Hey! That's how I feel! A qualitative content analysis of anxiety in middle grade literature

Heather M. Wood

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HEY! THAT’S HOW I FEEL! A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ANXIETY IN MIDDLE GRADE LITERATURE

A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the Division of School Library Studies
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by Heather M. Wood
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This Research Paper by: Heather M. Wood
Titled: Hey! That’s How I Feel! A Qualitative Content Analysis of Anxiety in Middle Grade Literature

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to examine quality literature focused on anxiety as a mental health concern for middle grade readers and to identify which books should be promoted widely for students and recommended to teachers to support an SEL approach to the curriculum. The analysis of 10 middle grade books (Appendix A) using a book analysis tool (Appendix B) based on previous research completed by Wickham (2018) and Monaghan (2016) and as consistent with CASEL 5 identified four definitive themes in all 10 books. The four themes discovered were:

1) Books Have a Wide Range of Cognitive and/or Somatic Symptoms that Make them Relatable to Readers
2) Books Show that Younger Characters More Commonly Have Parental Relationships and Older Books Include a Close Friend
3) Access to Professional Therapy to Cope with Anxiety Is Prevalent but not Didactic in All Books
4) Initial Realistic Portrayal of Anxiety Shows Forward Motion in Decision Making that Portray Hope for Better Days

The 10 texts are diverse in age and experiences of the protagonist. The characters within the books experienced various anxiety symptoms (both cognitive and somatic), prompted by a range of circumstances relating to the protagonist or someone close to them. Secondary characters acknowledged the protagonist’s anxiety in various ways and those characters had various impacts upon the protagonist’s anxiety, relationships, decision-making skills and forward motion of life. Given these insights and consistency with the CASEL 5, all 10 books could be recommended to teachers, by teacher librarians, for an SEL curriculum and as relatable texts for students. Table 1 summarizes SEL details in each book, and Table 2 shows the researcher’s book recommendations ranked in order of those that are most prevalent for each CASEL 5 component.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Books have the power to encourage students, while at the same time enlighten other readers of the truths about lives they don’t live” (Morrow, 2018, para. 4). In 2018, Emily Morrow, writing for The Scholastic Blog *OOM - On Our Minds*, asked readers why diverse books were so important. The quote above is from Jennifer H. who shared her first hand experience of the impact they have on readers. This statement is true for many readers, leading many to wonder if there are enough books that provide truths about others lives, for the reader.

Justification of Problem

The CDC (2021) defines a mental health disorder as a significant change in the ability to learn, behave, and/or handle emotions, leading one to experience distress or problems throughout their day. *Data and Statistics On Children’s Mental Health* (CDC, 2021) specifically defines an anxiety disorder (exhibited by 7.1% of US children) as often experiencing worries or fears in persistent or extreme forms, rather than those that are developmentally appropriate. Further still, Grace Whiteley (2013) defines two ways in which many individuals exhibit anxiety symptoms: “cognitive anxiety includes worries about outcome, evaluations, potential failures, and inadequacies while somatic anxiety is characterized by muscle tension, increased heart rate, sweating, and a keyed up feeling” (p. 5).
Students across the nation experience mental health concerns at a variety of levels. *Data and Statistics On Children’s Mental Health* (CDC, 2021) states that 7.1% of US children experience some form of an anxiety disorder. The prevalence of students experiencing mental health concerns leads schools to look at Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as part of the standard curriculum. The CDC (2021) defines SEL as a process through which students learn to manage and recognize emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate other perspectives, build and maintain relationships and make responsible decisions.

The Iowa School Library Program Standards (Iowa Department of Education, 2019) state that the Teacher Librarian shall curate a diverse collection, therefore, they must be aware of recent and high quality texts available to middle grade readers. This awareness allows them the ability to recommend meaningful literature to students and to teachers for use in SEL curriculum.

**AASL/Iowa Standards and The Importance of Children’s Anxiety in Middle Grade Books**

The *National School Library Standards* ([AASL], 2018) under Shared Foundation II, Include, state that learners should understand and commit to “inclusiveness and respect for diversity in the learning community” (p. 35). Shared Foundation III, Collaborate, states that learners should “work effectively with others to broaden perspectives…” (p. 36), and AASL Shared Foundation V Explore, indicates that learners develop and nurture a growth mindset via experiences and contemplation (p. 38). In addition to the AASL Standards, the Iowa Department of Education (2019) School
Library Program Standards, under Program Component II: Library Management Three, direct the library to provide a diverse collection of resources to support student needs. This standard corroborates the need for SEL literature to be included in a school library collection by requiring a diverse collection that is reflective of a range of learners, communities and points of view, allowing students to see themselves reflected in the books available to them. Additionally, a diverse collection will allow students to step into the lives of others, thereby building empathy for those who are not like them.

**Furthering Past Research About Children’s Anxiety in Middle Grade Books**

Murphy (2018) reports in *Representations of health and wellness in children’s literature* that cultural diversity was not well-represented, nor was the language accessible for the readers of books relating to mental health. Murphy noted that additional studies could be conducted regarding how health and wellness could be taught through literacy education and how physical education teachers and classroom teachers could collaborate to ensure the inclusion of health and wellness in the curriculum. Murphy also stated that future studies should focus on diversity and multicultural approaches to mental health and wellness. Furthermore, Murphy’s focus was on children’s literature, often broadly defined as literature written for children. More focused research could be completed with middle grade fiction, defined by Shannon Maughan (2018) as literature intended for readers from 8-12 years of age.
Rationale for Leadership In Libraries, Classrooms, SEL Learning, and with Parents/Caregivers

The Iowa Department of Education (2019) School Library Program Standards state that the librarian curates a diverse collection (LM3) with resources that represent diverse points of view and that differentiate learning for individuals with varying ability levels. As such, the Iowa standard asserts that students will experience books in much the same way that Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) describes books as windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors. Determining the quantity and quality of text relating to anxiety disorders will provide all stakeholders with a valuable resource that can be shared. Additionally, texts reflective of mental health can be considered for inclusion in SEL within a school curriculum. Groups that will benefit from this study, which may be shared in district-wide professional development or peer conferences, are other school librarians, teachers, and administrators seeking to integrate literature within an SEL curriculum.

Summary of Problem Statement

Anxiety is a widespread mental health concern for students, and quality literature that accurately portrays anxiety among middle grade readers is needed to empower students to see themselves in the literature available to them, to create empathy among other readers, and for use within an SEL curriculum.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to examine quality literature focused on anxiety as a mental health concern for middle grade readers and to identify
which books should be promoted widely for students and recommended to teachers to
support an SEL approach to the curriculum.

