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EXPLORING BIBLIOTHERAPY AND CREATING FAMILY LITERACY
BAGS IN RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

by

SIERRA URBAEZ

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Undergraduate Thesis Program in Elementary Education
in the College of Community Innovation and Education
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, Ed.D.

Abstract

This thesis sought to aid children in coping with community violence. As violent crimes terrorize communities near and far, children are hearing about them. Children might learn about this violence on the news or by overhearing adults' discussions. Regardless, this thesis sought to help students navigate a world that may be anxiety filled. This thesis includes an exploration of bibliotherapy and discussions of the use of books in a therapeutic manner to delve deeper into its profound effects. The topics of this thesis surround social-emotional learning, which is also investigated and explained. The benefits of combining bibliotherapy and social-emotional learning are evident in the findings of this thesis which identified helpful books. By watching read-alouds, analyzing their content, and choosing books that aligned with the goal of this thesis, nine books were selected for inclusion. Bitmoji Book Bags were created for each of the nine books. These Bitmoji creations contain links to book talks, read-alouds, discussion prompts, activities, and more for students and their parents. The format of these Bitmoji Book Bags is digital, so that the links can be easily exchanged with parents, community members, and educators as a resource for when community violence occurs.

Dedication

To Steph and Brittany, whose excitement for me throughout this adventure never wavered.
Thank you both for your encouragement.

To Nick, who cheered me on through this entire process. Thank you for pushing me to achieve
my dreams every day.

To my mother and sister, who have supported me throughout my entire college career. Thank
you for believing in me through every step of the way.

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Introduction

A sunny day in May changed lives forever in Uvalde, Texas. As did the chilly winter morning in Newton, Connecticut, and the usual warm afternoon in Parkland, Florida. School shootings alter countless lives across their community. On May 24, 2022 in Uvalde, 21 lives were taken at Robb Elementary School (Astudillo, Oxner, & Neugeboren, 2022). When I learned of these events, I could not help but wonder what could be done to help. The events have already happened, and now the survivors have a lifetime of trauma ahead of them. National Public Radio (2022) explained in May of 2022 that 27 school shootings and over 200 mass shootings had happened so far that year. Considering how frequent these unfortunate events are, I wanted to delve deeper into a topic that could be of use to elementary school children and families dealing with school shootings. I may not be able to change policies, laws, and procedures, but I can change how children are coping with these events. Whether the events are active shooter drills, news segments, or just overhearing their parents or adults talking, students and teachers cannot turn a blind eye to the prevalence of violence in their communities. Children are curious beings, always asking questions. We, as adults and teachers, may not have all the answers, but we can at least know how to help young students cope with the reality in which we are living.

Children's literature is known to have a profound effect on readers. Children's literature can serve as a window, being a pathway to another world, or even as a mirror, giving readers the chance to reflect on their own experiences in a new light (Bishop, 1990). One application of children's literature is bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is the "practice of prescribing books to help individuals with emotional challenges," according to Dr. Kathryn Duncan (Lindberg, 2022, n.p.). Strong characters can be role models for young readers. If children can see themselves in a character, readers can then imagine themselves behaving as the characters do. Books that contain

life rehearsals (Roberts & Crawford, 2008; 2009) of grief, worry, and sadness might be helpful as resources in every classroom. As violence remains in our communities, I believe students also need books to show them that the world is not all bad. Books with this theme of hope may also address the negative feelings that accompany it. This thesis explored the research literature on how bibliotherapy may help elementary students understand and cope with community violence, and then applied these concepts of bibliotherapy by creating digital family literacy bags with relevant books and activities.

Review of Literature

Bibliotherapy with children's literature

Students spend so much time in school that parents expect students will learn more than just academic content. Teachers are not only able to teach students, but can also support students' psychological well-being (Lucas & Soares, 2013). Although supporting children's wellbeing is no easy task, bibliotherapy should be considered to help facilitate growth among students' minds in the forms of problem solving and managing relationships (Rizza, 1997). Books are always seen as a reference for academic knowledge, but children's fiction can promote social and emotional well-being as well (Ho & Funk, 2018). An effective method for a variety of demographics, bibliotherapy within children's literature focuses on using relations to characters as a coping mechanism. Bibliotherapy is considered an integrative method of teaching readers about good character traits in a character education curriculum (Parker, 2005). The principles of bibliotherapy can extend to teaching coping mechanisms that a character may practice.

Rozalski, Stewart, and Miller (2010) describe bibliotherapy as being divided into two options: developmental and therapeutic. Developmental bibliotherapy targets everyday situations students may encounter in life. This could include everyday life experiences, such as puberty, friendship, courage, or family relationships. Developmental bibliotherapy seems to take a less formal route, so that teachers can use books to "...promote positive attitudes toward life's challenges..." (Kramer & Smith, 1998, p. 90). Developmental bibliotherapy encourages students to make the right choices through books that promote certain traits.

Another kind of bibliotherapy is therapeutic bibliotherapy. Therapeutic bibliotherapy, also known as clinical bibliotherapy, is used by mental health professionals and seems to focus on more specific, life-changing events and conditions (Rozalski, Stewart & Miller, 2010). Rather than teachers doing so alone, Lucas and Soares (2013) stress the usefulness of the partnership between teachers and school psychologists. Researchers suggest that developmental bibliotherapy, as opposed to clinical bibliotherapy, can be employed for children witnessing familial issues, like divorce, to “ease the pain” (Kramer & Smith, 1998, p. 90).

Sullivan and Strang (2002) explore how developmental bibliotherapy can be utilized to further develop children’s emotional intelligence. The prevalence of bibliotherapy is examined, like how religious teachers use religious texts and doctors use health pamphlets (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). The authors describe that “...some experts...” believe this task should be left to mental health professionals, but since bibliotherapy is so effective, other professionals believe teachers should be trained on how to use bibliotherapy in the classroom (Sullivan & Strang, 2002, p. 75). Emotional intelligence is benefited by bibliotherapy according to Sullivan and Strang (2002), rather than social-emotional learning. However, the two are quite similar. Emotional intelligence is described as the capability to understand and interpret your own and others’ emotions. With this information, teachers can create and maintain healthy relationships. Social emotional learning, on the other hand, is defined as “the process of acquiring the skills to understand and manage emotions, participate in healthy relationships, and make good decisions” (CASEL, *What is the CASEL Framework?*, n.d.).

Bibliotherapy is described in three steps: identification or universalization, catharsis or involvement, and insight (Kramer & Smith, 1998; Parker, 2005; Rozalski, Stewart & Miller, 2010). Identification, or universalization, happens when readers see themselves as characters in a

story (Rozalski, Stewart & Miller, 2010). For readers to see themselves in a story does not have to mean that the reader looks like a picture drawn by an illustrator, but rather, that the reader has been or can picture themselves in the same scenario of the character. The reader realizes the issue or experience revealed in the book is a universal one, experienced by many human beings (Kramer & Smith, 1998). Readers associate, or empathize with the character, and now see the benefit of reading and of shared experiences within the pages of a book.

Catharsis, or involvement, is when readers connect so well with the theme of a book that readers can reconnect or “revisit feelings that previously were repressed,” (Rozalski, Stewart & Miller, 2010, p. 34). Hopefully, readers can reconnect enough to vicariously reflect on their experience and to grow from what has been learned. For me and for many educators, the catharsis stage means that the book is so moving that the book has the reader reconsider an experience in a new light in which reader may have been developmentally stuck and tried to move on. Catharsis is as if the reader is opening to the book, mentally. Readers can look back on their past experiences, take another look at experiences readers may have not thought of in a while.

Finally, the last stage is insight, which in my opinion, is the most important stage. Insight occurs when the reader takes their new realizations or knowledge from the book and understands how to approach new situations in their own life based on the vicarious experiences within the books. In this new light, the book finally gives them “insight” on how to move forward with their lives. Readers take themselves out of the book and practice what was learned, often on their own or through an activity proposed by their teacher (Kramer & Smith, 1998).

Lucas and Soares (2013) list similar guidelines to bibliotherapy, except that another step is added. The authors add juxtaposition. The last added step of juxtaposition involves

“interaction with a therapist,” (Lucas & Soares, 2013, p. 139). In this case, to move forward developmentally, the experience may have been so traumatic, as to need the professional insights weighing in to provide guidelines for thriving and growing.

Teachers are in the position to make operational decisions about bibliotherapy. “Operational decisions” need to be made regarding how and when these bibliotherapy experiences or sessions will be conducted (Sullivan & Strang, 2002, p. 76). Relevant and appropriate books must be chosen to facilitate these sessions accurately and effectively. When bibliotherapy occurs, books are to be read aloud in a collegial or partner style with discussion questions interjected during and after reading. Most importantly, both short-term and long-term follow-up activities should be conducted to ensure that students are getting the most out of their developmental bibliotherapy experience. Sullivan and Strang’s (2002) article provides guidelines on how to implement bibliotherapy in the classroom as a teacher. Based on their recommendations, in the case of community violence, these sessions would be whole-group activities, with books that touch on the topics of fear and/or grief. One kind of follow-up activity could be conducted out of the classroom. My idea is to conduct these open-ended, follow-up activities through digital family literacy bags accessible to children and parents at home. The purpose of conducting some family activities at home with parents is so that these conversations held in alignment with the families’ values and their recommendations are normalized with family members.

Parker (2005) suggests that teachers use books that hold enough depth to allow comprehension, introduce relatable and likable characters who are dealing with moral dilemmas, and that include culturally diverse themes to allow readers to explore and examine character education (Parker, 2005). Even before Parker’s (2005) character education work, Kramer and

Smith's (1998) article for teachers, regarding bibliotherapy after divorce, finishes with a list of books, descriptions, and activities all surrounding divorce, a missing parent, or remarriage (1998). An annotated bibliography containing books on this subject is especially helpful for teachers to have on hand when one notices a student struggling with this topic. Using books about a variety of challenging situations, not limited to divorce or community violence, allows students to learn more about what their peers may be facing rather than forming misconceptions about it. Overall, this article provides reasoning, explanations, and suggestions for implementing developmental bibliotherapy in the classroom (Kramer & Smith, 1998). Divorce can be seen as one of life's challenges that the authors described earlier in the article. There are a few takeaways from this article. The first is that tough situations, like divorce, can have profound effects on students' ability to perform academically and grow emotionally. The same goes for community violence. Additionally, bibliotherapy is a remarkable tool to teach readers about coping strategies and empathy (Kramer & Smith, 1998).

Later, Simone Smith (2014) applied these tools of bibliotherapy to provide teachers with similar family literacy bags addressing family transitions like divorce or separations. For the current study, Smith's (2014) literature review spurred my thinking to create family literacy bags regarding a response to community or school violence that would give today's teachers something to send home with students when a mass shooting happens. By having a set of books and activities regarding coping with community violence at the ready, teachers can be better prepared for these unforeseen events.

Rozalski, Stewart, and Miller (2010) devised a five-step process for determining if a book is suitable for bibliotherapy use. The main takeaway from their five-step process is how relevant and understandable the book is for its targeted audience. Once a book has been decided upon, the

next step is time to make a lesson plan based on it. The focus of this lesson plan should be to provide students with actions readers can do in relation to what was just read. It should give readers concrete plans of how to approach situations and reflect on what one has learned.

Similarly, Roberts and Crawford (2008) stress using picturebooks to move students to hopeful positions, leveraging empathetic feelings to action or praxis. Picturebooks can even be used (Crawford & Roberts, 2018; Roberts & Crawford, 2009) across many stressful family topics, such as war, terrorism, and disasters, that may not seem to be typical topics for young children.

When considering ancillary materials to pair with children's books, Plond's (2013) article entitled "Developing and implementing family literacy bags in the classroom" also informed the current study by providing two example lesson plans. A sixth grade unit on the book *Holes* surrounds the character traits of being caring and helping those in need. For the three steps of developmental bibliotherapy, the lesson plan states to provide a story map for readers to track the plot and characters (identification stage), host discussion circles (involvement stage), and assign cause and effect charts for discussion (insight stage) (Parker, 2005). Discussion is key for bibliotherapy's best impacts. The purpose of this lesson is to have middle school-aged children relate to the characters in the story's struggles, discuss their personal connections, and learn how to react if presented with similar scenarios to be a friend or to help someone.

