered in nearly all areas of students' lives. Outside of school, students regularly engage with videos and short-form media on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and streaming services. These media experiences frequently evoke strong emotions toward the characters, narratives, and conflicts. Research in media and literacy education indicates that visual portrayals can promote engagement, empathy, and perspective-taking by allowing viewers to observe and reflect on social situations in relatable ways (Bruner, 1996; Hobbs & Moore, 2011). When used intentionally, film can function as a powerful instructional tool that supports cognitive and emotional learning.

Despite the broad availability of film and media, their use in classrooms is often unstructured and inconsistent. Films are commonly shown in academic environments. However, they are frequently presented without intentional alignment to instructional goals, especially

those related to social-emotional learning (SEL). As a result, opportunities to use film as a meaningful tool for SEL instruction are frequently overlooked. When films are used exclusively as time fillers or as extensions of academic content without intentional reflection or discussion, the potential to support students' social and emotional development is largely untapped.

Social-emotional learning has become an essential element of modern education. Social-emotional learning is a major focus of educational research because of its effect on behavioral, academic, and social-emotional success (Frye et al., 2024). This shift demonstrates increasing awareness of the interconnectedness among students' psychological well-being, social competence, and academic achievement. Research regularly shows that SEL, when used effectively, supports positive outcomes across multiple grade levels. These outcomes include improved emotional regulation, increased engagement, and greater empathy for others (Frye et al., 2024). Students who receive consistent SEL instruction are better able to navigate social interactions, manage emotions, and participate in meaningful academic learning.

Despite the documented benefits of social-emotional learning, countless educators report difficulties in effectively implementing it (Jerome et al., 2022). Teachers often express uncertainty about how to successfully integrate SEL within daily instruction through engaging, age-appropriate methods aligned with academic expectations. In many classrooms, SEL instruction is conveyed through sporadic lessons or scripted programs that are unrelated to students' lived experiences. These challenges reinforce the need for flexible, engaging instructional tools that support meaningful SEL implementation.

Gaps in Practice

Although national frameworks and research-based models for social-emotional learning exist, a gap remains between theory and classroom practice. Frameworks such as those

developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provide a strong conceptual foundation by emphasizing core competencies and developmental progressions. The five core competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These capabilities are intended to evolve across grade levels. This framework reflects students' development of emotional, cognitive, and social capacities. Although these benefits exist, the **frameworks themselves lack concrete guidance for educators in translating SEL theory into daily instructional practices** (Lawson et al., 2018).

Educators are often required to blend SEL instruction with academic demands and standards. This is influenced by the limited instructional time and mandated curricula. As a result, SEL is treated as an optional add-on rather than a vital instructional component. If an SEL resource depends entirely on written activities or discussion-based lessons, it might not fully engage all learners or reflect students' media-rich experiences inside and outside of the classroom.

There is a need for instructional resources that bridge this gap by supplying adaptable, useful strategies for SEL instruction. Specifically, **educators need tools that correspond with established social-emotional competencies while being flexible enough to be incorporated throughout diverse media, grade levels, and classroom contexts**. Film-based instruction provides a possible approach to meeting this gap by combining accessibility, engagement, and alignment with students' common experiences.

Rationale for Film-Based Instruction

Film-based instruction provides a unique opportunity to support students' social-emotional learning through common visual and emotional experiences. Films present

complex conflicts, characters, and social situations that serve as entry points for reflection and discussion. Through analyzing characters' emotions, decisions, actions, and relationships, students can explore social-emotional themes in an engaging and appropriate context.

Films also provide an introduction to extremely sensitive and challenging topics at a distance that feels safe for students. Using film to support social-emotional learning can allow for authentic emotional exploration and build connection (Thomas & Manalil, 2025). Rather than discussing personal experiences directly, students can reflect on the characters' actions, choices, and the conflicts they face. This reduces potential discomfort while still creating opportunities for meaningful and vulnerable communication. According to Thomas and Manalil (2025), using film can activate empathy, encourage emotional self-regulation, and support moral and ethical deliberation, cultural and social sensitivity, and memory and engagement. These are more difficult to foster in conventional classroom settings.

This approach encourages inclusive participation and students' opportunity to practice empathy, critical thinking, and perspective-taking (Aslantürk Altıntuğ & Güneyli, 2025).

Challenging topics, such as bullying, can be addressed through film and discussions. Film can immerse students in different perspectives and increase their social-emotional development.

Ultimately, film functions not only as a teaching tool but as a link that connects students to deeper empathy, understanding, and self-awareness.

Using the VARK learning model (Fleming & Mills, 1992), it is important to recognize that students learn best using different modalities. Although social-emotional competencies can be taught through other forms (such as literacy), that may not be the most effective modality for all students. Film is a multisensory tool that can be customized to various modalities. A film-based toolkit connects with students' current media consumption. Many students have

experience with visual narration and digital media. This makes film an accessible and developmentally appropriate instructional resource.

One concern with using film to teach social-emotional learning is that it could oversimplify conflicts and emotions (Hanich, 2021). To address this concern, educators must guide students in reflective dialogue. When used intentionally, with reflection activities and discussion prompts, film can evolve from passive viewing to an active learning experience.

Context of the Project

Developed from the perspective of a K-12 general education educator, this professional project demonstrates the perspective of a practicing classroom teacher. Educators are often expected to incorporate social-emotional learning together with academic instruction. This project is created from the perspective of a practicing teacher who is responsible for designing, implementing, and assessing instruction that promotes both academic and social-emotional development. This project is analyzed from the perspective of an educator who teaches multiple grade levels in a single classroom (a blended fourth- and fifth-grade classroom). Instruction in this context commonly incorporates multimedia tools such as digital texts and visual media. It provides opportunities to explore film as an instructional tool.