**Research Questions**

1. How is anxiety portrayed in literature for middle grades? Does it provide
   sensitivity for students who have experienced anxiety and/or build empathy
   among their peers?

2. Which of these recommended books provide teacher librarians with a broad
   understanding of textual themes that support an SEL curriculum and may be used
   in recommendations with teachers?

**Assumptions**

This study assumes that stakeholders will benefit from additional books focusing on
anxiety disorders. Additionally, this study and researcher assumes that these books
could be used in the SEL curriculum. The study will focus on middle grade chapter
books.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to examine quality, diverse literature focused on anxiety as a mental health concern for middle grade readers and to identify which books should be promoted widely for students and recommended to teachers to support an SEL approach to the curriculum. Prior research relevant to this study can be categorized into three subthemes: prevalence of anxiety disorders in youth and familial correlation, portrayal of characters with anxiety and mental illness in the literature for youth and using SEL literacy and bibliotherapy to connect with youth.

Prevalence of Anxiety in Youth and Familial Correlation

Telman, van Steensel, Maric and Bogles (2017) analyzed the likelihood of familial connections in reference to anxiety disorders in children by interviewing 144 children (aged 8-18) with a diagnosed anxiety disorder compared to 49 control children of the same age. The study examines the transference of anxiety disorders in a family utilizing a bottom-up approach. Telman, et al. found that children with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) were more likely to have a parent (more often the mother) with lifetime and/or current GAD, than children with other anxiety disorders. Similarly, children with social anxiety disorder (SAD) were more likely to have a parent (in this instance, the father) with lifetime and/or current anxiety disorders, when compared to the control group. This study found that children with anxiety disorders were two to three times more likely to have at least one parent with a current or lifetime anxiety disorder, however they were not more likely to have siblings with an anxiety disorder.
Ghandour, et al. (2019) conducted a secondary analysis of the 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) results to determine estimates of the nation-wide prevalence of depression, anxiety and behavioral/conduct problems in youth aged 3-17 and receipt of mental health treatment among those youth. The presence of mental health disorders was assessed based on responses from parents/caregivers regarding diagnoses made by a medical professional during the initial study and in 2019. The study determined that anxiety, depression and behavioral/conduct problems continued to be in the range of 3-7% among children, similar to the findings in their 2016 research. Ghandour, et al. also found that comorbidity continues to exist, with a higher incidence in children diagnosed with anxiety than those diagnosed with depression, acknowledging that children diagnosed with anxiety have a higher likelihood of developing depression at some point. Results also noted a strong association between childhood mental disorders and overall health, noting that roughly 30% of children with fair or poor physical health were also diagnosed with anxiety, while 13% of children living with a parent in fair or poor health were diagnosed with anxiety. Ghandour, et al. recognized that the occurrence of childhood anxiety continues to be a widespread concern across the United States. Additionally, children’s overall health and the health of caregivers is impacted by the diagnosis of mental health disorders, leading the researchers to conclude that treatment can benefit both children and their families.

**Portrayal of Characters with Anxiety and Mental Illness**

Wickham (2018) performed a qualitative literary analysis of two YA novels (*Challenger Deep* and *Freaks Like Us*), focusing on the realistic portrayal of mental
health with an interdisciplinary lens, an examination of characters and their mental illnesses and the shift in cultural perception of mental illness. Wickham (2018) noted the changing cultural perception of mental health and stated that as the population became more aware of neurodiversity and the literary world began to reflect that understanding by writing more books that have neurodivergent characters, readers gained a new and better understanding of the “unreliable narration” (p. 10) that often appears in young adult literature. Wickham’s (2018) analysis of character experiences noted that the authors don’t dehumanize their main characters, contrarily the authors emphasize that the characters deal with many of the same issues that other adolescents deal with, making the characters more relatable to the reader (p.11). Shusterman used his life experiences and Vaught used her professional experiences to accurately portray the symptoms of schizophrenia, rather than rely on the predictable stereotypes in adolescent behavior. As authors who wrote their books for the general population rather than specifically for the mentally ill audience, their narratives are considered more authentic because they have a personal experience and background knowledge that most do not possess. Wickham (2018) focused on two YA novels that bring more serious, stereotyped mental health illnesses into light, declaring that these novels “confront(s) the stigma of mental illness and illustrate(s) a road to interdependence, inclusion, agency, and empowerment that is often obscured” (p. 10). Wickham stated that as our world becomes a place where everyone has enough space to see themselves realistically, we must be willing to listen to other voices and resist the urge to believe that the mentally ill must be saved by someone who believes themselves to be normal.
A case study completed by Monaghan (2016) evaluated Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Madeleine Roux’s *Asylum* to identify how mental health is conveyed in YA literature. Monaghan (2016) utilized a set of markers that can be applied to YA texts to determine if mental health is accurately represented within the text. Markers that were utilized in this case study were reflective of the protagonist's age and understanding of mental illness, the reader’s ability to draw parallels between themselves and the protagonist, the precise articulation of mental illnesses within the text and the ability for the story to be relatable to its reader. Monaghan (2016) stated that Chbosky’s novel is a relevant YA text that accurately portrays mental health according to each of the four markers, while Roux’s YA novel, *Asylum*, only meets one of the markers, that being the accurate representation of mental illness. The researcher confirmed that not every YA novel will meet all the markers noted in the study, however, she stated that these markers are a starting place for future studies.

Hughes and Laffier (2016) examined the portrayal of bullying in their qualitative content analysis of three YA novels. The analysis questioned the validity of content (is the literature recent or does it portray out-dated information, myths and stereotypes), what messages were sent to the reader and what discussion points could be used in a classroom environment. This study determined that each of the three novels selected accurately portrayed bullying based on current research, additionally each of the three depictions reflects the variances in bullying behaviors which can be used as discussion points in a classroom setting. The reasons for bullying portrayed in the books are incomplete, yet valid and allow for further discussion relating to victims and events that
can lead to bullying behaviors. Although a bullying victim profile does not exist, there are certain characteristics commonly found in bullying victims and these are accurately portrayed within the studied texts, however, accurate depiction of a victim’s characteristics can be detrimental to a victim and this can be a critical discussion point in classrooms.