The other lesson plan by Parker (2005) is a kindergarten lesson plan based on the fable *The Tortoise and the Hare*. Perseverance is the key character trait highlighted in this bibliographic lesson. According to the authors, to address the three steps, students are asked to identify with any character knowing that animals are universal (identification step). Then, the teacher reads aloud and passes the book around (involvement step), and students discuss how the characters win and "students understand perseverance at the end of the story," (insight step)

(Parker, 2005, p. 6). The author suggests a roleplaying scene as a follow-up activity to give students the chance to act out how one would react when faced with a similar situation, not a race, that requires perseverance.

Making connections with characters and having readers relate to them is the central idea of bibliotherapy. This idea of relating a character to oneself is a great opportunity for children to explore the idea of self, including self-expression and awareness. Self-awareness is one of the key components of the SEL framework, discussed in the following section entitled Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL, *What is the CASEL Framework?*, n.d.).

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is described by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning as “the process of acquiring the skills to understand and manage emotions, participate in healthy relationships, and make good decisions” (CASEL, *What is the CASEL Framework?*, n.d.). Researchers Tussey, Clark, and Haas (2020) stress that children with behavioral issues need teachers that are capable of teaching them about social-emotional learning. These behaviors, coined “challenging behaviors,” can create issues in and out of school (Tussey, Clark, & Haas, 2020, p. 57). The intervention suggested by the authors can help ease the effects of challenging behaviors. First and foremost, teachers can be good role models for their students through “mindfulness practices.” (Tussey, Clark, & Haas, 2020, p. 58). Mindfulness practices can be described as times in which someone present and in tune with themselves and their surroundings. It is often practiced as a coping mechanism for anxiety.

Tussey, Clark, and Haas continue into a section entitled “Sample Literacy and SEL Activities,” (2020). Several books are listed along with activities to be conducted in and out of school. Additionally, the table contains educational resources. These books and websites are

made to aid teachers in setting themselves up for success when incorporating social-emotional learning in their classrooms. As the article concludes, the authors describe how literacy can also be improved by students exhibiting challenging behaviors through the activities listed in this article (Tussey, Clark, & Haas, 2020).

Using children's literature as social-emotional bibliotherapy has a dual purpose. Not only are the readers going to learn how to handle negative emotions, like fear and grief, but their literacy skills will also improve. The activities described to be conducted in school all begin with a read-aloud to the class of the book, followed by a kind of brainstorming on the reading. The main activity is one that allows for reflection on the themes of the book. The scenarios posed by the book are thought-provoking enough to conduct activities at home. Teachers should highlight the importance of encouraging families to take part in their child's SEL process. Knowing that these topics learned at school are also transferable to their home life can persuade readers to keep up their efforts and practice SEL anywhere, not just in school. As children inevitably face community violence or hear about community violence on the news, social-emotional learning teaches them how to handle their intense, emotional reactions.

Family literacy bags

Literacy and SEL can be perpetuated at home, according to Santos, Fettig and Shaffer (2012). Creating and sending home book bags is a "literacy-promoting activity" for an entire family to enjoy and thrive off (Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 35). This additional support can greatly improve the student's literacy. By including a parent, sibling, or hopefully, the entire family, students are provided with more than just a teacher to turn to when questions arise.

These bags can increase the enjoyment of all subjects, for example, science, with all family members (Martin, Daughenbaugh, Shaw, & Burch, 2013). By having entire families

participate in nightly activities, students become more familiar with topics while the other family members feel more involved in their student's education.

Plond (2013) begins with an explanation of why she uses family literacy bags in her classroom. She describes the barriers she faced in getting students to read at home, like blank or falsified reading logs (Plond, 2013). Her honest rationale can attract many teachers to her suggestions. She suggests that family literacy bags are a solution to the issues teachers face. Zeece and Wallace (2009) stress that creating your own literacy bags can be more effective than purchasing one. In getting to know your students, you will get to know what students like and how students like to learn. Plond (2013) also makes a case for why she prefers to make family literacy bags herself. She states, “1) many of the pre-made activities require a certain group of books; 2) the activities are either too simple or too challenging for my students; and 3) they often do not cover the concepts that I want to be covered,” (Plond, 2013, p. 81).

Explanations like these might offer a rationale that can sway teachers to make their own bags.

Literacy bags can be utilized to reinforce ideas and concepts previously explained in class across some content areas (Martin, Daughenbaugh, Shaw, & Burch, 2013). The authors created science family literacy bags which contained children’s nonfiction books that correlated with a scientific theme. In this way, I was inspired to by their study to create digital Bitmoji Book Bags that might focus on a needed topic, one at a time.

Children are given many opportunities to develop these foundational skills with not only their teachers but with their parents, too. Exposing readers to books on different topics, such as managing emotions and handling relationships, gives them a chance to work on their literacy while developing social-emotional skills. Santos, Fetting, and Shaffer (2012) describe opportunities to engage families in these skills, suggesting newsletters, book bags, and school

events. When educators focus on one topic within a book bag, as suggested by Fettig and colleagues (2012), young readers are given more of an opportunity to learn and practice the skill or topic. The themes of books read in class opened a door to book bags and related activities that could be experienced at home (Santos, Fettig & Shaffer, 2012).

I believe a benefit to sending home family literacy book bags dedicated to SEL and community violence is that children do not have to tackle tough topics alone on their own, or in front of their classmates. In the comfort of their own home, families can delve deeper into personal questions and viewpoints that students may have about a theme (Santos, Fettig & Shaffer, 2012).

Additionally, some parents may feel hesitant trying to teach literacy skills, but these parents could reinforce the detailed literacy skills their students receive at school by enacting the related literacy activities that simultaneously are bringing comfort through bibliotherapy focused on SEL (Zeece & Wallace, 2009). By sending home family literacy bags, parents are empowered by the opportunity to engage in literacy-promoting acts in less stressful ways. These book bags are considered fairly low-stakes activities, as opposed to volunteering in the classroom or participating in a literacy event at school while being observed by a teacher. More freedom is presented to the involved family members, which can allow them to guide discussions in a direction that pertain to their lives.

For example, a book about emotions may leave a student wondering how their parents' recent divorce correlates to the anger the student is feeling. By sending students home with a family literacy bag about understanding emotions, students in their family context are given the chance to explore this more with their families (Santos, Fettig & Shaffer, 2012). All of this research served to inform the current study's goal of creating digital book bags pertaining to SEL

and community violence, with my reasoning for creating them as a supplement for family conversations about important topics.

Family literacy bags are also referred to as book bags. Book bags typically consist of an appropriate book, activities, and discussion questions for families to partake. Zeece and Wallace (2009) called them BAGS which stands for “Books and Good Stuff,” as the form of family literacy book bags (p. 35). Several guidelines are described to aid in the creation of BAGS: “plan with purpose; questions to ask; select with sensitivity; engage with excitement; package with pizzazz; follow up and use feedback” (Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 36-38). To “plan with purpose” is to keep students' developmental abilities and interests in mind as you create book bags. The “questions to ask” are outlined very clearly in the article and are as follows: “Why am I creating the BAGS? What goals do I have for children and/or families who will be using this resource? Where will these materials be used?” (Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 37). The question pertaining to the goals of the resource can be tailored to current events in the world or in the classroom. For example, a class trip to the zoo can prompt teachers to create book bags promoting the use of informational texts, while community violence may lead to book bags about emotions. “Select[ing] with sensitivity” may look like considering children’s needs when deciding on themes, or even inviting families to give their input about the topics of book bags. To “package with pizzazz” means to provide an inviting appearance to the physical book bag. For the “engage with excitement” step, students must feel encouraged to request, use, and return book bags. Families must be involved in not only the decision-making process of bag topics but in their distribution. Lastly, to “follow up and use feedback” is to incorporate responses from both the parent and child. Having an expectation of communication between parents and the teacher allows for feedback that can be used to modify the bags.

Likewise, Martin, Daughenbaugh, Shaw, and Burch (2013) thoroughly explain science literacy bags. Despite this article focusing on science topics being incorporated into a family literacy bag, the authors outline important components that remain constant for family literacy bags on any subject. Logistics of these bags are explained, including how long a student can keep one, storage, and safety issues (Martin, Daughenbaugh, Shaw, & Burch, 2013). In this case, the teacher checks in with the student after a week, to see if the student would like to keep the physical book bag longer. The bags are kept handy to check out and alter as needed. Since these are science literacy bags, teachers may note that some experiment materials may be harmful to younger siblings who encounter them. Of course, harmful materials would not be the case for digital SEL bags about community violence.

Also, their article offers an appendix containing paired fiction and nonfiction texts to create literacy bags based on (Martin, Daughenbaugh, Shaw, & Burch, 2013), which I found to be organized by topics and big ideas. The authors point out that two texts are included; both texts in the pair are suggested to be of the same reading level. In conclusion, this article informed many of the decisions that I made within this thesis as insights are provided into how STEM book bags were created and used.

In Plond's (2013) process of developing her book bags, she selects the texts, reads them, and inquiries about what aspects of the book can be focused upon to create meaningful activities. Like Martin and colleagues (2013), this article (Plond, 2013) recommended pairing fiction and nonfiction books together for a family literacy bag, which has led me to consider doing the same. I believe nonfiction and fiction texts are included because both offer different perspectives and approaches to the same topic. Plond (2013) also included an overview letter, as well as questions to ask while reading. An overview letter is also essential, so that parents have clear instructions

on what is expected of parents to complete. “Quick and Easy Activities,” along with all required materials, are included. The author emphasizes that she includes all necessary materials, and “never assume[s] that a family will have something,” (Plond, 2013, p. 82). I believe that not assuming a family has materials is an important suggestion to note, as I would not want to send home a family literacy bag with activities that cannot be completed. Logistics are also suggested for the bags, with questions listed regarding how the bags will be made, when the bags will be sent home, and where the bags will be stored (Plond, 2013). Logistics are important for teachers to consider before implementing book bags in their classrooms.

In addition to book bags, Santos, Fettig and Shaffer (2012) also sent newsletters home with hopes to encourage families to extend classroom topics to the home (Santos, Fettig & Shaffer, 2012). The authors include book-related activities that correspond to books read in class. These newsletters could also include an explanation of how these activities provide further development in literacy and social-emotional skills. These encouraging and brief newsletters can contain a list of suggested books for families to read together. School events are an opportunity to “share how to extend classroom literacy activities at home,” (Santos, Fettig & Shaffer, 2012, p. 92). A hands-on opportunity for parents to practice social-emotional learning may be what is needed to start doing so in their own home. Parental involvement in the development of social-emotional skills and literacy is especially helpful (Santos, Fettig, & Shaffer, 2012).

Researchers recommend finding a way to obtain feedback about the family literacy bag (Martin, Daughenbaugh, Shaw, & Burch, 2013). Therefore, I decided to include a brief survey for parents and children to complete at the end, which is important to include in my own work. Guidelines for feedback are offered and honest parent feedback is appreciated. This would allow

the teacher to adjust the bags as necessary to best help his or her students. The instructions for each night's activities in the literacy bag are clear for students and their parents.

The following chapter describes the methods I took to curate books for the Bitmoji library and the steps I took to create an effective and useful product. Chapter Four, Findings, provides screenshots of the final Bitmoji Book Bag Library as well as links to the actual work. Later, Chapter Five entitled Concluding Remarks discusses the work, outlines the educational implications, and offers avenues for future research.