The film-based SEL toolkit is designed to support adaptability by supplying lessons for primary (grades K-2), intermediate (grades 3-5), middle school (grades 6-8), and high school (grades 9-12). It also gives a lesson template that can be modified for any grade level. A toolkit format allows for adaptability and flexibility across grade levels, permitting teachers to tailor these resources to meet students' developmental needs while preserving consistency in social-emotional learning instruction.

The intended audience for this project includes educators who seek accessible, research-informed strategies for integrating social-emotional learning through film. One benefit of this project is that it can be used by educators teaching any grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade. This project does not seek to assess long-term student outcomes; it focuses on the design and organization of practical instructional resources.

Alignment to WOU Graduate Learning Outcomes

- *Core Content Knowledge:* This project draws from research on social-emotional learning, pedagogical development, and media literacy to enhance the toolkit design and the instructional strategies implemented.
- *Applied Skills:* Scholarly and peer-reviewed research is translated into a practical and adaptable instructional resource that can be implemented in real classroom settings.
- *Disposition and Values:* This project accentuates ethical, culturally responsive practices, and considers diverse learners' needs, both essential components of graduate-level work in curriculum and instruction.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to design a developmentally appropriate, film-based toolkit that supports social-emotional learning instruction across multiple grade levels. Through a deliberately curated assortment of films and film clips, this project connects instructional materials with core social-emotional learning competencies. These materials include film selections, SEL competency alignments, lesson outlines, reflection activities, discussion topics, and instructional guidance.

The intended audience for this toolkit is classroom educators in kindergarten through 12th grade who seek flexible, engaging resources to support SEL instruction. This toolkit covers

various SEL topics, including self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. There are discussion questions and additional activities to connect the film with social-emotional learning. This project addresses the need for approachable, engaging SEL materials by supplying educators with organized guidance on using film intentionally rather than informally.

This project centers on the design, organization, and implementation of instructional resources and is not intended to measure student long-term outcomes. By offering a reproducible instructional model, this project supports consistent SEL implementation while allowing adjustability across classroom contexts (Domitrovich et al., 2017).

Research Questions

This project is focused on the following research questions:

- 1. How can a developmentally appropriate film-based toolkit be designed to support social-emotional learning (SEL) and competencies across multiple grade levels?*
- 2. How do films align with specific social-emotional skills at different developmental stages?*

Significance of the Study

This project adds to the field of curriculum and instruction by delivering a practical, research-informed resource that supports the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) across multiple grade levels. Research demonstrates that high-quality SEL instruction promotes emotional well-being, positive behavior, and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Using film as an instructional tool offers instructors a purposeful approach to developing students' social-emotional competencies rather than treating media as a supplementary activity.

The SEL film-based toolkit is adaptable, permitting educators to incorporate lessons throughout various instructional settings. It also supports interdisciplinary connections among social-emotional learning, literacy, and media literacy. This approach reinforces the idea that social-emotional learning can be incorporated alongside the mandated curriculum (Jerome et al., 2022). This can be used as part of the curriculum rather than as a separate program.

Definition of Key Terms

- *Developmentally appropriate practice*: A child-centered approach to instruction.
Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) provides guidelines and expectations for educational practices that correspond with children's developmental stages (Charlesworth, 2012).
- *Film-based instruction*: The use of film or media within an educational setting to teach particular topics or subjects.
- *Media literacy*: The process of analyzing messages from media sources and connecting them with technological tools (Hobbs, 2013).
- *Social-emotional learning (SEL)*: The process of developing the abilities to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate empathy, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017).
- *Toolkit*: A collection of instructional materials created to support educators in implementing social-emotional learning through film, including curated media selections, lesson components, and reflection activities.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to consider how social-emotional learning (SEL) influences students' development across various grade levels. It connects how SEL can shape the creation of a film-based toolkit to enhance students' social-emotional learning. When designing classroom instruction, several factors should be considered: students' ages, levels, and culture. In addition to the other considerations, students' social-emotional learning and development must be addressed.

This literature review addresses three themes: (1) social-emotional learning frameworks and core competencies, (2) social-emotional learning across grade levels, and (3) media, film, and visual literacy in education.

This project answers two research questions: *How can a developmentally appropriate film-based toolkit be designed to support social-emotional learning (SEL) and competencies across multiple grade levels? How do films align with specific social-emotional skills at different developmental stages?*

Search Process and Selection Criteria

To effectively find research to support this project, I started with Google Scholar. Hamersly Library's Article & Research Database can be used to search for the article DOIs. Some terms to use initially when searching for resources are "social-emotional learning," "SEL," "film in the classroom," "media literacy," etc. These searches result in thousands of references. To narrow these down, the search can be refined to include items such as "social-emotional learning and film," "film and emotions," and "social-emotional learning across grade levels." This refinement narrowed the results from thousands of articles to hundreds.

To further identify relevant references, I identified the number of citations from that article. If an article is cited more than another article, the one cited more frequently may be more applicable. The research is filtered to include grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. When an article is deemed helpful, additional references were found through the article's reference list.

A literature review matrix is used to organize sources and ensure compatibility. This literature review matrix sorts articles into three themes: social-emotional learning frameworks and core competencies, social-emotional learning across grade levels, and media, film, and visual literacy in education. This matrix includes identifying the title, author, year, article type, source, purpose/question, methodology, key findings, restrictions/limitations, themes/keywords, relevance to the project, and the citation. This encouraged the refinement and organization of potential references.