**Using SEL Literacy and Bibliotherapy to Connect with Youth**

Strahan and Poteat (2020) performed an exploratory study of 7th and 8th grade students in a rural community school, where teachers integrated SEL into daily academic studies, to learn how those students viewed their social emotional learning in a school environment. The research questions inquired about the type of social emotional connections students conveyed, relating to their experiences in school and how those connections are expressed differently with each student. Researchers collected results based on observation of lessons, gathering of work samples and interview responses. Results from the study are based primarily on five core SEL competencies recognized as The CASEL 5 (2021). Students in the study indicated their appreciation for teacher support and developed a more insightful awareness of their peer interactions and social relationships. They were able to recognize areas of personal interest, increased engagement and were able to vocalize a connection between effort and accomplishment, leading to improved decision making skills. Students were also able to see that the development of self and social awareness enabled self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision making.
In the context of counseling or therapy taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rahmat, Muzaki and Pernanda (2021) performed a qualitative content analysis questioning how counselors or therapists utilized bibliotherapy and how that bibliotherapy helped adolescent students cope with anxiety, specifically in the midst of a global pandemic. Rahmat, et al. stated that anxiety is a “normal reaction to situations that are very stressful in a person’s life,” (p. 380), thereby determining that the occurrence of anxiety is commonplace. The researchers declared that the use of bibliotherapy allowed students to recognize aspects of their personality within the pages of a book, thereby realizing that their feelings are felt commonly by others as well. Additionally, the recognition of anxiety in others, as well as within one’s own personality allowed adolescents new perspectives and new ways to cope with their own anxiety.

Elena Venegas (2019) conducted a case study analyzing a 10 year old, female (Grace) student’s academic and social growth within literature circle participation. Through the researcher’s observations and interviews with the student, she was able to affirm her research question: participation in literature circles can impact socioemotional and academic learning. Initially, Grace demonstrated poor intrapersonal skills such as self-management, specifically impulse control, and she lacked interpersonal skills as demonstrated in her disregard of social awareness within the literature circle setting. Conversely, Grace demonstrated positive self-confidence from the first literature circle as she became the self-appointed leader of the group. As the literature circles progressed the researcher noted that Grace’s high level of self-confidence continued, while her self-management and social awareness skills improved synchronously, allowing others to
share their thoughts and build off of other’s contributions, as well as actively listening to everyone within the group. Venegas also noted Grace began to demonstrate empathy and social metacognition during literature circle meetings. In an interview with Grace’s teacher she stated that, “Everyone had to be in charge, so I think that helped her begin to learn collaborative learning” (p. 155).

Summary

Previous studies combined with data from the CDC (2021) indicate that there is a widespread occurrence of anxiety disorders in youth across the country (Telman, et al., 2017; Ghandour, et al., 2019) and, in some cases, more than just children are diagnosed with anxiety disorders or other mental illnesses (Telman et al., 2017). Wickham’s (2018) analysis of the portrayal of characters with anxiety in YA novels states that the author’s emphasis to reflect that character and reader are more alike than different indicates that portrayal is becoming more realistic. Wickham (2018) notes that the authors in her research have personal experience with adolescent mental health concerns, attributed to their personal or professional experience, therefore, the author’s narrative is more authentic in the experiences of adolescents with mental health concerns and not based primarily on stereotypes and inaccurate assumptions. Additionally the authors emphasize that the characters deal with many of the same issues that other adolescents deal with, making the characters more relatable to the reader. Wickham (2018) focused on two YA novels that bring more serious, stereotyped mental health illnesses into light, declaring that these novels “confront(s) the stigma of mental illness and illustrate(s) a road to interdependence, inclusion, agency, and empowerment that is often obscured” (p. 10).
Monaghan (2016) focused on the understanding and connectedness of mental illnesses, as well as the relatability of a text to a reader.

When focusing on bullying and the portrayal of both the bully and the victim, Hughes and Laffier (2016) determined that while depictions of the bully were often accurate, the victims were commonly portrayed as weak and deserving of the behavior. Other studies examined bibliotherapy and SEL literacy and the positive effects they have on children with anxiety disorders, within both therapeutic and classroom settings (Strahan and Poteat, 2020; Rahmat, Muzaki and Pernanda, 2021). Results from Strahan and Poteat (2020) and Rahmat, et al. (2021) indicated that children were able to connect with and had a better understanding of themselves and others impacted by anxiety disorders when they were exposed to literature that reflected characters with anxiety disorders and mental illness. Studies above point out that children demonstrate significant improvement in components of the CASEL 5 when they work in groups to understand literature (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). The study completed by Venegas (2019) additionally stated that the idea of literature circles and the sharing of duties within literature circles significantly helped students struggling with social expectations, specifically within the CASEL 5 framework of self-management and in learner collaboration. To expand the work of previous studies, this study will look at characters with anxiety disorder, the accuracy of their portrayal of anxiety disorder, coping skills and treatment in middle grade literature, as well as whether the books examined support an SEL curriculum (specifically the CASEL 5). Additionally, this study will review
books for the curation of lists that can be promoted within a classroom and/or SEL curriculum.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research study utilized a qualitative content analysis method. Wildemuth (2017) stated a qualitative content analysis “allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective, yet scientific manner” (p. 318) and that samples consisted of intentionally selected texts that can inform research questions. This study took a directed analysis of content approach, defined by Wildemuth (2017) as an approach in which “initial coding starts with a theory or relevant research findings” (p. 319).

Sample of Books

The sample of 10 books used in this analysis (Appendix A) was curated from H.W. Wilson’s Children’s Core Collection and an article from Publisher’s Weekly. The search performed in the H. W. Wilson Children’s Core Collection was a subject search of “anxiety OR ‘anxiety disorders’ OR ‘generalized anxiety disorders,’” with limiters of age (8-12), publication between 2018 and 2021 and the source type selected was books. This search generated 42 titles, of which I selected two titles for being considered “essential” and seven being considered “recommended” titles for a library. The remaining “supplemental” titles were not selected for the study. An article written for Publisher’s Weekly in April 2020 titled “Spring 2020 Middle Grade Spotlight: A Book List” included 21 titles under the subject heading of Mental Health. A reading of the book summaries left me with 10 titles that specifically mentioned generalized anxiety disorder in the summary. I cross-referenced the 21 books back to H.W. Wilson’s Children’s Core
Collection. Nine titles overlapped the two lists, and one additional title from those 21 was also listed as a “recommended” title. This yielded 10 titles of middle grade chapter books from 2019 to 2021 for analysis.