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the research literature about how bibliotherapy may help elementary students understand and cope with community and school violence. Additionally, the concepts of bibliotherapy were applied by creating Bitmoji Book Bags with relevant books and activities. These book bags are digital to increase the accessibility of these bags to multiple families at once. However, this doesn't come without limitations. Families who do not have access to a computer wouldn't be able to access these book bags. To combat this struggle, teachers who have access to it could print out the slides and provide them to families along with a copy of the book. Additionally, digital family literacy bags can be easily shared between educators. The intended audience of these family literacy bags are families. However, if teachers have access to them as well, they can send their students home with a link to the library. When community violence occurs, teachers can make recommendations to parents on which books they could read to help cope. Family literacy bags were be created based on themes that relate to SEL skills that allow for a coping response to community violence. These themes include grief, sadness, worry, and also hope. The community and school violence in reference for the current study does not refer to bullying or include books specifically on the theme of bullying.

Process of selecting the books for Bitmoji Book Bags

Initially, nine picturebooks and corresponding digital read-aloud were selected with these themes in mind. The chosen books are at a kindergarten to third grade level. This is due to my

understanding that lower grade level books would have a gentler way of bringing up these dark themes. With this gentle approach, I believe it would be a good starting place for my Bitmoji Book Bags. Key words such as “grief, death, anxiety, stress, sadness, coping” were used to identify potential children’s picturebooks. In addition to typical search engines like *Google*, websites like *Goodreads*, *WeNeedDiverseBooks*, and *Scholastic Book Wizard* were utilized to find the best books for these family literacy bags. These websites are databases of books and *Scholastic Book Wizard* is specifically for teachers constructing a classroom library. I read through upwards of 30 book summaries to identify the final cadre of books. As I read each book, or watched a read aloud for it, I paid close attention to the situation presented in the books. I considered if this situation is one that many readers would be able to. Niche situations or very specific ones would not be useful due to their very limited audience. If a book has a relatable plot or main situation, I then looked at the characters and their traits. The characters typically started off in a dark place, angry or upset. By the end of the books, they’re usually much happier and more positive. I was looking for characters that would simulate the emotions that readers would feel. Books with hopeful, positive endings were important for me to choose.

Process of creating the Bitmoji Book Bags

After identifying books, I used *YouTube* to find a high quality read aloud of the book. Upon hearing the book read out loud and viewing its illustrations and peritext, I analyzed the book physically to determine if the book fits the purview of the current study. In selecting books about grief, sadness, and worry, I “selected with sensitivity,” as explained by Wallace and Zeece’s (2009). The students’ life situations and corresponding needs that I targeted are responses to community and school violence. I also worked to identify books that are award winning and therefore considered high quality by the children’s literature world.

Upon reading the selected books, I analyzed each book for possible awards, for their content, and for their approach and themes regarding these difficult or dark topics with children. By taking a more in-depth look at the storyline, characters, and their actions, I determined if each book is appropriate for the Bitmoji Book Bag Library I created. I looked for storylines that present situations that students can relate to and that provide an element of hope in the end. I didn't only look for stories with hopeful and /or somewhat happy endings, but with realistic endings, too. These may include community violence (or mass shootings), school violence (or school shootings), the loss that comes with these acts of violence (such as that of a loved one), and other school situations that bring up feelings of worry and sadness. The books that I decided to select were on grade level for kindergarten to third grade level; I think this is because books targeted towards younger children approach dark themes in the manner that I was I looking for.

Character development is another area that I analyzed to ensure the edification of and positive experiences for my students. Stories with characters who may begin the book unsure of how to cope, but end with characters employing useful coping mechanisms, were prioritized. Also important to my analysis, was including books that incorporated the effective use of peritext, such as dark fly pages at the beginning at the book, to light ones at the end, which are more subtle characteristics of which children and parents may not be as aware. The total design of these selected books were considered when I decided whether to include the book and make a family literacy bag.

Additionally, as books were selected pre-, during, and/or post-reading discussion questions that correlate with SEL concepts were considered. The fundamentals of SEL according to CASEL, include "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making," (CASEL, *What is the CASEL Framework?*, n.d., n.p.). To create

these discussion points and questions, I examined each fundamental topic of SEL and related the SEL topic to the theme of the book. Then, thought-provoking questions were developed to help families go beyond the surface level events within the book. These higher order discussion questions do not have a right or wrong answer, but rather, are open-ended for families to better develop meaningful and authentic responses to boost higher order thinking.

Then, appropriate post-reading activities were developed to facilitate readers' ability to understand, manage, and reflect on emotions that may ensue when community violence may occur. These activities go beyond Bloom's lower-level comprehension questions, according to Bloom's Taxonomy (Armstrong, 2010, n.p.) typically asked after reading a book. These included activities such as brainstorming example scenarios and reactions, relating relevant current events, creating poetry, reflective writing prompts, and other stimulating and important activities related to action and praxis, such as writing letters to senators regarding violence or school safety.

Finally, a book talk was crafted to motivate and set purposes for children as well as a book summary for parents to use. The book summary allows parents to preview plot points, occurrences, in order to know what topics are included in the book, rather than having to only watch the read-aloud, in order to know if this content is appropriate for their child. Additionally, for each book, I included a helpful link for parents to articles about bibliotherapy and SEL that can aid in their understanding of the purpose and the implementation of the family literacy bags.

Overview of Bitmoji Book Bags

With the suggestions and approval of the thesis chair and committee members, each of whom are experts and /or researchers in the field of children's literature, I worked to create the

needed components for the Bitmoji Book Bags. Prior research within the literature review for this thesis also informed the way I decided upon and included the following seven components:

1. Book talk: Brief goal statement provided for students to introduce the theme of the bag.
2. Read aloud: An already created or a formed link to a read aloud of the selected book.
3. Discussion question and points: Conversation starters for families to engage with after reading.
4. Summary: summary of the book along with the reasoning behind providing the bag.
5. Article: Link to an online newspaper or blog article for parents explaining bibliotherapy and SEL benefits.
6. Activity: Instructions for an engaging, reflective activity that provides students with a chance to practice what students have learned.
7. Survey: A survey for students and families to provide feedback on the book, activities, discussion, and the overall effectiveness of the bag.

The following chapter reveals the exact pages of each created Bitmoji Book Bag and the last chapter provides a summary as well as implications for future research and practice.

Findings

Introduction

Nine books were selected for inclusion in the Bitmoji Book Bag project. The books are listed below in no particular order:

1. *The Breaking News* (Reul, 2018).
2. *A Terrible Thing Happened* (Holmes, 2000)
3. *The Rough Patch* (Lies, 2018)
4. *The Whatifs* (Kilgore, 2020)
5. *I'm Not Scared, I'm Prepared!* (Cook, 2014)
6. *One Wave at a Time* (Thompson, 2018)
7. *Worries Are Like Clouds* (Innes, 2016)
8. *Ruby's Worry* (Percival, 2018)
9. *Right Now, I Am Fine* (Owen, 2020)

In this chapter which presents the findings of this thesis, readers will see screenshots of each of the contents for the nine books. I have included each Bitmoji Book Bag and all its contents. However, all books contain the same slide for a parent survey. Only the first set of screenshots for the first book will contain the screenshot of the survey. The shareable link for the entire Bitmoji Book Bag Library is below:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1qZG2e4FzWo-J9xc3HC-SB6d7NPagqqvvPVSmV2HwAMY/edit?usp=sharing>

First, readers will see the initial slide that introduces the entirety of the Bitmoji Book Bag Library, which is of the library itself. It contains a bookshelf with covers of each Bitmoji Book Bag. By clicking on the book, the link takes users to the Book Bag for that book.

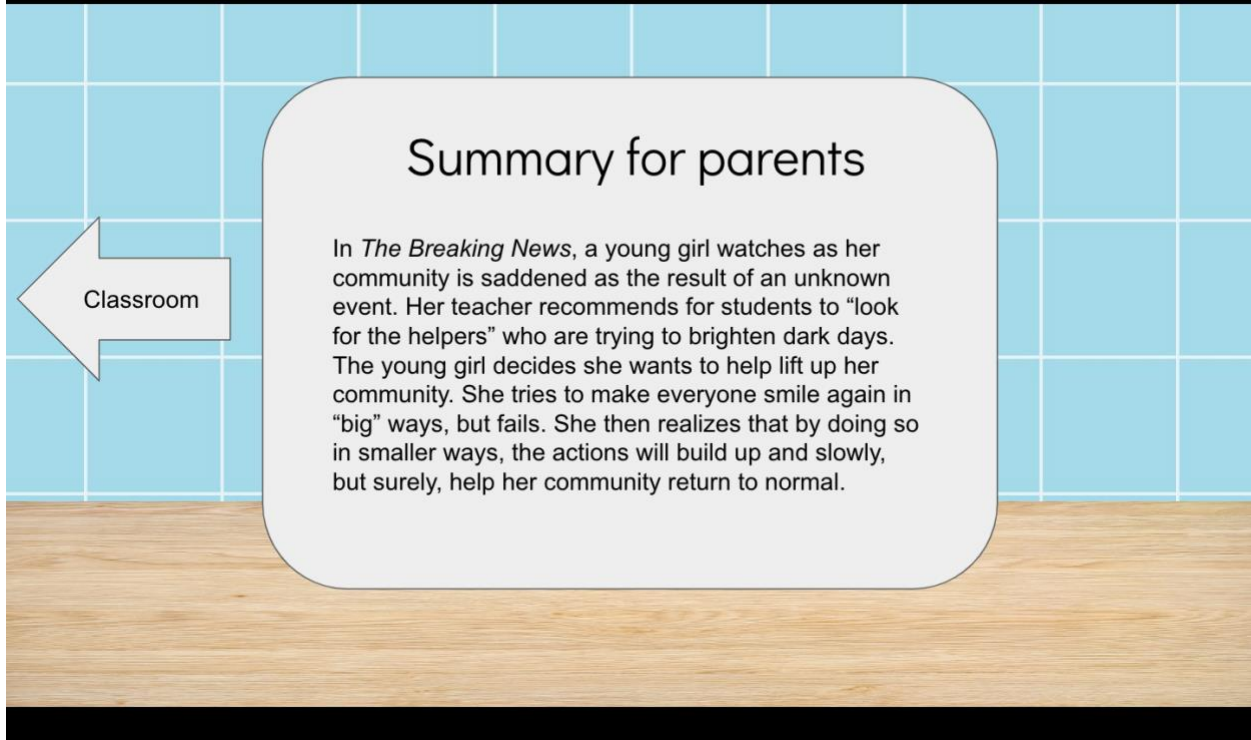
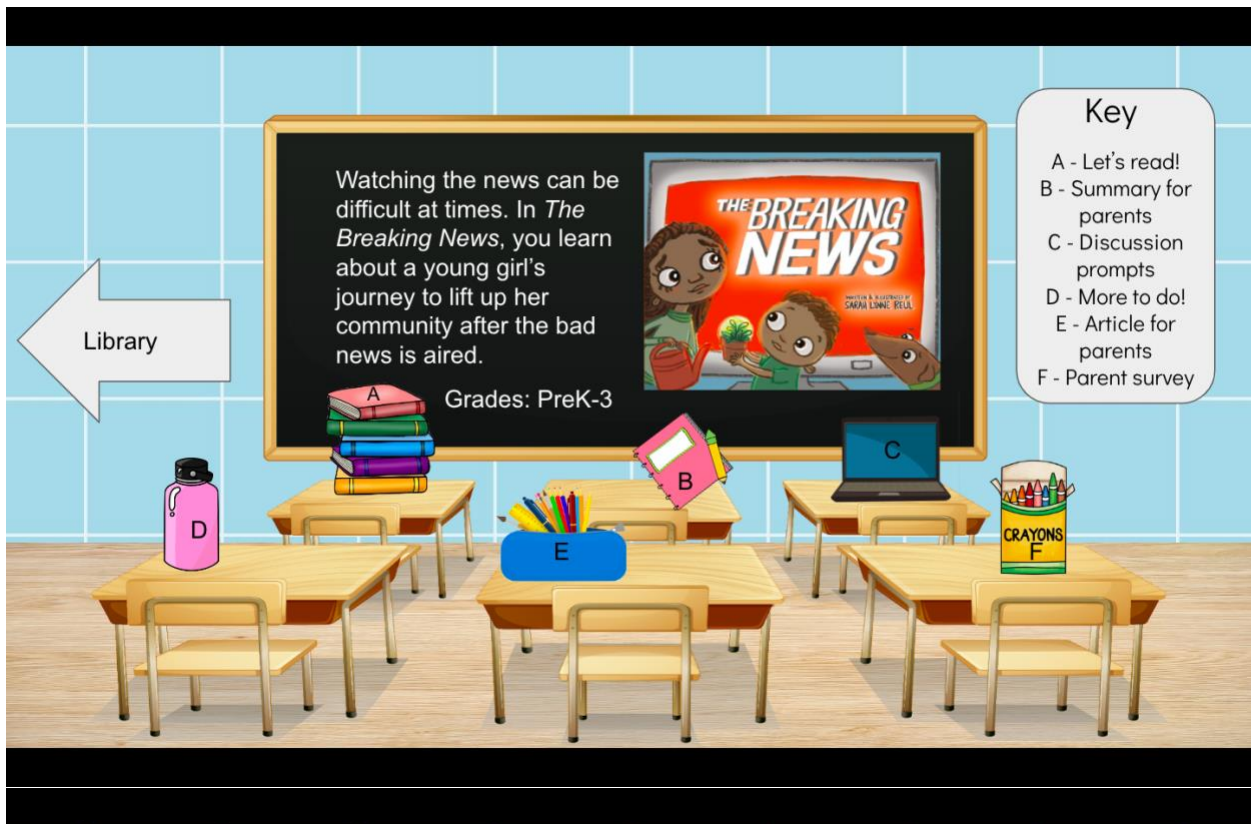
Following the initial slide, readers will see nine slides of the nine Bitmoji Book Bags. Each slide of each Book Bag houses hotspots and contains links to the contents informed by the literature review.