Theme One: Social-Emotional Learning Frameworks and Core Competencies

CASEL Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020) describes SEL as the way that people grow, learn, and change. Despite the variation in the exact definition of SEL, they all share a common component: developing competencies (Blewitt et al., 2018; Domitrovich, 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Frye et al., 2024; Green et al., 2021; Osher et al., 2016; Payton, 2008; Taylor et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018; Zhao & Shang, 2025). These competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Most SEL programs focus on these five core competencies. The meaning of each competency varies by reference, but they all share a common core definition. Many resources use CASEL's core definitions for each competency.

Self-awareness is a person's ability to understand their emotions, values, and thoughts, as well as how contexts can influence behavior (CASEL, 2020). This includes the ability to identify weaknesses and strengths, as well as self-efficacy and optimism. *Self-management* is the ability to effectively manage one's emotions, behaviors, and thoughts in various situations and to achieve their goals (CASEL, 2020). Self-management includes managing stress, setting goals, and controlling impulses. *Social awareness* includes a person's ability to understand others' perspectives and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, contexts, and cultures (CASEL, 2020). Social awareness includes adopting others' perspectives and understanding societal and cultural norms. *Relationship skills* are a person's ability to create and maintain supportive, healthy relationships and to navigate situations with people from diverse backgrounds (CASEL, 2020). This competency includes the ability to communicate clearly, actively listen, cooperate with others, and handle conflict. *Responsible decision-making* is a person's ability to make choices about behavior and social situations, in a caring and constructive manner (CASEL, 2020).

SEL is an important skill to develop because the interrelatedness of our world and economy requires the ability to communicate, problem-solve, and collaborate with others (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). Various studies show that SEL contributes to improved emotional regulation, increased empathy, improved peer relationships, classroom cooperation, and a more effective learning environment (Blewitt et al., 2021; Collie et al., 2012). Social-emotional learning can be supported by implementing evidence-based frameworks and programs.

In addition to the CASEL framework and core competencies, other theories and practices support student development and understanding. These include social learning theory, Constructivist learning theory, and experiential learning theory

Social Learning Theory

Developed by Albert Bandura (1977), social learning theory is centered around the concept that people learn by watching others. This theory consists of four stages: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. This theory has changed from social learning theory into social cognitive theory. Similar to other learning theories, social learning theory can help identify how students learn. Unlike other learning theories, the social learning theory focuses mainly on self-efficacy. This offers a strong foundational framework for social-emotional lessons.

Constructivist Learning Theory

When researching various theories and frameworks, Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development is often discussed (1978). Many studies use this theory to guide their research (Cantuária, 2023). This theory centers around the idea that learning occurs through environmental stimuli (Vygotsky, 1978).

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory, developed by Kolb (1984), emphasizes that learning occurs through a process that involves experiences, observations, conceptualization, and experimentation. In this model, learners obtain meaning by engaging with their experiences and reflecting upon them to form a deeper understanding. This is relevant with SEL because it supports the importance of reflection and meaning-making when developing social-emotional skills.

Within a film-based SEL framework, experiential learning occurs when students observe characters' experiences and relate to those characters. Many studies show that films can provide emotionally rich narratives that let learners observe complex emotional responses, ethical dilemmas, and social interactions in a safe and structured environment. Through guided

discussion and reflection, students can process these experiences, connect them to their own lives and apply various strategies. This cycle aligns with Kolb's model by transforming passive viewing into active learning, where students move from emotional engagement to reflective understanding and finally to real-world application (1984).

Together, CASEL's SEL competencies and these foundational learning theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how film can be used as a tool to support social-emotional development for diverse learners.

Theme Two: Social-Emotional Learning Across Grade Levels

One thing this project considers is the importance of a child's developmental stage when implementing and incorporating an SEL program. A program that works in kindergarten may not be as effective or appropriate for high school students. This is why it is important to select appropriate SEL skills and program implementation based on the students' level. This section examines variances among primary grades (K-2), intermediate grades (3-5), middle school (6-8), and high school (9-12).

Commonalities Across Grades

Core competencies of social-emotional learning are adaptable and consistent across all grade levels. Many analyses of SEL programs demonstrate consistent positive effects on students' SEL, regardless of each student's grade level (Greenburg, 2023). Durlak et al. (2011) found that students who participate in school-based SEL programs show improvements in social behavior, academic achievement, and emotional skills. SEL programs have also been proven to help students as they transition between grade levels (Green et al., 2021). The findings of these studies demonstrate the importance of SEL across different developmental stages.

Differences Across Grades

Social-emotional learning can look different in early childhood and elementary classrooms than middle- and high-school classes. In early childhood and elementary school, students' SEL focuses more on foundational emotional and interpersonal skills, such as emotion recognition and regulation, sharing, cooperation, basic empathy, perspective-taking, self-control, and classroom behavior. One large focus in early childhood is the ability to identify emotions and regulate behavior, which emphasizes self-awareness and self-management (Caldarella et al., 2009).

During middle school, students experience significant cognitive, social, and emotional changes that are associated with early adolescence. As a result, SEL development focuses on identity formation, peer relationships, and increased self-awareness. Studies examining the influence of SEL programs during this developmental stage suggest that improvements in self-management and social awareness are better predictors of academic engagement and successful transitions to high school (Wu et al., 2020). In contrast, researchers such as Brackett (2019) emphasize emotional regulation alongside interpersonal competence. These skills are vital at this stage, given the influence of peers and the increased emotional intensity. Both of these are important for a person's development, so both studies must be taken into consideration.

Although students' social-emotional development focuses on CASEL's core competencies throughout all grade levels, the focus shifts as they grow and develop. Younger students are developing the basic emotional and interpersonal skills. Students in middle school focus on self-identity, peer interactions, and relationships. High school students focus on developing independence, setting goals, and staying motivated (Yang et al., 2018). Together, these findings suggest that proper SEL implementation should be developmentally appropriate

while maintaining a focus on the core competencies to support students' academic, social, and personal success across all grade levels.