Data Collection

Wildemuth (2017) stated that a qualitative content analysis is intended to address questions from prior research and examine topics, themes or inferences from prior research. The data for this study was collected from the books listed in Appendix A and notes were taken based on the form in Appendix B. I noted reader relatability, or how a reader might relate to content in a book, as a common theme described in both Wickham (2018) and Monoghan (2016). Additionally, I used criteria adapted from Wickham (2018) and Monagham (2016) to analyze the following: character portrayal of anxiety disorders, coping mechanisms and treatment. The texts were also analyzed for the presence of skills from the CASEL 5 and how the characters exhibited those skills within the text (Appendix B). Finally, an analysis was completed with a focus on portrayal of characters with anxiety disorders and appropriateness for inclusion in an SEL curriculum.

Data Analysis

This study used the directed analysis of content approach, which Wildemuth (2017) described in eight steps. The first step is preparation of data, completed in this study by collecting titles and narrowing the number of titles according to specific criteria (Appendix A). The second step is to identify what will be analyzed in the study, in this case, the text of middle grade literature was the focus of analysis. The third step in the directed analysis of content approach is the development of 15 categories and an initial
coding scheme (Appendix B), which included 10 questions based on Wickham (2018) and Monoghan (2016), the CASEL 5 (CASEL, n.d.) and the demonstration of those skills by the character. The fourth step is to test the coding scheme on a sample of texts. I tested the coding scheme on 3 texts to see the demonstration of those themes by a main character. Additionally, I used specific details in taking notes about the texts, not just personal notations, based on the coding scheme. Step five is the coding of all text, which I did in the same manner as the testing of the sample texts in step four, by taking notes during the reading of each text and answering the analysis questions. The assessment of the coding consistency is step six. This was done by revising the initial 10 questions into four coding categories in order to include more depth. In this case, four themes, or insights, emerged from the coding categories. Therefore my coding needed to be adjusted to show more depth, such as how each book portrayed the character accessing help from professional therapists. Once the coding was determined to be consistent, conclusions were inferred based on the coding for step seven. I was able to draw conclusions, assess representation of characters with anxiety and determine the accuracy of character depiction. The final step is to report the methods and findings of my research. This will be done in Chapter Four.

**Limitations**

The middle grade texts curated for this study were limited to 10 titles and were organized by myself and based on the criteria specified previously. The reading and coding of the curated texts was completed by myself only. Consequently, I (the
researcher) acknowledge the potential for biased results based on my personal and professional experiences with anxiety disorders.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to examine quality literature focused on anxiety as a mental health concern for middle grade readers and to identify which books should be promoted widely for students and recommended to teachers to support an SEL approach to the curriculum. The research questions set forth by the researcher were 1) How is anxiety portrayed in literature for middle grades? Does it provide sensitivity for students who have experienced anxiety and/or build empathy among their peers? 2) Which of these recommended books provide teacher librarians with a broad understanding of textual themes that support an SEL curriculum that may be used in recommendations with teachers?

The 10 middle grade books read and analyzed are listed in Appendix A. The four coding categories and CASEL 5 components were derived from the questions in Appendix B and guided the data analysis:

1. How the character’s anxiety is exhibited (cognitive and/or somatic) and how that makes the character more relatable to the reader. The researcher acknowledges that the presence of cognitive and/or somatic symptoms among characters are not mutually exclusive nor does the presence or absence of either symptom make a book more highly relatable or recommended. Rather, this discussion is shared in order to recognize that readers may relate more to a character who experiences anxiety in a way that is similar to one’s own experiences, and educators may choose to recommend a book to a student given these circumstances.
2. The portrayal of relationships (both family and friend) in the story and how the reader can connect with that portrayal, allowing the story to be more relatable to the reader. These characteristics in books are described by Monaghan (2016) as “a productive means for educating teens and their peers, parents and caregivers and medical professionals, about illness from a teen’s unique perspective” p. 34). The research acknowledges there is a wide range of personal relationships of main characters among peers and families and that in all of the books analyzed the experience of anxiety creates strain on those relationships. This research aims to help teachers and teacher librarians consider the many ways relationships are presented to help make recommendations that may help readers best relate to these books.

3. Depiction of coping skills and/or professional therapy as it is utilized by the character. Of the 10 books analyzed, characters coped with anxiety by practicing self-taught coping skills or, at some point in the story, seeking out professional therapy. The researcher recognizes that the benefits of coping skills and therapy are determined on an individual basis and may not be beneficial to everyone.