Bitmoji Book Bags

The following findings are organized by book titles and contain the slides for each of the components of the book bag.

The Breaking News



Let's read!

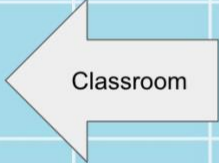


Classroom

Discussion prompts

- Talk about a time where you watched the breaking news on TV. What happened?
- Have you seen your community be affected by news you watched on TV? How did they react?
- What are some small steps you can take to become a helper in your community?

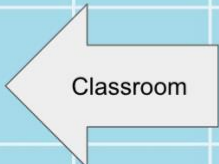
Classroom



More to do!

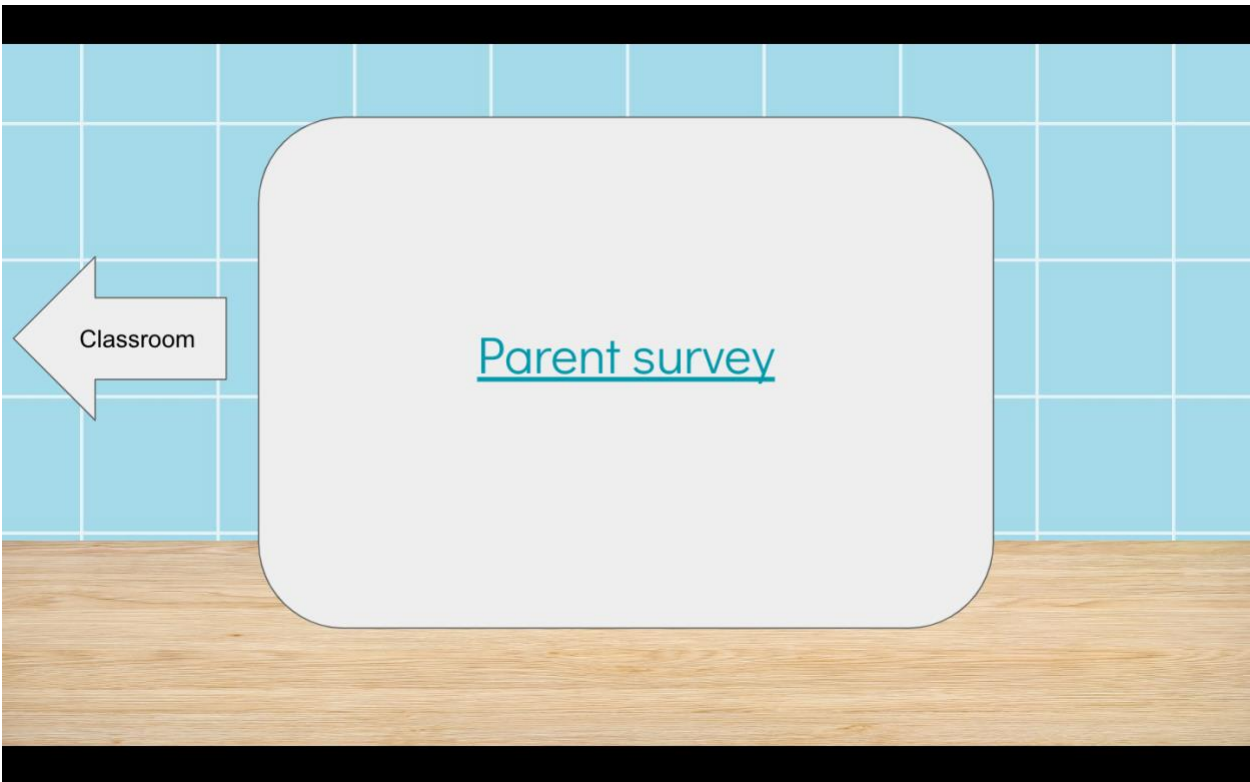


In the story, the young girl and her family pot plants to give our to their community. This is one of the ways she is a helper. On the stems of this plant, draw flowers. On each petal, draw or write about ways you can grow through a tough time.



Article for parents

[How to Explain Scary News to Kids](#)



Feedback for Bitmoji Book Bags

Thank you for utilizing the Bitmoji Book Bags I've created. Please complete the form below with feedback on how I can improve them!

 sierra91urb@gmail.com (not shared) [Switch account](#)



* Required

Which Bitmoji Book Bag did you use? *

Choose



Overall, did you find this Bitmoji Book Bag to be effective in teaching your child new strategies to cope with community violence? *

Your answer

What did you like the best about the Bitmoji Book Bag you used?

Your answer

What did you like the least about the Bitmoji Book Bag you used?

Your answer _____

Did you feel like this Bitmoji Book Bag was grade-level appropriate for your student?

Your answer _____

Did the discussion prompts bring up meaningful conversations with you and your child?

Your answer _____

Do you think your child enjoyed the activities that accompanied the Bitmoji Book Bag?

Your answer _____

Did the article provide additional information on the topic that you found useful?

Your answer _____

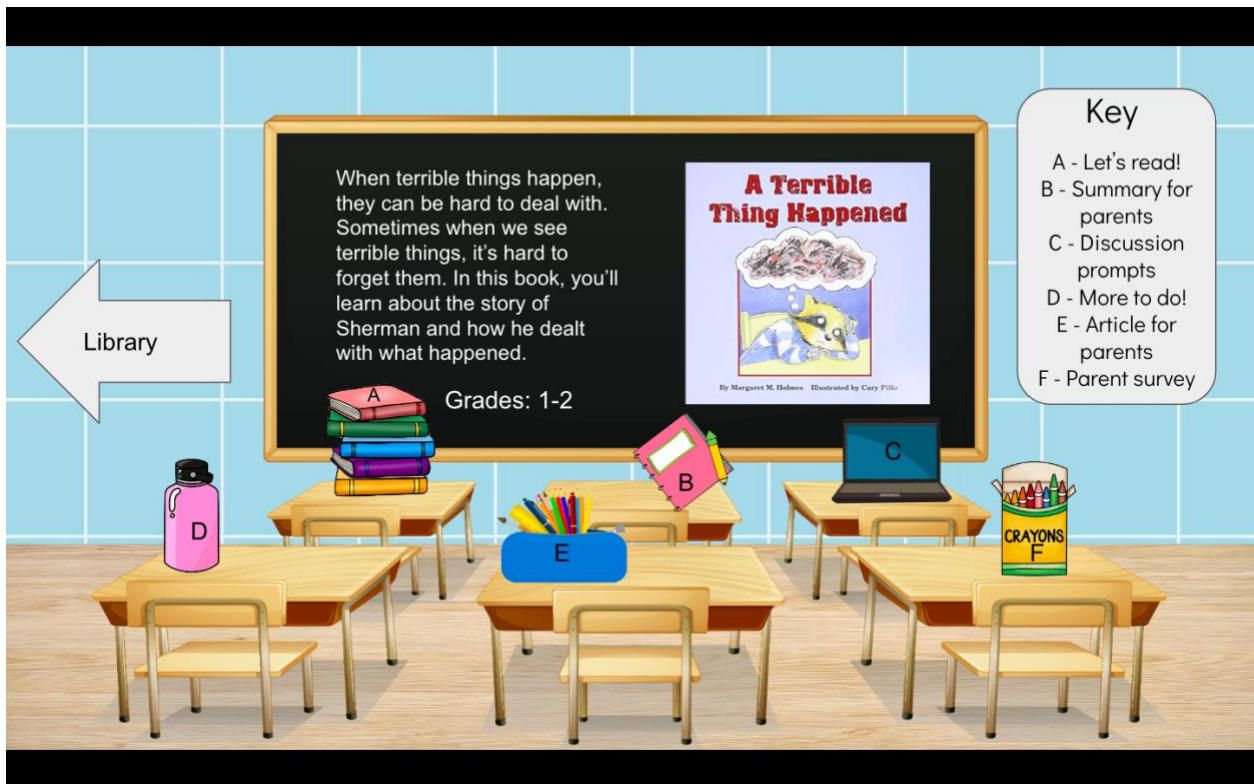
If you have any book recommendations for future Bitmoji Book Bags, please put them below!

Your answer _____

Submit

Clear form

A Terrible Thing Happened



Let's read!

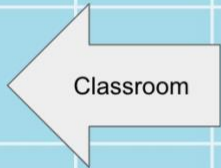


Classroom

Summary for parents

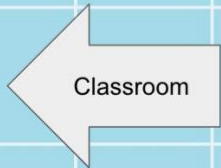
In *A Terrible Thing Happened*, Sherman witnesses a an unknown but terrible thing. He doesn't like thinking about what happened. He tries to avoid thinking about it, but then he starts having physical symptoms of anxiety and begins acting out in school. He works with Ms. Maple at school to express his feelings and what he remembers from what happened. As he lets his feelings out, he starts to feel better physically and mentally.

Classroom



Discussion prompts

- Have you ever watched a terrible thing happen? How did it make you feel?
- What kinds of things does Sherman do that help him feel stronger and less angry?
- Sherman feels better after he starts to talk about his feelings, and he also discovers that he feels better when he draws how he feels, too. Do you feel better when you talk about or draw your feelings? What other ways can you think of to let feelings come out or to share them with someone you trust?



More to do!

Name _____ Date _____ Page 1

Writing About Feelings

In each moment, we may feel a variety of feelings, or emotions. Feelings come and go, and being good at writing about them can help us see that feelings and emotions are visitors, like passing clouds on a sunny day.