Theme Three: Media, Film, and Visual Literacy in Education

Children experience media daily. Technological development has increased students' exposure to various media and content formats. The development of mobile devices, such as phones, and the widespread use of screens, encourage students to engage with these media. From social media to video platforming sites, students are affected by this source of information daily. Technology continues to change, and educators must acknowledge its influence on students.

A growing body of research supports the instructional use of media, specifically film, across subject areas. Students indicate that film can be used as an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing comprehension, engagement, and critical thinking in classroom settings (Aslantürk Altıntuğ & Güneyli, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2021; Hobbs, 2013; Matusiak et al., 2019; Supsakova, 2016). Hobbs (2013) further argues that media literacy goes beyond decoding media messaging and includes the ability to analyze, evaluate, and meaningfully create media content. This broad conceptualization positions media as both an instructional resource and a cognitive tool for deeper learning.

Within this framework, media literacy is characterized by its adaptability across disciplines, grade levels, and diverse learner needs. Research suggests that visual literacy can contribute to improved academic performance by supporting comprehension, retention, and conceptual understanding (Matusiak et al., 2019; Supsakova, 2016). Combining visual imagery, dialogue, sound, and narrative structure enables learners to engage with the content through multiple cognitive pathways, thereby enhancing accessibility and engagement.

Importantly, film also provides a unique method for developing social and emotional concepts in educational contexts. Through narrative and character-driven storytelling, students can observe social dynamics, emotional expression, and ethical decision-making in context-rich scenarios. This aligns with Hobbs' (2013) concept that media literacy includes reflective and interpretive practices that support meaning-making. When applied to social-emotional learning, film-based instruction allows students to engage in perspective-taking and emotional analysis in ways that are both structured and developmentally appropriate.

Furthermore, the integration of film into instructional practices supports differentiated learning by providing multiple entry points for understanding. Visual and auditory modalities can enhance accessibility for diverse learners, including multilingual students and those who may struggle with traditional text-heavy content. As educational environments become increasingly diverse, the flexibility of media-based instruction positions film as a valuable resource for inclusive pedagogy. Consequently, film functions not only as a tool for engagement but also as a medium through which academic content and social-emotional competencies can be jointly developed in a cohesive and accessible manner.

Gaps in Existing SEL Resources

Although many studies show that films can increase a person's empathy or emotional engagement, there are still limited longitudinal or experimental studies that prove film-based SEL procedures sustain SEL growth over time. For example, one study found that cinematic virtual reality films increase empathy scores immediately after viewing. This study does not examine long-term behavioral effects (Trudeau et al., 2023). Similarly, studies grounded in narrative transportation theory show that immersion in narratives can influence empathy,

attitudes, and emotions. Despite this, most measure short-term emotional responses rather than long-term SEL competencies (Walkington et al., 2020).

One challenge when analyzing the impact of film-based tools in education is that the research is underexplored. Many of the studies involving SEL and films focus on teacher reflections, anecdotal evidence, or qualitative data instead of quantitative and experimental evidence (Aslantürk Altıntuğ & Güneyli, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2021). Another consideration that must be taken into account are other extraneous factors (social and personal) that may influence the outcomes (Thomas & Manalil, 2025).

This project seeks to address the identified gaps in existing research by creating an accessible, developmentally appropriate SEL resource that is grounded in theory and practice. By integrating film as a tool for SEL, this toolkit aims to provide structured opportunities to enhance self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making. In doing so, this project contributes to the growing field of film-based SEL by offering a practical, inclusive, and research-informed framework that can support social-emotional growth in various educational settings for diverse learners.

Chapter Three: Project Design

Introduction of the Project Design

This project involves developing a film-based social-emotional learning (SEL) toolkit. This toolkit is designed for students from kindergarten through 12th grade. This toolkit is a resource for instructors to match a specific social-emotional skill or competency to a film. Parents and guardians may also use this resource to support a child's social and emotional development.

This chapter describes the design of the film-based social-emotional (SEL) toolkit, which is grounded in theory and differentiated to meet the needs of all students. It starts with an overview of the conceptual frameworks that guide this project, followed by a description of the target audience and environment. The structure and components of the toolkit are explained. This includes the criteria for film selection and the instructional models used to support student engagement. This chapter also discusses alignment with social-emotional learning competencies, implementation considerations, and assessment approaches. It ends with an analysis of the importance of equity, accessibility, and design limitations. To support the design of this toolkit, the following section explains the context in which the project was created.

Context of the Project

I am an elementary educator who currently teaches a classroom of fourth- and fifth-grade students. I work in the Sweet Home School District. This school district includes four elementary schools (kindergarten through 6th), one junior high (grades 7 and 8), and one high school (grades 9 through 12).

According to the Oregon Department of Education (n.d.), in the 2024-2025 school year, my school served 259 students, 55% of whom are living in poverty. 86% of the student

population identifies as White, and English is the primary language spoken. 72.3% of the students have regular attendance. In math and reading, this school scored lower than the district and state averages.

As an educator in a district where poverty is a concern, it is important to support students' social-emotional development. While finding resources for SEL implementation, it is challenging to find ones that accommodate multiple grade levels. I teach two grades in the same classroom, so I require content that can be adapted to meet both grade levels. This toolkit promotes social and emotional development through film across multiple grade levels.

Design Methods of the Project

This project uses developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) to create a film-based social-emotional learning (SEL) toolkit. NAEYC (2009) explains that developmentally appropriate practices include planning lessons that create goals for students that are both challenging and achievable. The design of this film-based SEL toolkit is grounded in established research on social-emotional development. Additionally, it is supported by learning theories that emphasize the role of social interaction, observation, and experiential engagement within the learning process.

The framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the primary foundation for this project. The five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—provide a comprehensive model for understanding and supporting students' social-emotional development. These competencies inform both the selection of films and the design of lesson activities within the toolkit.

Film Selection Process

The selection process for this toolkit is structured and intentional to ensure alignment with social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, developmental appropriateness, and instructional relevance. This process identifies films that engage students while providing meaningful opportunities for skill development, discussion, and reflection.

An initial selection of films is made by reviewing commonly used educational media, recommendations from teaching resources, and existing literature on film-based instruction. This toolkit includes full-length films and clips from the indicated films. These offer flexibility across grade levels and instructional contexts. Each film is selected based on its alignment with the CASEL core competencies, developmental appropriateness, narrative strength, and diverse perspectives. Films are reviewed to identify key scenes, character interactions, development, and themes related to SEL. Each film is matched with one or more SEL competencies that align with its potential to model specific skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and decision-making.

After evaluation, films are organized by grade band and alignment with specific SEL competencies. Care is taken to ensure balanced representation across all competencies, with adaptations for each grade level, allowing comprehensive coverage of social-emotional skills. A final set of films is chosen to align with the five core CASEL competencies. This structure balances depth of engagement with practical implementation. It also allows enough time for viewing, discussion, and reflection within typical school structures.

To support diverse educational contexts, this toolkit offers flexibility in the use of film. Educators may substitute films, use selected clips, or adapt the content based on individual student needs, available resources, and instructional time. Through this structured selection process, the resulting film set reflects an alignment between content, theory, and instructional

purpose. This process ensures that each film serves as a meaningful tool for social-emotional learning.

Toolkit Development

The development of this film-based social-emotional learning (SEL) toolkit is guided by a structured and intentional design. This process aims to create a set of learning experiences that cohesively integrate film to promote the development of social-emotional competencies. These are grounded in SEL frameworks and learning theories and designed to be both pedagogically sound and practically applicable across diverse educational contexts.

Each lesson in this toolkit follows the same structure to support student engagement before, during, and after viewing the film. Each lesson is organized into three primary phases: pre-viewing, guided viewing, and post-viewing activities. This structure intentionally scaffolds student learning and ensures that engagement with content extends beyond passive viewing.

Data Collection and Evaluation Procedures

The purpose of this section is to explain the process that evaluates the effectiveness of this toolkit. Although this project focuses on creating a resource, the evaluation framework is intended to support the assessment of outcomes and instructional impacts. The evaluation of this toolkit is guided by two objectives: assessing the extent to which it supports the development of students' social-emotional competencies and examining its usability and effectiveness in educational settings. These objectives reflect the project's dual focus as both an instructional resource and a practical tool for educators.

Student outcomes are centered on developing the core social-emotional competencies identified by CASEL. Evaluation efforts aim to identify whether students demonstrate increased ability to identify and regulate emotions, engage in perspective-taking, build positive

relationships, and make informed decisions. In addition to student outcomes, the evaluation also considers teacher perceptions of the toolkit, including ease of use, adaptability, and perceived impact on student engagement. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the toolkit's effectiveness, multiple data sources are proposed. These sources will include student-generated materials and educator feedback, enabling a more holistic evaluation of the learning process.

Student data will be collected through reflective and formative assessment tools embedded within the lessons. These include written reflection journals and exit tickets. In addition to the written artifacts, student participation in discussions could serve as an informal data source. Educator data will be collected through feedback surveys and observational notes. Data is collected throughout the toolkit implementation, including both formative and summative assessments. At the beginning of implementation, educators might choose to give a pre-assessment or reflection activity. This establishes an initial understanding of students' social-emotional skills. This optional step provides a point of comparison for evaluating student growth.

During each lesson, formative assessments are given through ongoing student activities. These include reflection, discussion, and exit tickets. These allow educators to monitor and adjust instruction. This data is mostly qualitative and focuses on students' ability to engage with and use social-emotional concepts and skills. At the end of each lesson and unit, summative assessments, such as reflection activities or self-assessments, encourage students to synthesize their learning and evaluate their growth. Several limitations of the evaluation procedures must be acknowledged. This project does not include formal implementation, so the evaluation framework is theoretical. The reliance on self-reported data, particularly student reflections and teacher surveys, may be influenced by bias or response variability.

The flexibility of this resource means implementation may be inconsistent across classrooms, leading to inconsistent data collection. Differences in instructional time, educator experience, and student demographics may influence both the outcomes and the interpretation of results. These limitations highlight the importance of understanding evaluation findings and suggest future research to assess the toolkit's effectiveness.

Chapter Four: Project

Introduction to the Project

This chapter describes the development of this digital social-emotional learning (SEL) toolkit that implements film-based learning experiences to support students' social and emotional development and growth. The purpose of this project is to provide educators with a structured instructional resource that uses films, guided discussion, and reflective activities to support students' social-emotional development.

The toolkit is intentionally differentiated across grade bands. This aligns with the principles of developmentally appropriate practices and ensures that instructional resources match students' cognitive, social, and emotional cognitive development (Charlesworth, 2012). The toolkit is grounded in the CASEL framework for social-emotional learning, which identifies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as core competencies essential to students' academic and social development (CASEL, 2020).