4. The interpretation of anxiety by the character and the implication that has on their decision making skills. This research acknowledges that anxiety symptoms have an impact on daily decision making and notes that often, within the books selected, the manner in which the character deals with the anxiety and the decisions they make are a reflection of their perception of the anxiety.
Table 1 shows a summary of the initial coding categories for each book and whether or not each book portrayed all five concepts of the CASEL 5. The four themes, or insights, that emerged out of the four coding categories are explained after Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Cognitive and/or Somatic Exhibition. Wide range of cognitive and/or somatic symptoms that make them relatable to readers.</th>
<th>Character age and primary relationship. Younger characters more commonly have parental relationships and older characters include a friend.</th>
<th>Coping Skills and Therapy. Access to professional therapy to cope with anxiety is prevalent but not didactic.</th>
<th>Character’s Self Awareness of Anxiety. Initial realistic portrayal of anxiety shows forward motion in decision making that portray hope for better days</th>
<th>CASEL 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Bat and the Waiting Game</em></td>
<td>Somatic, bouncing on feet Younger protagonist and supportive parental figures</td>
<td>Coping Skills - calming</td>
<td>It is part of his personality, generally he makes positive decisions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1) Social Awareness 2) Self Management 3) Responsible Decision Making 4) Relationship Skills 5) Social Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Canyon's Edge</em></td>
<td>Cognitive, worry, self-isolation Older protagonist who pushes away friends</td>
<td>Therapy - as a way to help cope</td>
<td>Negative perception, but begins to feel hope at end of story</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Right Hook of Devin Velma</strong></td>
<td>Somatic, freezing up</td>
<td>Mid-range aged protagonist with supportive and accepting family and friends</td>
<td>Coping Skills - sometimes helpful</td>
<td>It's part of who he is, others accept it, decisions are made to avoid circumstances that will cause anxiety, realizes positive outlook is more impactful than avoiding anxious situations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Sea in Winter</strong></td>
<td>Cognitive and somatic, withdrawing from friends and short tempered with family</td>
<td>Older protagonist who pushes away friends and family</td>
<td>Therapy - not discussed until the end of the book, but portrayed as likely helpful</td>
<td>Negative perception, but friends and family encourage optimism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beyond Me</strong></td>
<td>Cognitive, worries</td>
<td>Mid-range aged protagonist with supportive parents and other adults in life</td>
<td>Coping Skills - calming</td>
<td>Worries are part of who she is, she makes positive decisions to positively impact others</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maybe Maybe Marisol Rainey</strong></td>
<td>Cognitive and somatic, fears and trouble sleeping due to busy brain</td>
<td>Younger protagonist with supportive and accepting family and friends</td>
<td>Coping Skills and Therapy - increased understanding of feelings</td>
<td>Her fear is part of her, her decisions are reflective of her fears, encouragement instills positivity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The List of Unspeakable Fears</td>
<td>Cognitive, fears</td>
<td>Younger protagonist whose mom thinks her fears are illogical, step-father is very understanding and empathetic</td>
<td>Coping Skills - calming, Professional Therapy unavailable due to setting, therapy with adults</td>
<td>Negative perception, until discovery of other with similar feelings</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Become a Planet</td>
<td>Cognitive and somatic, withdrawn, lack of motivation, doesn't want to leave the house</td>
<td>Older protagonist who pushes away friends, isolation</td>
<td>Therapy - first attempt fails, continues therapy at the end inferring success this time</td>
<td>Negative perception, family encouragement leads to positive decisions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Will Probably Be Fine</td>
<td>Somatic, hyperventilates (referred to as panic attacks)</td>
<td>Mid-range protagonist whose parental figure is empathetic, friends don't understand</td>
<td>Coping Skills - calming</td>
<td>Slightly negative perception, friends and family encouragement leads to positive impact on decisions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guts</td>
<td>Somatic, stomach aches, nail biting</td>
<td>Younger protagonist with supportive parents</td>
<td>Therapy - both with Professional and mom is helpful and allows for increased understanding</td>
<td>Positive perception, decision making tends to be more positive than negative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1

Theme 1: Books Have a Wide Range of Cognitive and/or Somatic Symptoms That Make Them Relatable to Readers

Research question 1 asked, How is anxiety portrayed in literature for middle grades, and does it provide sensitivity for students who have experienced anxiety and/or build empathy among their peers? During the analysis of the books in Appendix A, the researcher noted how the character experiencing anxiety exhibited their symptoms, as well as the relatability of the expression of symptoms. In five of the 10 books analyzed, the protagonist exhibited somatic symptoms of anxiety, such as feeling itchy, having panic attacks, stomachaches, nail biting, stomach/chest tightening and hyperventilation. These somatic exhibitions occurred in direct correlation to when the character was feeling anxious about something. The character’s feelings of anxiety occurred in different circumstances and at different times, adding to the realism the author used. The realistic component of the manner in which the character exhibited his/her symptoms allows the reader to connect with the character, thereby making the narrative relatable to the reader.

In Guts (Telgemeier, 2019) Raina experiences stomach aches and bites her nails when she feels anxious. She feels anxious about the following occurrences: herself or others vomiting, when she has to speak in front of her classmates, when she is teased and occasionally at home, due to a large family sharing limited space. Addison, in The Right Hook of Devin Velma (Burt, 2019) experiences being “frozen” (p. 6) when he feels anxious. He describes his reaction very early in the book, stating, “I wished I knew why everything seemed to shut down as soon as things got tense” (p. 5), he continued, “One
part of my brain kept talking, telling my voice to speak, my arms to move, my lungs to breathe. The other half just said ‘Nope’” (p. 5). Similarly, Stanley, the protagonist in Stanley Will Probably Be Fine (Pla, 2019) has panic attacks when he is in situations where he feels anxious, leading to his attempts to avoid such situations.

Two characters, Pluto and Maisie both exhibit their anxiety cognitively and somatically in their stories. Pluto, the pre-teen who had been recently diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety in How to Become a Planet (Melleby, 2021) exhibits her anxiety somatically with a tightness in her chest, while her fears and obsessive thoughts of what, she believes, others think of her now that “the doctor has diagnosed me as broken” (p. 22) portray her cognitive exhibition of her anxiety. Maisie from The Sea in Winter (Day, 2021) experiences a tightening of her stomach when she receives calls/texts from dance friends that she has been avoiding since her injury, while also withdrawing from her family and friends, thereby trapping herself in her negative thought patterns and anger (cognitive exhibition).

Other characters referred to ruminations, the internal thoughts when feeling anxious. Commonly, the cognitive exhibition of anxiety consisted of fears, both real and imagined, worry, negative thought patterns and nightmares. In some circumstances, the feelings were discussed amongst characters, however, the internalization of anxiety also may have lessened the importance placed on treatment.

Marisol, the young girl in Maybe Maybe Marisol Rainey (Kelly, 2021) speaks of a “busy brain” and the inability to sleep because she could not turn off her brain, as well as her fears of many things. Additionally, Marisol creates her own anxiety by fearing she
will fail in her attempt to climb the tree in her yard, by falling and getting hurt. While this fear is based in reality, Marisol has not attempted to climb the tree so her fear is based purely on her negative thought patterns that she has created.

However, Essie’s fears are based in both reality and her imagination, from past experiences and what she perceives to be happening in her life. Other characters have an awareness of many of her fears, but only the ones based in reality. She keeps her imagined fears to herself, eventually sharing some of them with her best friend.

In *Beyond Me* (Donwerth-Chikamatsu, 2021) Maya’s “earth drops below me, midair, toes off the floor, hovering, arms paddling, free-falling, feels like an eternity before I drop backward” (p. 34-36). The earthquakes and subsequent aftershocks cause her to begin to worry about her safety and that of her loved ones. While watching the news with her father she learns of tsunamis (caused by the earthquakes) that have impacted other regions of Japan noting “scenes from yesterday’s tsunami along the northeastern coast, for the first time we see how bad it is, I cannot bear to watch, but I cannot turn away, where are the people?” (p. 68-69) and later seeing “people stranded on school rooftops, people standing in front of homes, offices, shops ripped from their foundations…people separated from their family, from their friends, from their community, people looking for people, people alone” (p. 72). Learning of what others are going through in her country adds worry to her fears. As her family begins to heal from their experiences of the earthquake and aftershocks that went on for days, she continues to be both fearful for her family and friends and worried about those suffering the aftereffects of the tsunami.