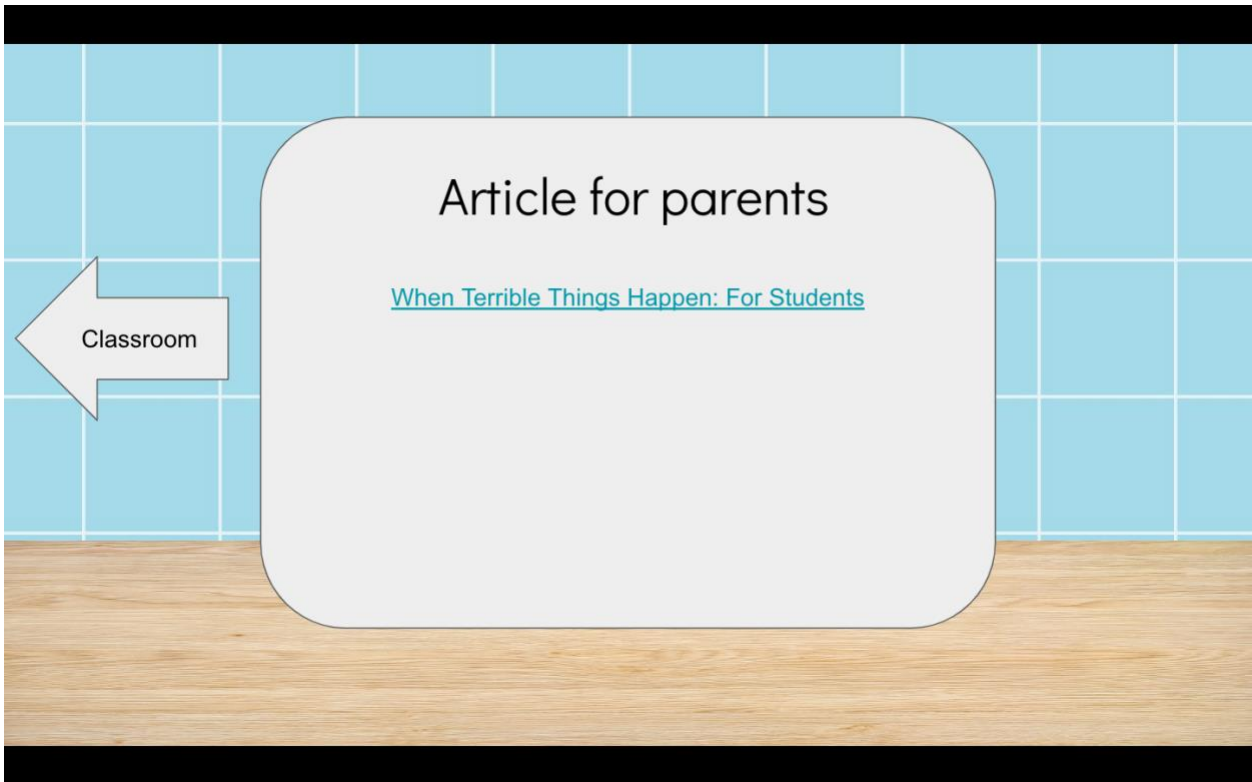
Step 1: From the list below, circle 10 descriptive emotion words to write about.

Descriptive Emotion Words

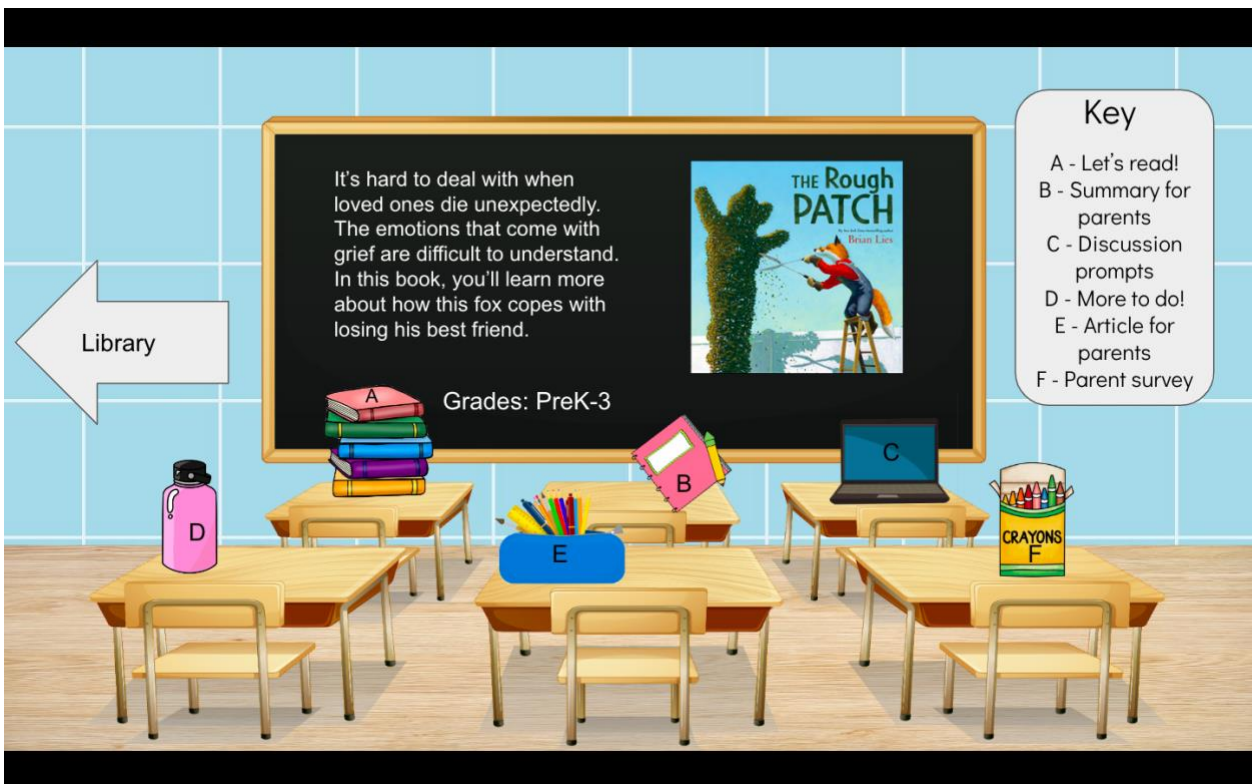
amused	determined	insecure	proud
amused	disgusted	intended	relieved
angry	eager	jealous	sad
annoyed	embarrassed	joyful	satisfied
anxious	energetic	lonely	scared
ashamed	envious	lost	self-conscious
bold	excited	loving	stupid
bored	foolish	miserable	terrified
brave	frustrated	motivated	uncomfortable
comfortable	furious	overwhelmed	worful
confused	hopeful	peaceful	worried
content	hurt	pessimistic	

Step 2: After selecting your 10 words from the list, use the spaces on pages 2 and 3 to write about a time when you have felt each emotion. Start by asking yourself or asking adult how you felt and where you felt the emotion in your body.

Read the descriptive emotion words on the worksheet. Choose a few and write about a time when you felt each emotion. Write about how important it is to share your feelings.



The Rough Patch



Let's read!

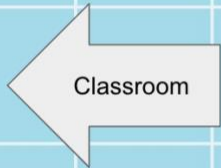


Classroom

Summary for parents

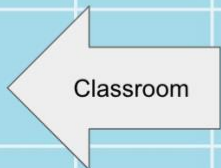
In *The Rough Patch*, Evan loses his precious best friend, his dog, out of nowhere. They used to work together in his yard on his plants. After he loses his dogs, he chops down the plants out of anger and sadness. Weeds begin to grow. One day, a pumpkin begins to grow. Evan tends to it and eventually takes it to the fair, where he begins to enjoy himself and have some fun for the first time in a while. His pumpkin wins third place, and one of the prizes is a puppy. Wearily, Evan takes the puppy home.

Classroom



Discussion prompts

- Have you ever lost something? How did it make you feel?
- How does attending the fair help Evan? How can interacting with others help you through times like this?
- Why is this story called "The Rough Patch"? Does this title have more than one meaning?



More to do!

Think about a loved one you've lost. How did you get through that rough patch of grieving them? Reflect on that process. Fill out the graphic organizer by writing and drawing about how you coped at that time.



The Whatifs



Let's read!



Classroom

Summary for parents

The Whatifs invade Cora's mind with negative questions. She feels as though they're always on her mind. On the day of her piano recital, the Whatifs commence their typical routine of pestering her. She builds up worry over her turn and a friend, Stella, starts to notice. She explains to Cora that positive Whatifs exist too. Cora is shocked to learn this, and starts having positive Whatifs. During her recital, Cora presses the wrong key, and her negative Whatifs return. After seeing Stella off to the side cheering her on, Cora finishes her recital well. She then learns to consider positive Whatifs.

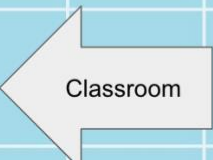
Classroom

A white arrow pointing to the left with the word "Classroom" written inside it.

Classroom

Discussion prompts

- Cora's what ifs followed her around from the moment she woke up. What are some what ifs that follow you around?
- Cora felt better after she talked with Stella. Who is someone that you can talk to when you are feeling anxious?
- Some people get an upset stomach when they get worried. What do you notice about your body when you start to worry about something?

A white arrow pointing to the left with the word "Classroom" written inside it.

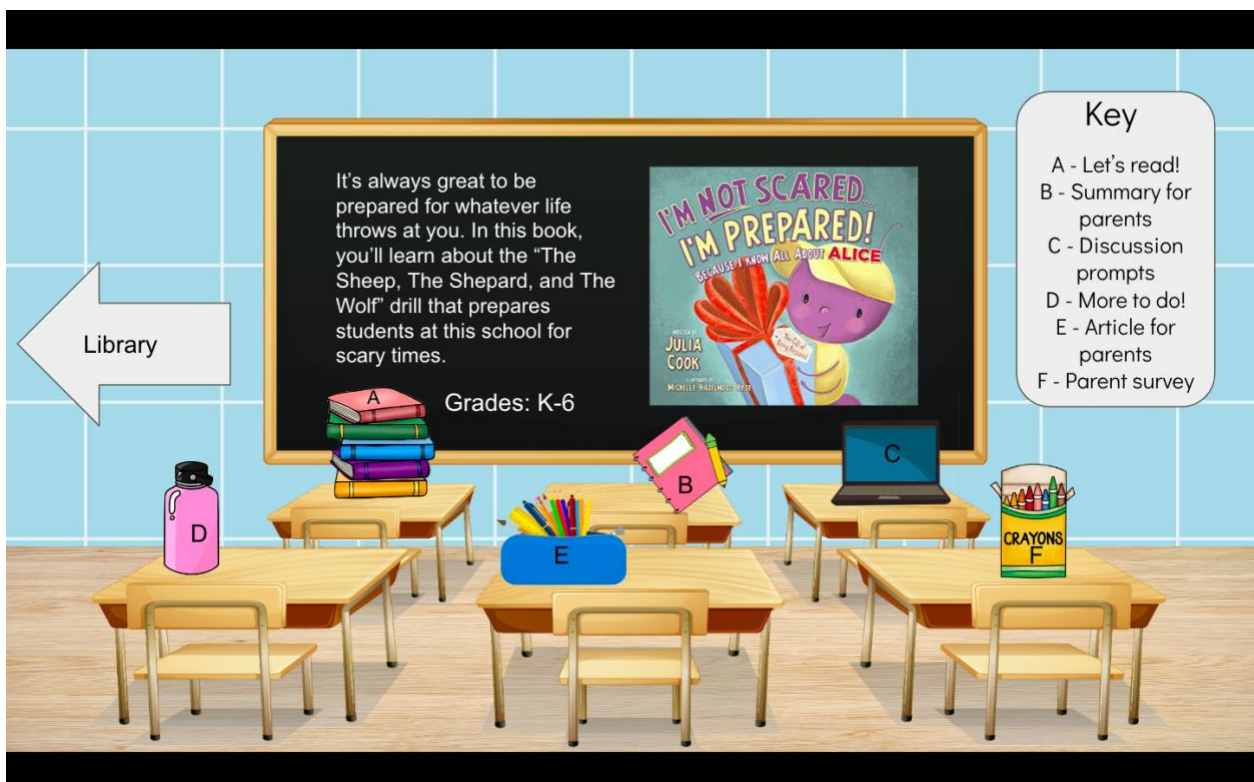
Classroom

More to do!

Come up with a list of scary situations you've found yourself in before. These can include being nervous for a test, starting at a new school, trying to make a new friend, or going somewhere for the first time. Think of a negative "What if?" question you may have thought of at that time. Next, turn that question into a positive "What if?" question! Think about how you can transform your negative thoughts into positive ones.



I'm Not Scared, I'm Prepared!



Let's read!