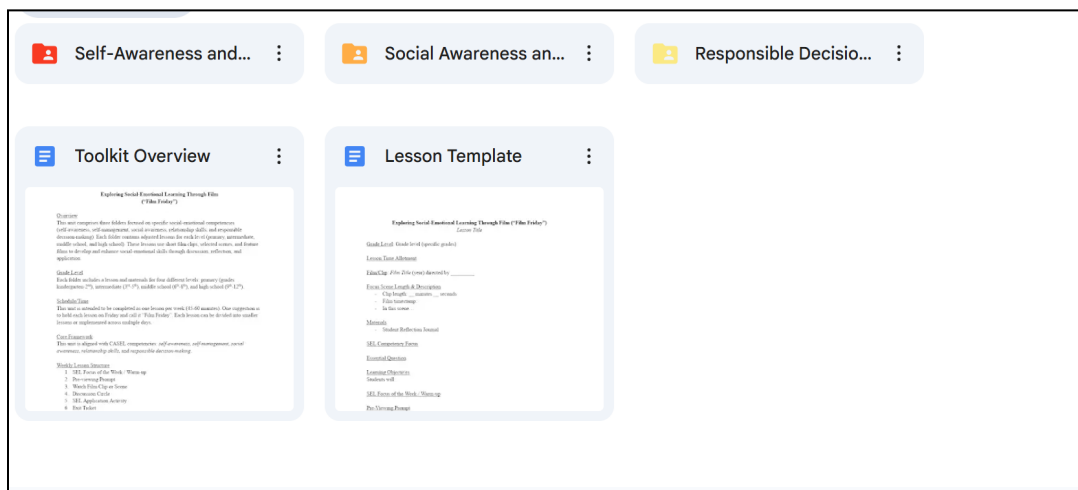
The artifacts presented in this chapter are not indicative of all of the materials included in this toolkit. These artifacts support the intended research questions: *How can a developmentally appropriate film-based toolkit be designed to support social-emotional learning (SEL) and competencies across multiple grade levels? And how do films align with specific social-emotional skills at different developmental stages?* The entire toolkit is available [here](#).

Project Overview

This project is organized/shared using Google Docs and Google Drive. The digital format promotes accessibility and instructional flexibility, allowing educators to adapt lessons to diverse contexts, student needs, and time constraints. The initial toolkit includes subfolders with the

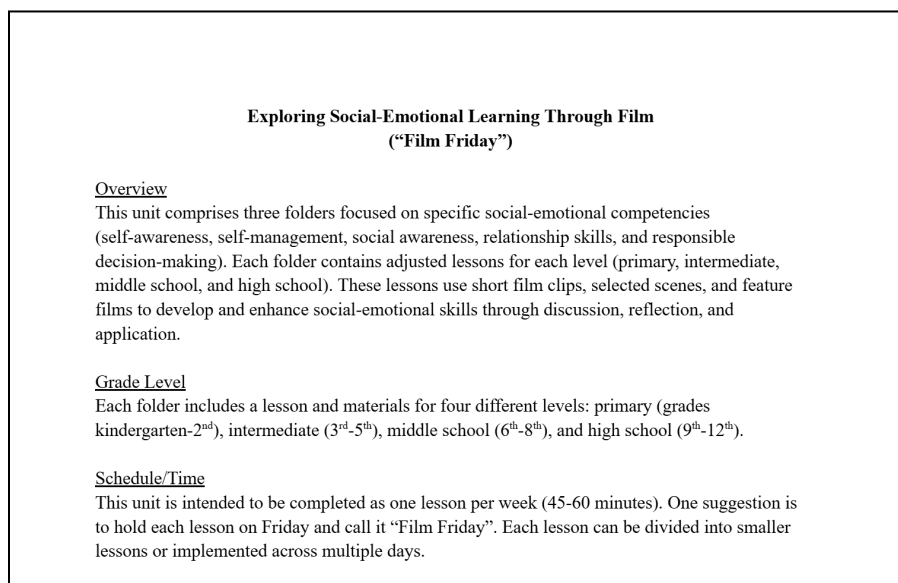
required materials for the lessons. These are in a PDF format. The lesson template is formatted as an editable document for users to adapt. Figure 1 shows what the toolkit looks like from the main folder.

Figure 1: Toolkit (Main Folder)



Educators are the intended audience for this project; specifically, educators seeking to support students’ social-emotional development. By offering the [Lesson Template](#) (shown in Figure 2), this resource is adaptable for any grade level (K-12).

Figure 2: Lesson Template



The project comprises three folders that are focused on similar social-emotional competencies: (1) self-awareness and self-management, (2) social awareness and relationship skills, and (3) responsible decision-making. Each folder contains adjusted lessons for each level (primary, intermediate, middle school, and high school). The use of film-based instruction aligns with Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977), as students observe characters modeling specific behaviors, emotional regulation, communication, and decision-making in diverse contexts.

The consistent lesson structure intentionally promotes predictability, consistency, and emotional safety while also supporting scaffolded social-emotional skill development across all grade levels. Each lesson has the same basic structure: SEL focus of the week/warm-up, pre-viewing prompt, watching the film clip, discussion circle, application activity, and exit ticket. Additional sections offer opportunities for alteration and differentiation.