When Maya’s class is finally able to gather back at school, they write postcards to those
impacted by the tsunamis. Maya writes in part, “My broken heart is filled with hope for you” (p. 270).

**Theme 2: Books Show that Younger Characters More Commonly Focus on Parental Relationships and Older Characters Include a Close Friend**

The analysis highlighted the protagonist's age and how age impacted the relationships within the story. The younger characters had stronger, more singularly focused parental relationships, while the older characters had strong and focused relationships with both parental figures and friends (peers). The relationships and the interactions within the relationships had implications on how well the reader could connect to the story. Parental figures and some friends of younger protagonists considered the anxiety a personality trait and widely viewed the anxiety through an apathetic lens while parental figures and friends of older aged characters tried to understand and be sympathetic toward the character and the anxiety experienced, but were often excluded by the character. The variety of relationships exemplified the diversity that exists in the lives of the reader.

Anxiety in characters that were younger was often not perceived as anything unique or different to other characters in the same age group. Bat’s friend in *Bat and the Waiting Game* (Arnold, 2019) understood that Bat handled and dealt with things differently. While he didn’t know why Bat handled things differently, he accepted it as a part of who Bat was, as a person and as his friend. Bat’s mother had a positive understanding of his anxiety and did things that encouraged him to talk with her about how he felt.
Characters of an older age, with anxiety, had adults who overlooked, believed it to be irrational or were in denial of the anxiety. When the anxiety was exhibited as fear, it was inferred that other characters simply believed that being fearful was just who the person was. Because anxiety was assumed as a personality trait, it was often not discussed amongst characters, nor was it something that other characters tried to understand.

In *The List of Unspeakable Fears* (Kramer, 2021), Essie’s mother frequently reminded her that she could not be afraid of everything and felt that many of her fears were ridiculous. Her mother demonstrated a clear lack of understanding for her daughter and what she was experiencing. However, Essie’s best friend Beatrice was very accepting of her fears. She simply accepted them as part of her friend’s personality and tried to understand them.

However, there were occasions in which parental figures were understanding of the character experiencing new feelings. In *The Sea in Winter* (Day, 2021), Maisie experienced an injury that put an extended pause in her dance career. As a result, she withdrew from her family and friends and into a negative thought pattern. Her parents were aware of the trauma (both physical and mental) that she had experienced due to her injury and they were very sympathetic to her feelings, however, they believed she would learn to adjust to her new normal and everything would be fine. Ultimately, her parents realized they needed to do more to help Maisie and sought therapy.

Furthermore, friendships were tested when characters developed anxiety at an older age. In multiple books, the character with anxiety, either consciously or subconsciously, pushed their friends away, thereby isolating themselves and not allowing others to help or
understand them. *The Canyon’s Edge* (Bowling, 2021) talked of Nora pushing Danielle away during *the after*, although neither of them understood why. Joon starts hanging out with other people in *Stanley Will Probably Be Fine* (Pla, 2019) because sometimes he just didn’t *get* Stanley, and Pluto pushed away all her friends because she believed she was different in the time after her diagnosis.

Although parent(s)/parental figure(s) were the characters that sometimes ignored the character’s anxiety symptoms, they were, conversely, the characters that also related best to those that exhibited anxiety symptoms, as they accepted, understood and encouraged the character with anxiety. They often encouraged the character with anxiety to seek therapy and develop coping skills. They were sensitive to underlying concerns, such as sensory stimulants and they offered both advice and listening, based on what the character needed.

**Theme 3: Access to Professional Therapy to Cope with Anxiety Is Prevalent but not Didactic in All Books**

The 10 books analyzed in this study portrayed characters who used a variety of self-taught coping skills and/or participated in or sought out professional therapy at some point in the book. These portrayals were helpful and realistic in that not all the characters dealt with their anxiety in the same manner, and what worked for one character, may not work for another. All the characters in the books in Appendix A learned methods to deal with their anxiety that worked best for them and their families. The act of engaging in therapy may be unfamiliar to children (readers) and it was normalized, becoming a component of the story. However the manner of coping did not overtake, nor become a
primary element of the story. Furthermore, all the characters were given guidance by their parent(s)/parental figure(s) to determine what would be best for them.

Maya, along with her parents and grandparents, found various ways to help others in Beyond Me (Donwerth-Chikamatsu, 2021). They, along with others in their community, donated items of high need to the victims of the tsunami. Maya also found origami, a Japanese tradition, to help her cope when she was especially worried.

In Bat and the Waiting Game (Arnold, 2019), Bat found solace from his anxiety when he spent time in his room with Thor, his pet skunk. Bat’s mom also helped talk him through his anxiety at times and helped him understand the events that caused him anxiety.

Raina’s mother, in Guts, (Telgemeier, 2019) was a great help to Raina as she continued to try to manage her anxiety symptoms, but as her anxiety continued to impact her life and well-being, her mom began talking to her about the idea of professional therapy as a way to help Raina better manage her symptoms.

Maisie and her parents had a very candid, honest discussion at the end of The Sea in Winter (Day, 2021) about professional therapy. Mom revealed that she had seen a therapist in the past to help her accept and move forward from Maisie’s father’s death, among other things. Maisie’s parents encouraged her to speak with her mom’s therapist as an initial step and to inquire about a therapist that would best fit her needs.
Theme 4: Initial Realistic Portrayal of Anxiety Shows Forward Motion in Decision Making and Hope for Better Days

During the analysis the researcher observed that characters understood their anxiety in different ways, having a direct impact on their decision making, however, their understanding and therefore, decision making demonstrated a forward movement as they learned and perceived their situation differently. Also noted was the connection between how other characters perceived the protagonist’s anxiety and the manner in which that shaped the protagonist’s understanding and decision making.

Probably the most apparent circumstance of the impact on daily life is in How to Become a Planet (Melleby, 2021) when Pluto is trying to understand and accept her new diagnosis and what it means for her going forward. “Pluto still didn’t want to get out of bed the next morning….She was mad….She didn’t want to try. She was tired of trying, even more tired of failing….She failed at everything here” (pp. 177-178). Pluto’s daily decision about getting out of bed was impacted directly by her anxiety symptoms, and heavily influenced by her mother’s lack of knowledge and understanding pertaining to Pluto’s diagnoses. As Pluto worked to understand her diagnosis, she learned that, “Maybe sometimes Pluto would fail. Maybe sometimes her bad days would be too bad….And maybe that would be okay” (p. 276).