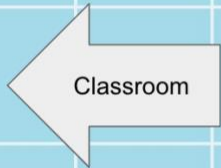


Classroom

Summary for parents

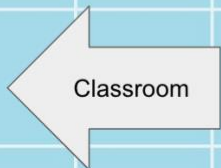
I'm Not Scared, I'm Prepared! takes readers through the story of an ant who's teacher gives them the gift of being prepared. They learn about the "The Sheep, The Shepard, and The Wolf" drill to prepare students for an intruder. They are directed to follow ALICE, "Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate." Students practice running "zig-zaggy," blocking doors, and running to a meeting point. This book stresses to students that their teacher wants to take care of them to the best of their ability.

Classroom



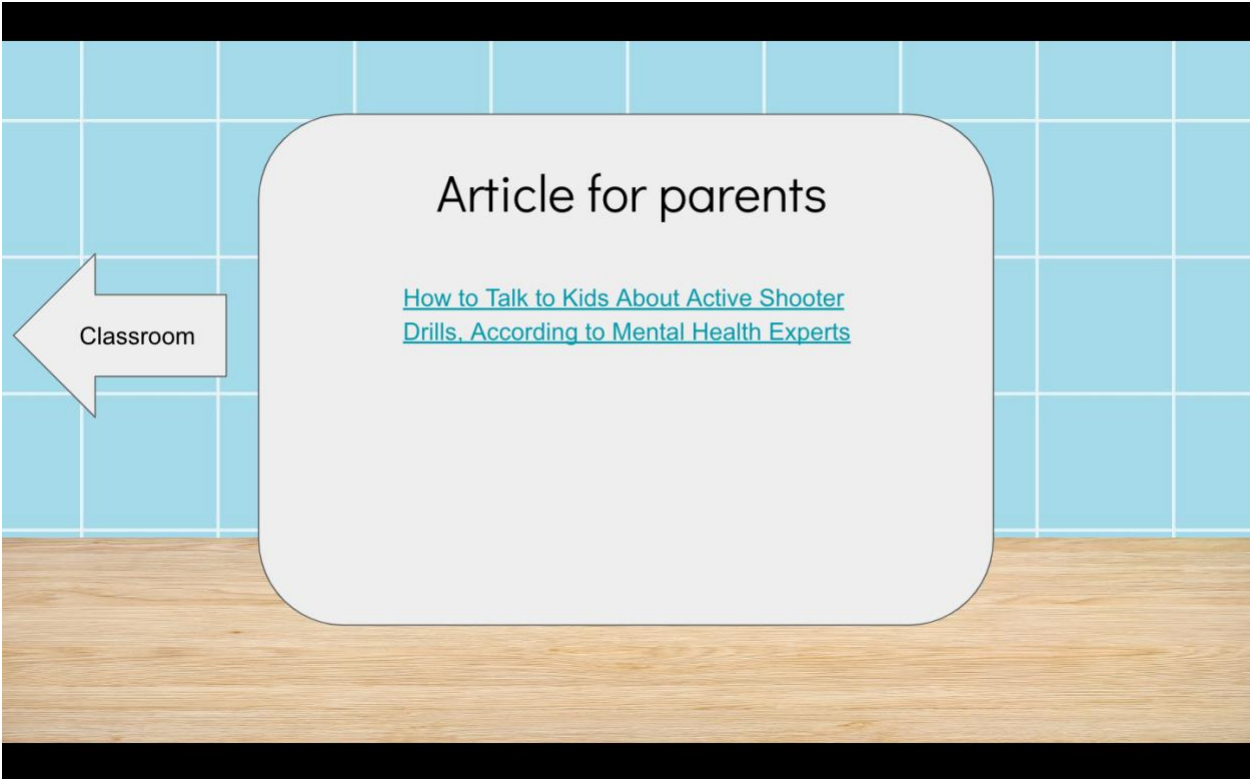
Discussion prompts

- Why do you think the class of ants should practice ALICE?
- Does your class have a drill similar to ALICE? If so, what's it like?
- How does practicing for lockdowns keep you safe?

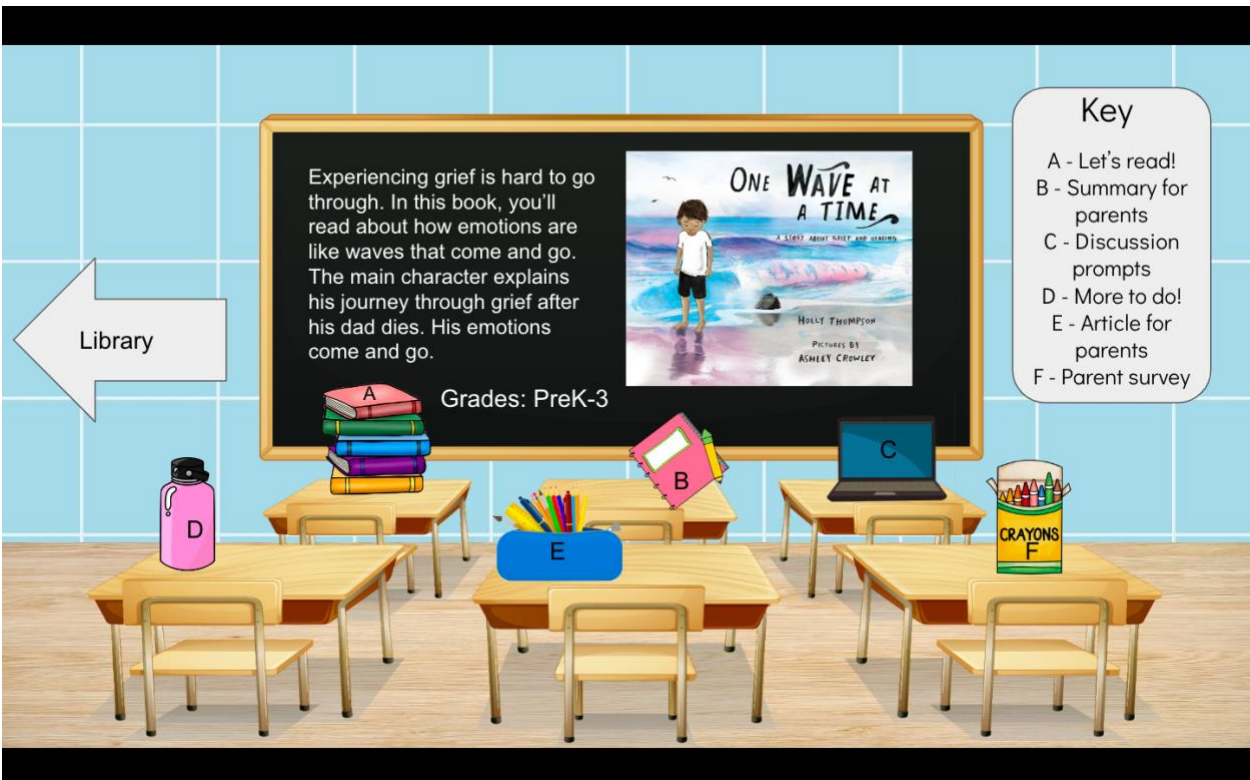


More to do!

Think about the drills you've experienced during school like fire drills, tornado drills, etc. Have you ever had to do one without knowing if it was actually a drill or not? Write about a time where you weren't sure if it was for a real threat or for just a drill. Talk about how you felt.



One Wave at a Time



Let's read!

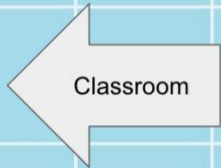
Classroom



Summary for parents

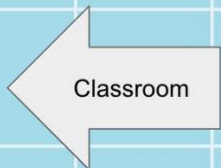
Classroom

This book begins by discussing how much one may appreciate a good day. It then transitions into talking about bad days and the worries that may come about during them. It provides different methods to coping with worries, like keeping busy or talking to loved ones. It emphasizes that readers can take control of their worries and do their best to let them float along like clouds.



Discussion prompts

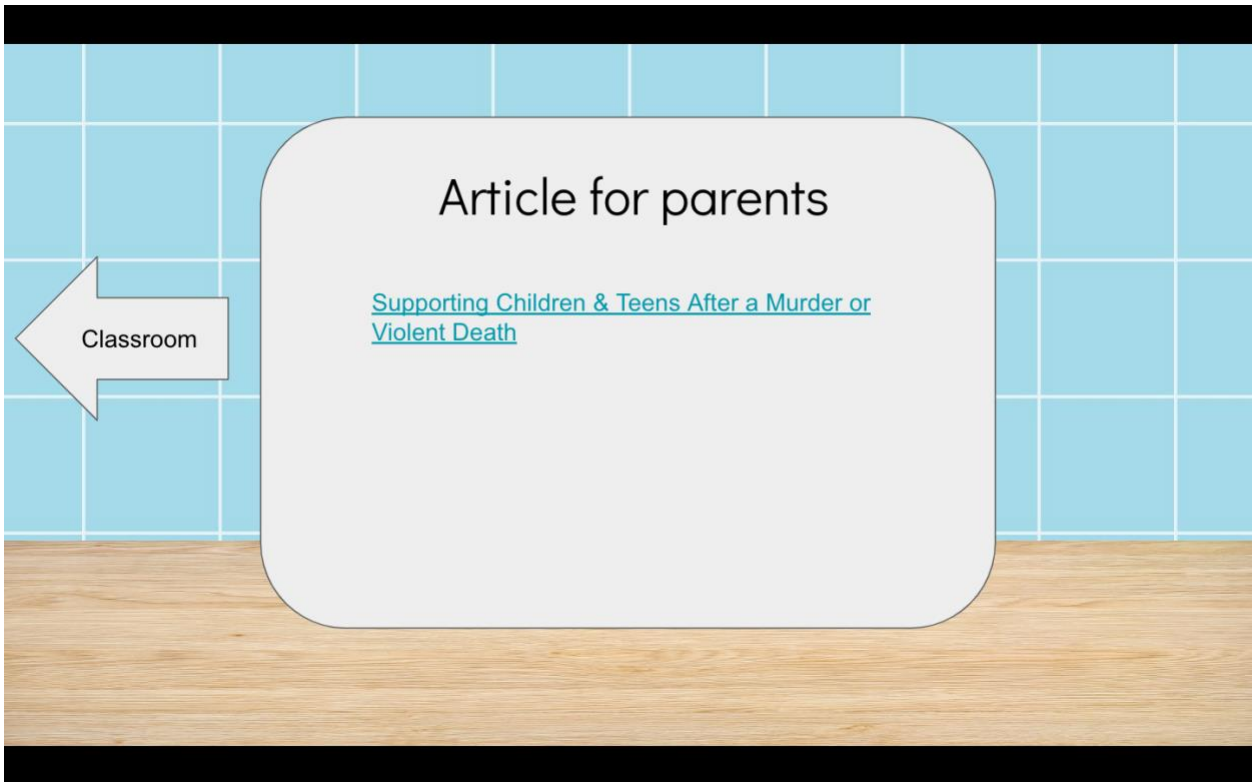
- List some of the changes the family makes back at home. How might each of these changes help them in their grief?
- What are the different emotions that the main character feels? Why do you think he experiences them?
- When was the last time you experienced each of these?