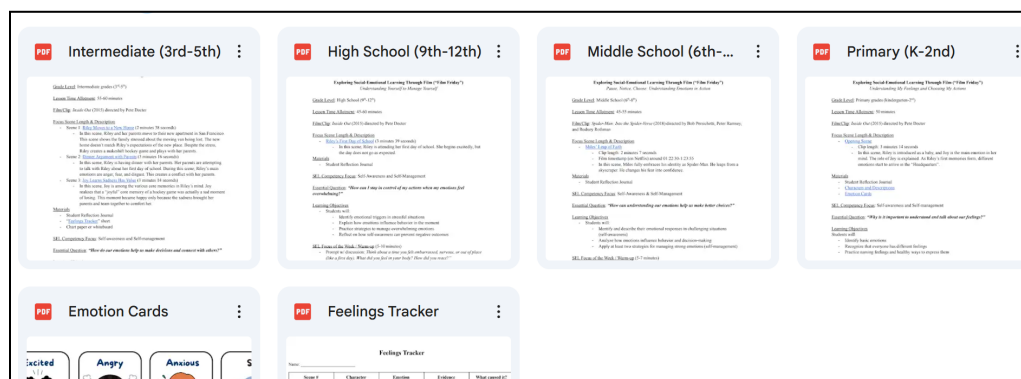
The lessons are designed to be flexible and may be implemented in any sequence throughout the school year. They can be completed in one session or split into multiple lessons. Each lesson contains optional paired-reading and extension activities for additional opportunities. The [Toolkit Overview](#) includes optional monthly themes to help you implement SEL throughout the school year. These topics include emotional regulation, kindness, and courage. In addition to these topics, it also offers larger project ideas (e.g., character analysis) that can be used to connect multiple SEL lessons or skills.

Detailed Presentation of the Project

This project is divided into three main folders: [Self-Awareness and Self-Management](#), [Social Awareness and Relationship Skills](#), and [Responsible Decision-Making](#). This [subfolder](#), shown in Figure 3, contains a PDF for each level: [primary](#), [intermediate](#), [middle school](#), and [high](#)

[school](#). The additional materials ([Emotion Cards](#) and [Feelings Tracker](#)) are also available in this folder.

Figure 3: Self-Awareness and Self-Management Subfolder



The primary lesson follows the same format as the others. The lesson is titled “Understanding My Feelings and Choosing My Actions.” It is adapted for students in kindergarten through second grade. The allotted time for this lesson is 50 minutes. The film used is *Inside Out* (2015), which is directed by Pete Docter. The scene used in this lesson is the opening scene from the movie. The clip length, link, and description are included in this section.

The materials needed for this lesson are a student reflection journal, [Emotion Cards](#), and [Feelings Tracker](#). The lesson focuses specifically on self-awareness and self-management. The essential question for it is “*Why is it important to understand and talk about our feelings?*” The learning objectives are to identify basic emotions, recognize that everybody has different feelings, and practice naming feelings and healthy ways to express them.

This lesson is intentionally designed to begin with an SEL Focus of the Week or Warm-up. This section should take about five minutes. It begins with the teacher explaining how this lesson will be about self-awareness and self-management. The teacher will display the [Emotion Cards](#), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Emotion Cards



Figure 4 displays eight different emotions (excited, angry, anxious, sad, happy, proud, frustrated, and jealous) using images. This resource has optional questions/prompts for each emotion. The teacher can ask students how they are feeling today. They can follow this up by informing them that all feelings are okay and that feelings give us information. This clip visually demonstrates the different feelings the main character (Riley) may experience and how they help her understand what is happening around her. To prepare for the film clip, the educator can show students this [resource](#), which describes the various emotions that will be seen.

The **During Viewing** section explains what students should do while watching the film clip. This section focuses students' attention on the viewing objectives. This section also includes a link to the clip, so the teacher can show students directly from the lesson plan without having to search for it. The **Discussion-Circle** portion demonstrates Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist learning theory. This is achieved by encouraging students to collaborate, interpret

emotions, analyze perspectives, and critically consider the social interactions presented in the film scenes (Vygotsky, 1978). Each lesson contains different questions aimed at the specific SEL competency. There are suggested questions and a key teaching point. This section is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Discussion Circle Example

Discussion Circle (10 minutes)

- Ask students:
 - “Which emotions did we see?”
 - “Did Riley have more than one feeling?”
 - “Have you ever felt like Riley?”
 - “Is it okay to feel sad or angry? Why?”
- Key teaching point: **“All feelings are okay. It’s what we do with feelings that matters.”**

After the discussion questions, each lesson offers an SEL application activity. The SEL application activities demonstrate Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984). This is accomplished by encouraging students to apply emotional and social concepts to authentic personal experiences (Kolb, 1984). One example of this is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: SEL Application Activity Example

SEL Application Activity (Draw/Writing) (10 minutes)

- Show students how Riley has “Headquarters.”
- Students draw their own “Headquarters” in their Reflection Journal and include feelings they have.
- Prompt: Draw a time when you felt: (“I feel ____ when ____.”)
 - Joy
 - Sadness
 - Anger
 - Fear
- Practice Calm Strategies
 - Teach what to do with big feelings:
 - When I feel angry, I can...
 - Take deep breaths
 - Count to five
 - Ask for help
 - When I feel sad, I can...
 - Talk to someone
 - Get a hug
 - Draw my feelings

Each lesson concludes with some reflection questions that can be answered as a discussion or in the students' reflection journal. These questions are adapted for each lesson, but many can be used across multiple lessons and adapted to different situations.

Every lesson promotes additional resources, such as a list of items to assess student understanding. Extension activities and optional paired readings are included for each lesson. There are also typically three teacher reflection questions included in each lesson. Using the same organizational structure, each lesson is specific to the identified social-emotional competency and grade level.

Conclusion

This digital film-based SEL toolkit is designed to provide educators with an engaging, adaptable, and developmentally appropriate resource for supporting students' social-emotional development across grade levels. Through guided discussion, reflective activities, and application-based learning experiences, it promotes the development of core social-emotional competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The following chapter will explain the project's reflection, limitations, and improvements.

Chapter Five: Reflection

Introduction to the Reflection

This professional project was designed to develop a developmentally appropriate, film-based toolkit to support social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction across multiple grade levels. This chapter reflects on the development and refinement of the toolkit while evaluating progress toward the original goals. It also examines insights gained through the research and design process, identifies project limitations, and considers future directions for improvement.