Addi’s decision in The Right Hook of Devin Velma (Burt, 2019) to lash out in anger and frustration, prompted by his anxiety, resulted in a black eye (p. 180) from Devin. Addi’s anxiety about a previous, nationally publicized occurrence and Devin’s negative reaction to it, prompted a confrontation that ended in poor decisions by both characters.
Each character was able to grow through the experience and although Addi stated “I don’t think cured is how it works” (p. 231) he and Devin acknowledged that progress was made.

Raina made decisions in *Guts* (Telgemeier, 2019) regarding what she ate at lunch that impacted her well being. Initially when she was given unfamiliar foods in the school cafeteria or if someone else touched any of her food, she refused to eat it due to fear that the food or the germs would make her ill and cause her to vomit. After Raina discussed her feelings with her mom and friends, and as she began to understand the somatic symptoms of her anxiety, she felt more confident in trying new foods and recognized that her anxiety was impacting her decision-making.

Maisie’s fear of the unknown and her anger at her situation in *The Sea in Winter* (Day, 2021) guided much of her decision making. She became easily frustrated with her family members and withdrew from her friends, while also putting less effort into her schoolwork, causing her grades to drop. Her mother’s sharing of her experience with a professional therapist encouraged Maisie to seek therapy, allowing her opportunities to move forward with her life and expand her interests.

By contrast, Stanley could and did make regular, responsible decisions. In *Stanley Will Probably Be Fine* (Pla, 2019), he tried to avoid situations in which he was forced to make significant decisions, but when he couldn't avoid those situations, he made responsible decisions. He also realized that his decisions and his outlook/perspective could have negative impacts on his relationships. Upon this realization and understanding, he made a greater effort to have a positive outlook.
Research Question 2 Books That Provide a Range of Textual Themes and Would be Recommended as Supporting an SEL Curriculum

The second research question in the qualitative content analysis asked, “Which of these recommended books provide teacher librarians with a broad understanding of textual themes that support an SEL curriculum that may be used in recommendations with teachers?” All the books selected for this study are highly recommended to teachers who are considering SEL supportive texts for their classrooms.

Specific to an Iowa perspective, it should be noted that the Iowa Department of Education states competencies for students for Social Awareness that overlap with the CASEL 5 and that several themes from the Iowa competencies are found in the books analyzed. The exhibition of anxiety symptoms and the impact those symptoms can have on daily life conveyed to readers the extensive influence anxiety could have in a person’s life. A clear understanding of the influences of anxiety enabled one to have an awareness of and empathy for loved ones who live with anxiety. The Iowa Department of Education, in their Social Awareness competencies, state that students in grades 3-5 should have the ability to identify how thoughts and emotions influence behavior (Iowa Department of Education, 2020). The books analyzed in this study indicate that symptoms did influence decision making skills and that it must be understood how those symptoms impact decisions, to allow characters to make positive decisions.

The diversity of character age in the selected books allowed for increased appeal to students. It empowered students of all ages to gain a healthy perspective of what they and/or others experience. The Iowa Department of Education, on their SEL
Competencies by Grade Band chart, stated that targets for the 3-5 grade band, relating to Social Awareness (derived from CASEL 5) are to “recognize differing views and perspectives” and “identify and interpret social cues…to determine how others feel” (Iowa Department of Education, 2020). The age diversity also offered students, who want to learn more about how others feel, to become more empathetic and understanding of someone they know that may be experiencing anxiety, the opportunity to do so without the fear of asking others. Finally, the wide range in the ages of the protagonists gives readers insight into how anxiety is exhibited and can be dealt with at various points in life.

The range of how characters cope with anxiety varies by character’s age. In the analysis of books it was noted that the younger aged characters used coping skills that were self-developed in many cases, as a way to cope with feelings of anxiousness. The characters who were older often sought therapy, with the guidance of a parent/parental figure, to help them deal with and manage symptoms. Under the umbrella of Iowa Department of Education SEL Competencies, Self-Management (one of the CASEL 5), Impulse Control is another competency that is targeted for students. The targeted skill at grades 3-5 is that students can “identify’ and “demonstrate productive, self regulating strategies to process emotions and reframe thoughts and behaviors (Iowa Department of Education, 2020). This skill is clearly and positively portrayed in the selected texts, an additional justification for recommendation to support an SEL curriculum.
The themes identified previously coincide with the CASEL 5, and all books are recommended for use in an SEL curriculum. The CASEL 5 are clearly depicted, on varying levels, within the story of each of these books. Table 2 shows each book ranked in order of its strength of connection to specific CASEL 5 components that may be used together with the Table 1 details of CASEL 5 components in each book to recommend books for a middle grades SEL curriculum and for read alouds or individual reading.

Table 2: Researchers’s Ranking of Books with Inclusivity of CASEL 5 Component for Read Aloud or Individual Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Books</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self Awareness</strong></td>
<td>Guts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Right Hook of Devin Velma</td>
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<td>The Sea Winter</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Canyon's Edge</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bat and the Waiting Game</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Stanley Will Probably Be Fine</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>The List of Unspeakable Fears</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Beyond Me</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Maybe Maybe Marisol Rainey</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Guts</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Right Hook of Devin Velma</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Canyon's Edge</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Bat and the Waiting Game</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self Management</strong></td>
<td><strong>Guts</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Stanley Will Probably Be Fine</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>The Sea in Winter</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Right Hook of Devin Velma</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>The Canyon’s Edge</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>How to Become a Planet</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Awareness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Guts</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Canyon’s Edge</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Sea in Winter</strong></td>
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<td><strong>How to Become a Planet</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Stanley Will Probably Be Fine</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Responsible Decision Making</strong></td>
<td><strong>Guts</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Bat and the Waiting Game</strong></td>
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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to examine quality literature focused on anxiety as a mental health concern for middle grade readers and to identify which books should be promoted widely for students and recommended to teachers to support an SEL approach to the curriculum. The analysis of 10 middle grade books (Appendix A) using a book analysis tool (Appendix B) based on previous research completed by Wickham (2018) and Monaghan (2016) and as consistent with CASEL 5 identified four definitive themes in all 10 books. The four themes discovered were:

1) Books Have a Wide Range of Cognitive and/or Somatic Symptoms that Make them Relatable to Readers
2) Books Show that Younger Characters More Commonly Have Parental Relationships and Older Books Include a Close Friend
3) Access to Professional Therapy to Cope with Anxiety Is Prevalent but not Didactic in All Books
4) Initial Realistic Portrayal of Anxiety Shows Forward Motion in Decision Making that Portray Hope for Better Days

The 10 texts are diverse in regard to age and experiences of the protagonist. The characters within the books experienced various anxiety symptoms (both cognitive and somatic), prompted by a range of circumstances relating to the protagonist or someone close to them. Secondary characters acknowledged the protagonist’s anxiety in various ways and those characters had various impacts upon the protagonist’s anxiety, relationships, decision-making skills and forward motion of life. Given these insights and consistency with the CASEL 5, all 10 books could be recommended to teachers by teacher librarians, for an SEL curriculum and as relatable texts for students. Table 1
summarizes SEL details in each book, and Table 2 shows the researcher’s book recommendations ranked in order of those that most represent each CASEL 5 component.