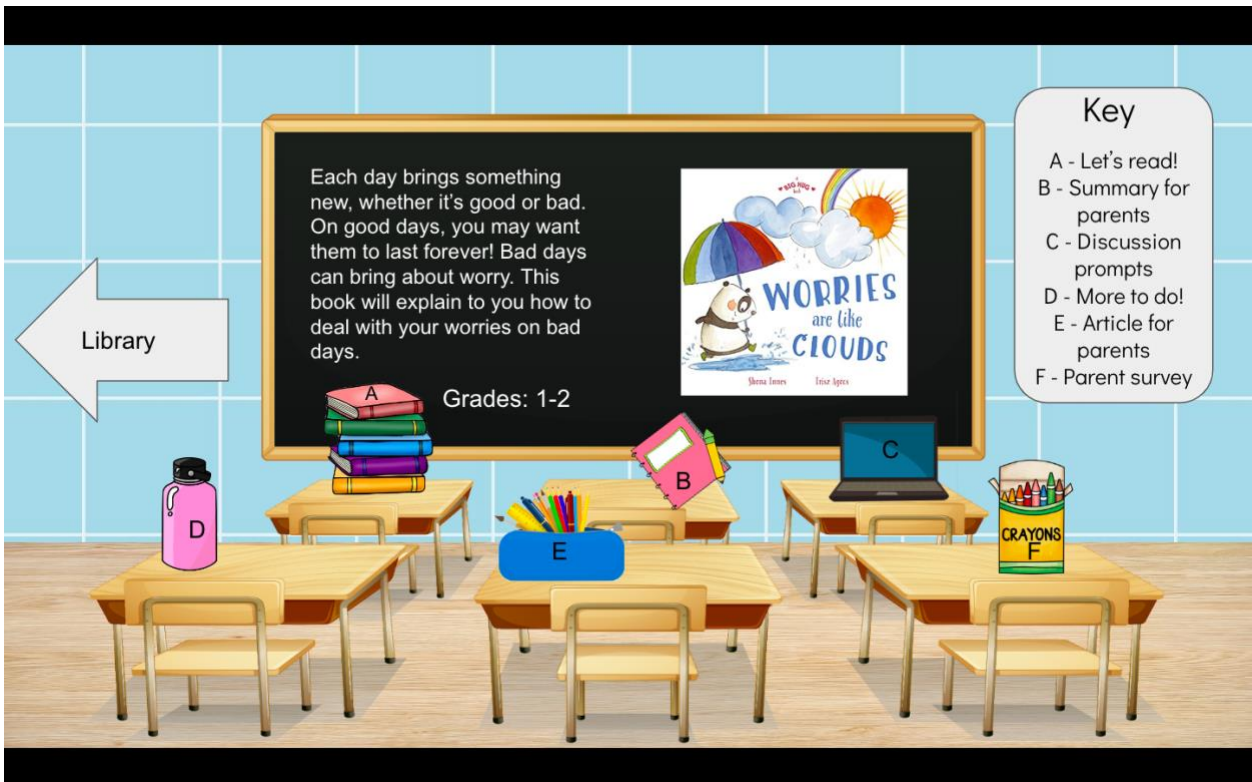
More to do!

Create a Comfort Kit. Gather items that can bring you comfort when your emotions become too much. Think about what the main character put in his Grief First Aid Kit. Are there similar items you can use? Keep your Comfort Kit handy so that you can access it easily. Here's a list of some suggestions:

- Stuffed animal
- Coloring book and crayons
- Soft fabric



Worries Are Like Clouds



Let's read!

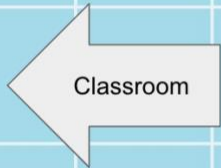


Classroom

Summary for parents

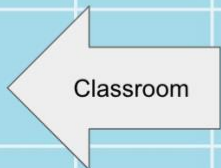
This book begins by discussing how great that good days can be. It then transitions into talking about bad days and the worries that may come about during them. It provides different methods to coping with worries, like keeping busy or talking to loved ones. It emphasizes that readers can take control of their worries and do their best to let them float along like clouds.

Classroom



Discussion prompts

- What's your favorite way to deal with a worry? Are there any suggestions in the book you'd like to try?
- Where do you think worries come from? Why do you think we worry?
- How are worries like clouds?

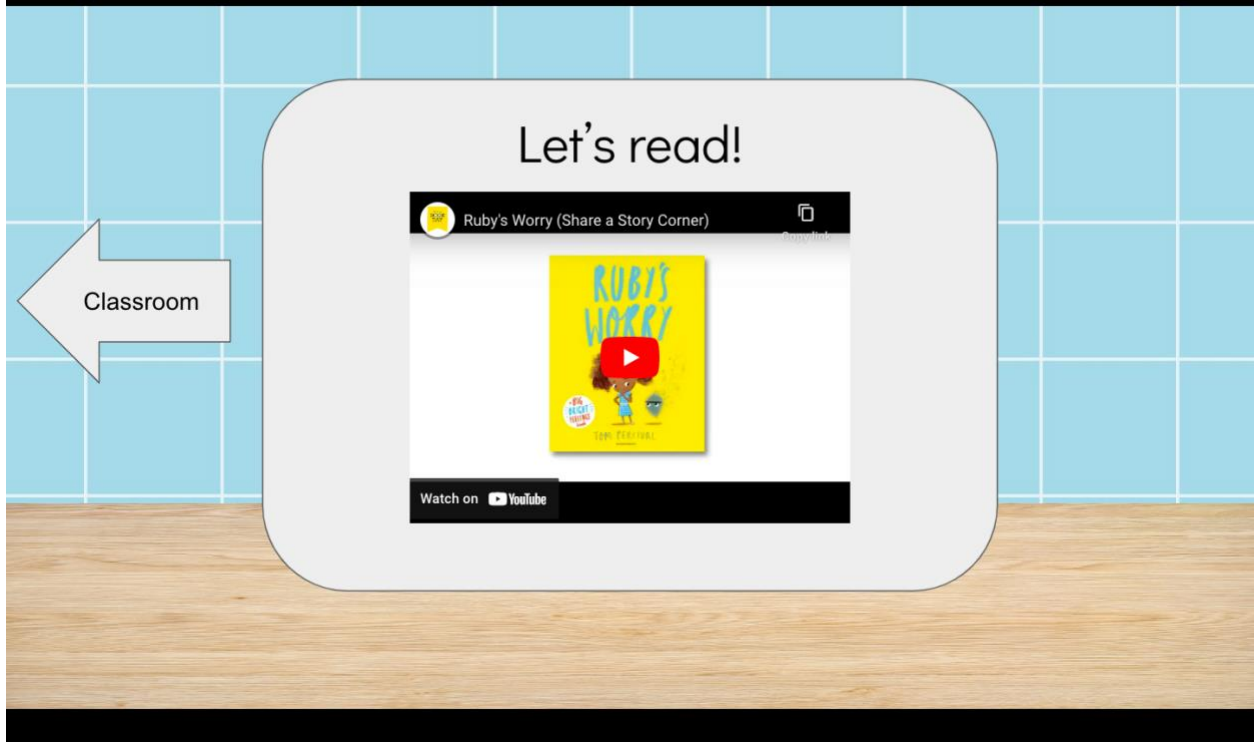
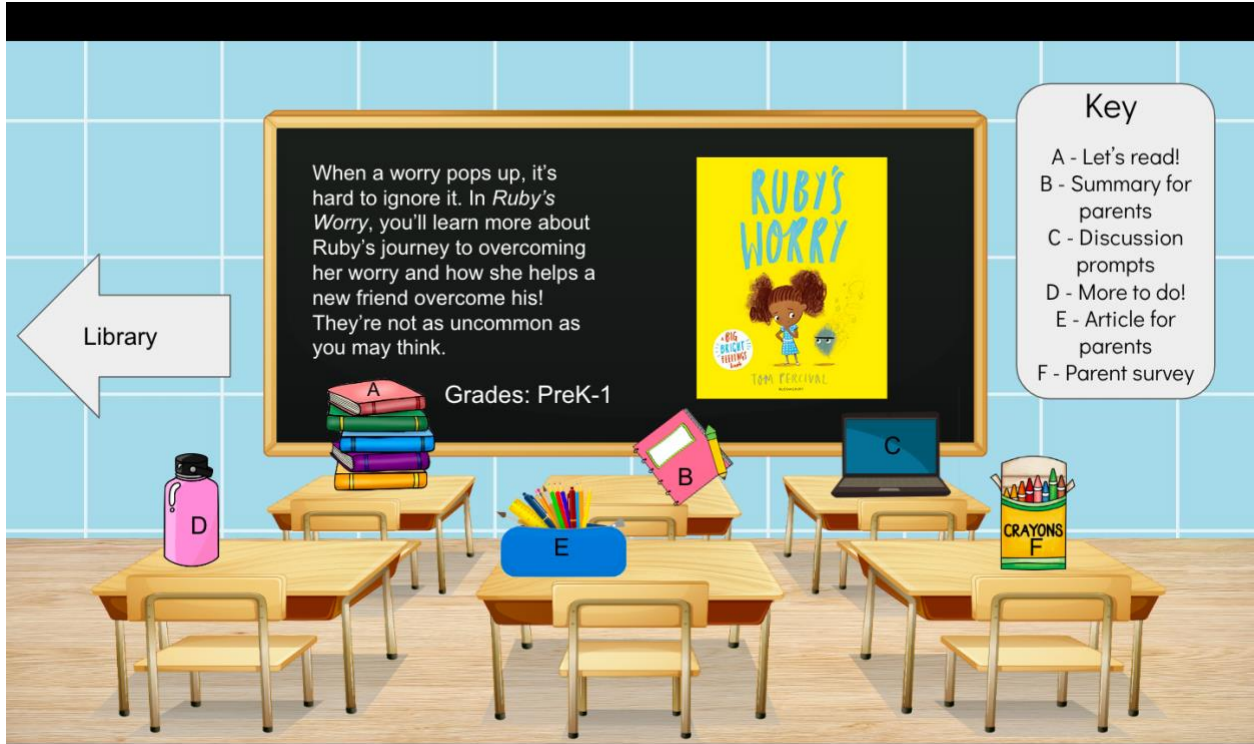


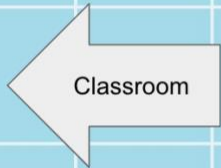
More to do!



In each cloud, write down a worry you've been having. Under it, write down a way to cope or solve that worry.

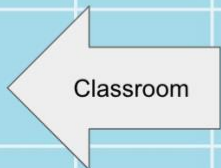
Ruby's Worry





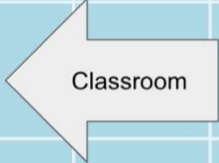
Summary for parents

In this book, readers will go along on a journey with Ruby to deal with her worry. It overtakes her life and it becomes all she can think about. One day, she notices another boy with a worry. As she talks to him about his, it starts to shrink. When she starts talking about hers, it goes away too. She realizes that talking about worries is a great way to get rid of them and that lots of people have them.



Discussion prompts

- Why do our worries sometimes grow? How can we stop them from growing?
- Who would you talk to about a worry? Why do you feel comfortable talking to them about worries?
- The author/illustrator has drawn their own idea of what a worry looks like. What do you think a worry looks like? Why?

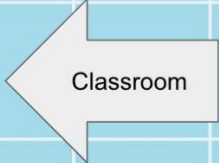
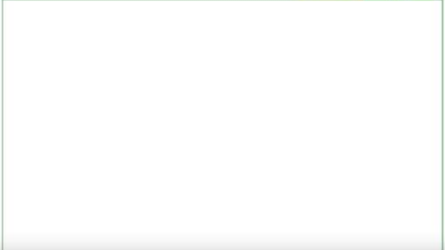


More to do!

Worries, Worries Everywhere—Make Them Disappear by Showing You Care!