Progress Toward Original Goals

The first research question considered with the toolkit is: *How can a developmentally appropriate film-based toolkit be designed to support social-emotional learning (SEL) and competencies across multiple grade levels?* This development process began by defining the project's conception and intention. Using these guiding objectives, I identified SEL competencies that could be effectively integrated within individual lessons. This project addresses self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. After these competencies were connected, a lesson was created for each grade level. This toolkit addresses this goal by creating a resource that encourages social-emotional development through lessons featuring film clips.

The second research question is: *How do films align with specific social-emotional skills at different developmental stages?* Originally, when designing this toolkit, I intended to map it out holistically. My intention was to develop a basic lesson structure with adaptable components that could be used with any SEL competency, film, and grade level. The initial design for the project was to create a resource folder for each core competency. Each folder would contain a subfolder for each grade level (primary, intermediate, middle school, and high school).

This approach ultimately proved too complex and time-intensive to implement within the project timeline. I was unable to complete that many resources and add enough details to meet my hopes for the project. This goal is met because it offers lessons in social-emotional skills for various grade levels and provides a lesson template that can be used for any social-emotional competency, using many films, in any grade.

Connection to the Literature Review

The literature review addresses three themes: (1) SEL frameworks and core competencies, (2) SEL across grade levels, and (3) media, film, and visual literacy in education. When considering SEL frameworks and core competencies, the research by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2020) has proven most helpful and vital to the development of this project. The breadth of research on SEL implementation across grade levels necessitated a more focused scope for this study. When initially researching this topic, I had to narrow my search. Many research articles supporting the implementation of media, film, and visual literacy in education focused on a single film to teach SEL skills. Few peer-reviewed articles examined the use of multiple films to support SEL instruction. This made it easier to generate ideas for connecting films to different educational topics.

Personal and Professional Growth

This experience expanded both my professional perspective as an educator and my analytical approach as a graduate student. Through developing this project, I began to examine films more critically by identifying the social-emotional skills and themes they represent. When watching films, I now identify what the conflict of the film is and then identify which social-emotional competency is addressed. I analyze how this film or film clip can be used in the classroom to help students process a specific SEL skill.

The process of this professional project has been challenging, as I try to be thorough in my research without hyperfocusing on perfection. Throughout the project, I continually identified areas for refinement, such as time management and thorough research, and learned the importance of balancing improvement and forward progress.

Overall, this project was a large accomplishment. Initially, I struggled to narrow down and determine my topic. Although the integration of film and SEL remained central to the project vision, determining a feasible structure and scope within the available timeframe required substantial refinement.

One significant professional lesson was reorganizing priorities toward progress and adaptability over striving for unattainable perfection. I was unable to identify how I intended to display and organize my project (website, Google Drive, etc.). The final formatting decision was Google Drive. One challenge I encountered was avoiding constant revisions throughout the process. Instead I focused on moving forward and accepting that I would need to revise and improve the project later. After deciding on a process, I would revise it rather than start over.

Balancing professional responsibilities and graduate work was difficult. I would either spend an overwhelming number of hours on my professional project or fail to complete my graduate work to meet expectations. The thing that supported me most with this is setting deadlines and timers. When delegating time, I struggled to ensure time was set aside for relaxation and family.

Alignment with Professional Standards

Core Content Knowledge: This project demonstrates the application of core content knowledge through the integration of SEL theories, media literacy, and instructional design principles.

Applied Skills: This research enhanced the toolkit's design and strategies. Drawing on scholarly, peer-reviewed research, it supports the development of a replicable and adaptable resource.

Disposition and Values: This process employs ethical and culturally responsive practices. This is vital for graduate-level work in curriculum and instruction.

Limitations and Challenges

Although this project met the research questions, it was not without some challenges. Some difficulties encountered during this process include scoping and design limitations. Due to grade-level variability, I was unable to implement this project in my current professional setting.

The scope of this project was limited by feasibility constraints. This project combines self-awareness and self-management. It also connects social awareness and relationship skills. Responsible decision-making is the only competency that was implemented independently. Initially, I intended for this project to be sorted by grade level, and then eight individual lessons: (1) understanding emotions, (2) empathy and perspective, (3) friendship and trust, (4) conflict management, (5) responsible choices, (6) resilience and growth, (7) inclusion and bias, and (8) identity and purpose. This was infeasible due to time constraints. Design limitations for this project include how to organize and implement it. To better support variability and replicability, I would reconsider the toolkit's design.

Improvements and Future Directions

If I were to do this project over again, I would have created a resource that included a variety of films, specific scenes, and corresponding social-emotional competencies. This approach would provide educators with a more accessible reference tool. Teachers could identify

films aligned to specific SEL competencies or locate competencies associated with particular films. This is one of the biggest changes I would have made.

If I were going to revise this resource, I would elaborate on the various social-emotional competencies and offer more specific lessons. The specific lessons originally designed would be implemented if I could revise them. The feedback that I received from my committee members enhanced the details and elaboration throughout my project. I recommend revising and expanding this project by incorporating more sources and references. The next step I plan to take for this project is to implement it in my own classroom to assess feasibility. My intention is to keep this resource to share with other educators and build on the lesson ideas.

Conclusion

This professional project demonstrates the potential of film-based instruction to support SEL across multiple grade levels. By integrating engaging multimedia experiences with intentional SEL instruction, educators can create meaningful opportunities for students to connect classroom learning to their personal experiences and relationships.

Although the project evolved significantly throughout the design process, the resulting toolkit provides a flexible foundation for future refinement and classroom implementation. Continuous expansion of the resource through additional lessons, competency-based supports, and film selections may enhance its practical application for educators. Ultimately, this work reinforces the value of integrating SEL and media literacy within educational settings to foster student engagement, reflection, and emotional growth.

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