**Conclusions**

Research question 1 asked how is anxiety portrayed in literature for middle grades? Does it provide sensitivity for students who have experienced anxiety, build empathy among their peers? During the analysis of the books, I noted the four insights that allowed me to answer this question.

The symptoms of anxiety are portrayed in two definitive ways (cognitive and/or somatic), yet the diversity in which those two ways were presented (fears, ruminations, busy brains, nail biting, stomach aches and ‘freezing’ are a few) allowed for a reader to be able to relate to the character and the story. The relatability of the text to the reader allows for a student to see their own experiences or those of a classmate, friends or sibling reflected in the story, therefore, providing sensitivity to those who have experienced anxiety and empathy among their peers.

Furthermore, the relationships between characters within the books give readers an opportunity to see their own relationships and the dynamics of those relationships within the story. Readers can build empathy for others when the story and characters are relatable and appear familiar to them. The variance of the protagonist’s age depicted in the books allowed for diverse relationship dynamics (parent/child, peer, parent/child/peer) and stages (young friendships, teen friendships, non-school friendships, etc).
The depiction of coping skills and professional therapy gives readers insight into the various ways anxiety can be managed. Protagonists utilized personally developed coping skills, professional therapy or a combination of both to manage their anxiety symptoms. In addition to the depiction of coping skills and professional therapy, this research noted the impact the coping skills or professional therapy had on the anxiety symptoms. Offering a positive understanding of strategies for management of anxiety allows the reader to be able to contemplate which methods may be most beneficial to them.

The final insight observed in this analysis was the protagonist's decision making skills, the impact anxiety had on those skills and the hopeful conclusions, sometimes based on those skills. It was noted that there was a connection between the protagonist’s initial interpretation, understanding or lack thereof, relating to their anxiety symptoms and the decisions they made. As more was learned and understood about the anxiety and its symptoms, decisions began to reflect the increased understanding the protagonist and other character’s had and became more hopeful and forward thinking.

All four insights provide evidence of relatability to the reader, granting the reader the ability to understand their own experiences or those of someone else. The diversity in the four themes give readers the tools needed to relate to the story. The reader’s relatability to the story encourages the sensitivity and empathy noted in the first research question.

Research question 2 asked which of these recommended books provide teacher librarians with a broad understanding of textual themes that support an SEL curriculum that may be used in recommendations with teachers? Upon completion of my analysis, I determined that all 10 books from the analysis should be recommended to teachers to
support an SEL curriculum. Wickham (2018) noted in her analysis that the characters
deal with many of the same issues and that makes them more relatable (p. 11). The
recommendation of all ten books allows teachers and others to suggest books to students
based on their experience, therefore recommending books that are most relatable to the
students (aka the reader).

**Recommendations for Practice**

In this study I analyzed books about those who ruminate about their worries and
fears, those who notice that they feel different, but don’t understand how or why, the
children who don’t know how to ask for help or what they need help with. I analyzed
books for the friend, the ones who want to understand, empathize and help. Finally, I
analyzed books for the teachers, caregivers, therapists and teacher librarians; so they feel
confident in recommending a book that their reader will relate to, and that will give them
the opportunity to develop empathy. I recommend all of the books in Appendix A for use
to support an SEL curriculum as described in the findings. It is my recommendation that
all of the books analyzed in this study should be utilized in the context of an SEL
curriculum and suggested reading for students who are looking for relatable books that
help them to foster their sensitivity to those with anxiety or those who want to develop
empathy for those with anxiety. I encourage adding these titles to library collections for
middle grade readers, as they are relatable, current and positively reviewed publications
that would enhance any collection. Furthermore, each book analyzed in this study
reflects the CASEL 5, therefore I would recommend the use of these books to teachers or
therapists who are teaching the five (5) core competencies of SEL as depicted in Tables 1 and 2.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study indicated that a positive portrayal of anxiety was present in recently published, middle grade novels, however, future research could be conducted to analyze books that were published over a larger period of time, noting any differences between books published recently and those published longer ago. It would be interesting to learn if the depictions and interpretations of anxiety are the same if the publication date parameters expand. Additionally, similar research could be conducted analyzing picture books for younger children and the portrayal of anxiety. A study focusing on comorbidity representation in literature would be beneficial, especially as comorbidity becomes more prevalent. Finally, a repeat of this study in a few years, would be advantageous to analyze newer published books.
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APPENDIX A

LIST OF MIDDLE GRADE CHAPTER BOOKS FOR ANALYSIS


APPENDIX B

BOOK ANALYSIS TOOL

Criteria adapted from Wickham (2018) and Monaghan (2016)

● Gender of character with anxiety:

● How is anxiety exhibited by character?

● Are the characters' life experiences reflective of what others of a similar age group experience?

● Do other characters demonstrate empathy toward the character with anxiety?

● Events that prompt anxiety and/or symptoms (past, present, frequency of occurrences).

● Is anxiety talked about amongst characters?

● How do other characters handle/deal with/cope with the character’s anxiety?

● How does the character handle/deal with/cope with anxiety? (counseling, talking with caregivers, etc)

● Does anxiety cause problems in any character's life? If so, what are the problems caused by the anxiety?

● Is there a problem within the story, relating to the anxiety, which needs to be resolved? If so, what is the problem and how is it resolved?

● Is the character’s anxiety cured?

CASEL 5 (CASEL, n.d.)

● Is the character dealing with anxiety self-aware?

● Can the character dealing with anxiety self-manage their emotions?
● Does the character dealing with anxiety have the ability to make responsible decisions?

● Does the character dealing with anxiety have the ability to make responsible decisions regarding their relationships?

● Does the character dealing with anxiety have positive social awareness?