Inspired by *Ruby Finds a Worry*

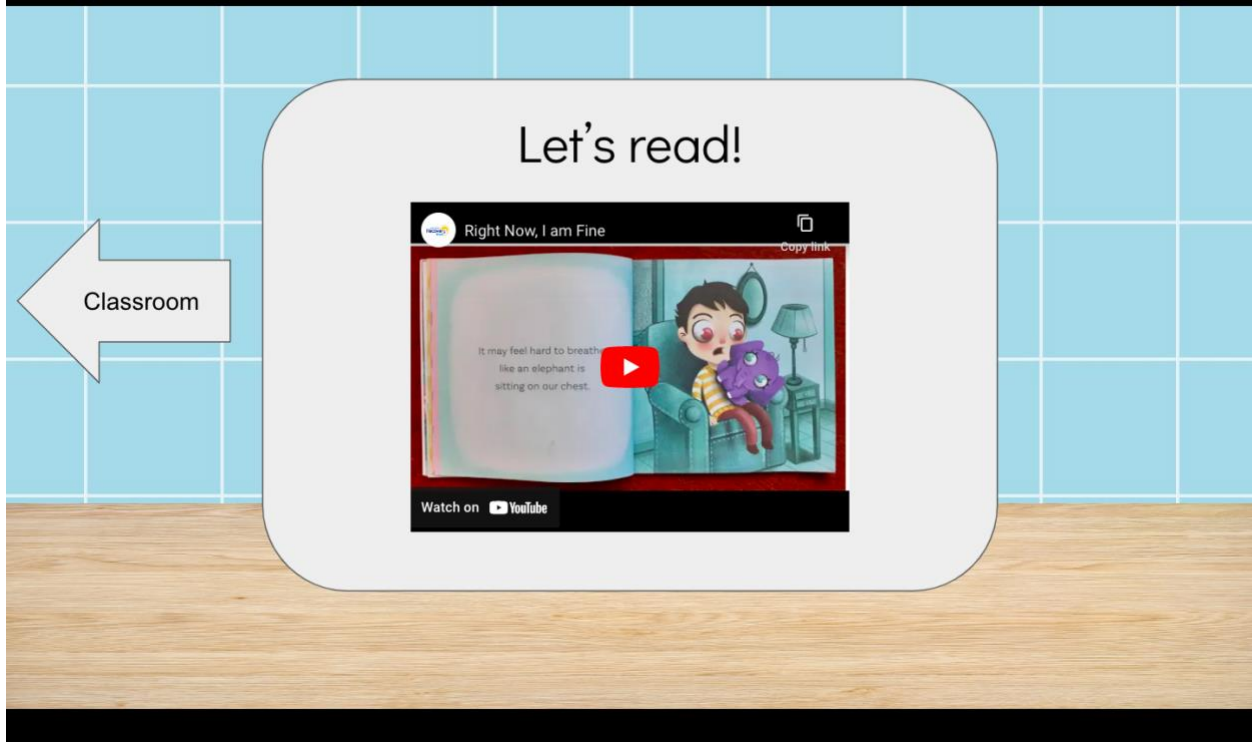
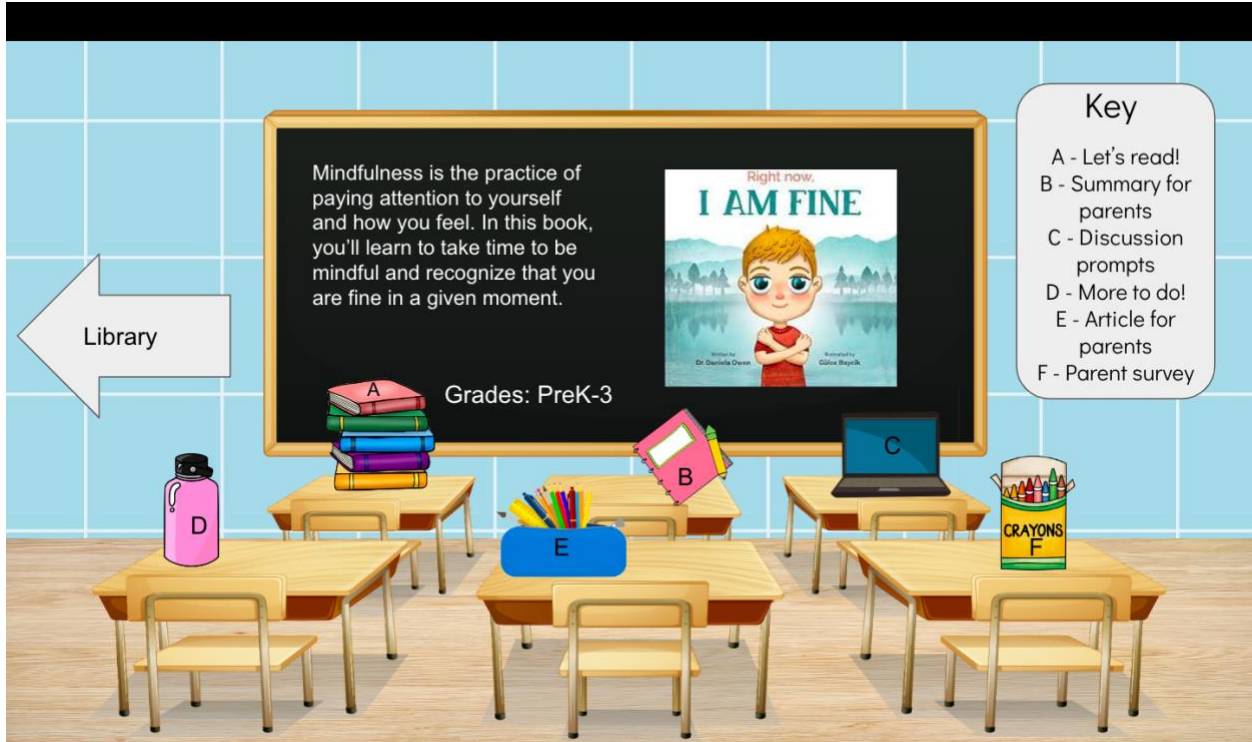
Draw and color a picture of you and your Worry, and what you could do to make your Worry disappear.

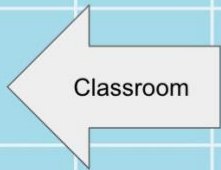


Article for parents

[How To Help A Child Struggling With Anxiety](#)

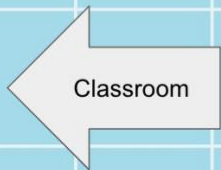
Right Now, I Am Fine





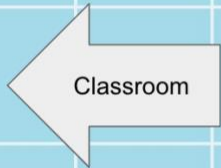
Summary for parents

In this book, readers learn about mindfulness and how to practice it. The main point of it is to stress to readers that they're fine "right now." Readers are instructed to take deep breaths, allow worries to fade away, and other tasks. There are suggestions for how to wind down and relax in times of stress.



Discussion prompts

- What do you like to do to calm down? Why?
- What does "I'm fine" mean to you? What does it look like for you?"
- How does worry present itself for you?



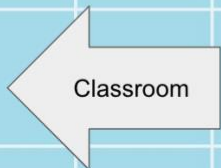
More to do!

THE PRESENT MOMENT
What does it mean to be present?
The word "present" can mean a gift, and it also describes what is happening right now, in the moment. Sit quietly and pay attention to what is going on right now using your five senses. Reflect on what your experience below.



1. Right now I see ...
.....
2. Right now I hear ...
.....
3. Right now I am touching ...
.....
4. Right now I smell ...
.....
5. Right now I feel ...
.....

Complete the worksheet when you're feeling fine and when you're feeling worried. Compare your answers. Think about how you can ground yourself when you feel worried.



Article for parents

[Mindfulness \(for Kids\)](#)

Concluding Remarks

The process of selecting books for these Bitmoji Book Bags showed me how many thoughtful books exist to assist children, schools, teachers, and families with tough times, yet how few picturebooks are of high quality and are open-ended enough to meet the needs of young children. Though these books were about negative topics, the content created using these seven pieces of literature will serve children positively as they learn to cope with community violence that may occur around them. I learned that, given the sensitive nature of these books, neither young students or their parents may go searching for these books themselves, or even know that such books exist. However, as educators, it is our responsibility to expose students to quality literature and its benefits, especially in terms of bibliotherapy around a variety of topics. The authors of the picturebooks curated in this thesis write these books with a purpose, that is, to help readers grow intrinsically and to help children and families cope with difficult times and navigate their feelings. One commonality that I noticed as I created this Bitmoji Book Bag Library is that all these selected books focus upon the acts of Awareness and Reflection frequently, and I have come to realize that these themes and actions are key to healthy coping mechanisms.

As I created these Bitmoji Book Bags, I kept the third grade students in my internship classroom in mind often. I constantly thought, “How can a book help my students the next time they learn about community violence?” Choosing and creating meaningful discussion prompts and activities were the most difficult aspects. For example, I feel like *The Breaking News* is a prime example of a book that provided actionable steps for readers that hear about community violence. I also decided to include prompts and activities that I believe are calming and validating enough to leave students feeling soothed, yet were still educational in some ways. For example, in the activity for *The Breaking News*, readers are asked to draw petals on a flower and

fill them with ways to grow during a tough time. This activity is both soothing and leaves them with actionable steps. Children, and even adults, find drawing and coloring to be relaxing, and this activity incorporates that task. Rather than solely instructing children to color, the drawing aspect provides an outlet for creativity in addition to the creation of actionable steps. An extended version of this activity could look like readers drawing out the steps they write down.

If given the chance and the permission through local school districts and our university Institutional Review Boards, I would have liked to share the Bitmoji Book Bag Library with educators and parents. I would have requested their feedback and used that feedback to adjust as necessary. I believe that the opinions of practicing educators and parents are important. Practicing educators are the ones who are working with children daily and know what can help them. Parents know their children and would be able to monitor how using a certain Bitmoji Book Bag could help them cope with community violence.

One strong aspect of my research is the Parent Survey I created. I look forward to using the Parent Survey I created. The responses to the parent survey included with each book could drive me to make updates and changes to the Bitmoji Book Bags. I would gladly have welcomed any feedback possible. The parent survey option is found on each classroom page for each book. In this survey, the very first question asks which book was read, which will direct me to make changes and modifications to the related book activities. This survey is organized to allow me to filter the responses by book. I can also then view all responses about a given book at once. Given a more welcoming school district landscape toward research in their classrooms, I might have been able to incorporate community feedback from educators, parents. However, my thesis defense with three children's literature experts and /or researchers provided needed feedback from university faculty. The last question of the survey asks parents if there are any suggestions

for additional books to include. Based on the future responses to that question, I look forward to being able to add additional books and continue to create an even more comprehensive Bitmoji Book Bag Library.

Future research

In the future, the goal of this thesis could be taken a step further and extended to include books for upper elementary school, middle school, and high school students. The books I selected to create Bitmoji Book Bags for are primarily meant to be read with prekindergarten through third grade readers. This is due to the juvenile nature of these books and their approach to discussing sensitive topics. Although older students may have a more nuanced understanding of why community violence exists, that does not mean that literature at their grade level should be overlooked as a means of information, comfort, and bibliotherapy. With more time, I would have expanded my research and created Bitmoji Book Bags for upper elementary school students. In order to keep the books used on a grade level readability for older students, future research should explore using chapter books that have hopeful, but realistic themes. Relatable characters in a chapter book could provide upper elementary readers with an opportunity to connect with characters, bring awareness and vicarious experiences to the topic, and offer themes that comfort and actionable responses to deal with these difficult and complicated issues.

For middle and high school students, future research might work to investigate what other kinds of resources might also be appropriate for them older students, in addition to literature and/or Bitmoji Book Bags. These resources could include role playing scenarios, studying social-emotional learning at an in-depth level, or meeting with a school counselor regularly. If I were able to create a resource like the Bitmoji Book Bags for secondary students, gaining student

input first is imperative. Knowing exactly what kind of resources students will find useful and appropriate appears to be key.

Additional future research could also involve creating more Bitmoji Book Bag libraries on other topics that might support students' SEL around other topics of stress, such as financial difficulties, homelessness, special needs, family issues, war, or disasters.

Educational implications

Similar to the findings of Smith (2014), the educational implications of my research study is that educators can work to find digitally accessible ways to offer support for difficult times. Now, in addition to myself, other educators may access and utilize the Bitmoji Book Bag Library that I made. Once I am in the field, I will also be able to update it using the feedback I can access from the Parent Survey responses. In the future, this project stands ready for tough situations where it may be needed. I want this Bitmoji Book Bag Library to be a living document that can be updated as necessary. Through children's literature focusing on SEL, I hope that my research and resulting project can spark a conversation amongst educators about what can be done for our students when they hear about tragedies.

As community violence remains prevalent, there will always be children who are overhearing conversations and feeling the community impacts concerning violence. Whether they hear about it from their family members, teachers, media, or even their peers, unfortunately there is no way to shield children completely from these horrific events. These conversations, void of the vicarious experiences that great children's books provide and without literature, interventions, extensions, and bibliotherapy, could leave students only feeling worried and anxious about school. Through my honors thesis, I created my Bitmoji Book Bag Library for these children.

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