

Social and emotional learning in K–3 Amplify Reading





Sustained academic success depends upon social and emotional learning (SEL) as well as the mastery of fundamental literacy skills. Consistent with the most widely-recognized framework and standards for SEL (from the CASEL consortium which includes 25 states), Amplify Reading focuses on four areas of social and emotional learning—*self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness* and *relationship skills*—including the multiple competencies that the CASEL framework identifies within each of these four areas.¹

As we considered how to incorporate core SEL competencies into Amplify Reading, we were often inspired by the best of educational television, from *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* to *Blue's Clues*. We also recognized the fantastic potential of state-of-the-art digital games and game worlds for interactivity, constructive engagement, and learning how to learn.

These learning goals and approaches all come together in Bookerton, the virtual neighborhood and game world for Amplify Reading activities. In Bookerton, social and emotional learning happens as students interact with:

- Their Curioso, who serves both as their virtual pet and as an extension of their own personality and growth;
- Alyx, the Bookerton resident who serves as their guide and constant companion;
- The 12 other residents of Bookerton—a diverse community of humans and a dog with a wide range of problems and interests; and
- The 48 quests, which bring together students' literacy practice and their interactions with the creatures and characters of Bookerton.

These interactions support the development of specific SEL competencies in the following ways:

¹ The Casel Core Competencies are listed at casel.org/core-competencies. For more information on their collaboration with states, see casel.org/collaborative-state-initiative. In incorporating age-appropriate SEL into literacy instruction, we have also drawn upon guidelines and best practices established by the Departments of Education in Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Ohio and Pennsylvania.



Self-awareness

Identifying emotions

Over the course of the quests, Alyx draws attention to the emotional states and dynamics of other characters. These quests deal with a full spectrum of emotions: a shy character who finds a reason to be brave, a frustrated artist who finds joy with creative inspiration. For instance, in one quest, Sam (a teenage stockkeeper in the local store) is feeling awkward and lonely because he's too nervous to talk with people at his work; in completing the quest, the student helps him to feel more confident about his conversational skills.

Accurate self-perception

Quests help students think about authenticity (being true to yourself). In the "Not a Little Kid!" quest, Emil (a classmate) is acting strangely at school. He says:

"I threw most of my toys away yesterday...my big brother is right. Only little kids play with toys like these! I'm totally grown up! I'm only interested in boring, adult things. Like eating broccoli and flossing my teeth!"

In completing the quest, the student helps Emil to become more conscious of his frustrations at being treated like a little kid, but also to acknowledge how much he misses playing with one of the toys he tried to throw away.

Recognizing strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy

Alyx also encourages students to assess their own current strengths and limitations (with respect to reading skills), while nurturing a well-grounded sense of confidence and a growth mindset.² She helps the students navigate the Amplify Reading literacy quests, which display students' current skills levels as well as their progress. Alyx supports the students and draws attention to the relationship between effort and success ("Keep going, you're growing!", "Look, you've developed a new ability!").

Moreover, the sequencing and pacing of the reading skill-building activities help demonstrate to each student that they can succeed. Students begin the program with games where they would be expected

to experience success using available data or a student's current grade level or time of year. An adaptive algorithm ensures that each student has a personalized learning path, so noticeable progress and growth are always within reach. Within reading activities, students are provided positive and corrective feedback that highlights their strengths on the target skill and helps build self confidence.

Equally important, even those students who start out far behind their classmates in reading skills still have the opportunity to complete all the same quests and storylines as everyone else. Completing the quests simply depends on making progress along their personal learning path.



² The pedagogical structure of Bookerton, and of Amplify Reading more generally, is well-aligned with the instructional advice in Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development*.

Self-management

Stress management, self-discipline

Bookerton encourages students to self-regulate and provides a supportive environment for them to do so.

We know a student who is struggling with challenging (and thus potentially stressful) content may need to pause and attend to something else—either a different task or a non-directive activity—before attempting it again. Bookerton provides time and space for this dynamic while also reinforcing the habit of “taking a break and then returning to the frustrating task” (rather than “stopping to do something else and never returning”).

Each quest includes several reading skill-building activities. Students can start one and then switch

to another if they are feeling frustrated, but the quest structure provides motivation to eventually complete all of them.

Bookerton also has “release valve” features to enable (a time-limited amount of) aimless play: students can drag their Curioso around the screen in a quest environment, or hear a character’s line repeated, or just hang out and daydream. In these instances, a series of gentle redirects will help students regain focus: for instance, Curioso will pop up and say, “Come find me!” leading the student back to their active quest.





Self-motivation, goal-setting

Bookerton provides an encouraging and enabling environment for students to set and work toward their own goals (including to develop specific reading skills).

As students develop their reading skills, they are celebrated in Bookerton through the development of their Curioso's powers, which mirror the student's particular achievement and provide them with more agency and problem solving powers in subsequent quests.

For example, once a student earns the power of Inspiration (the power to detect and collect items that inspire), their Curioso can help them make inferences about character motivations in order to help resolve a problem in the community.

For example, in one quest, Sam wants to learn to play the flute, but he's discouraged because he's just a beginner. The student can use their Curioso's Inspiration power to locate sheet music written by Sam's favorite musician, Louis Armstrong. When the student gives Sam the sheet music, Sam thinks about Armstrong and how hard he must have had to work to be good enough to write that music. Sam is thus inspired to persevere and continues to practice the flute.

As students become familiar with their Curioso's growth and its connection to their own reading skill development, Bookerton provides a view for goal-setting across reading skills and understanding how much growth is required to unlock the next power.



Social awareness

Perspective-taking

A main goal in several of the quests is for the student to arrive at insights about the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of a particular character (sometimes an adult, sometimes another child). These “mystery” quests are designed to help students better comprehend the psychological dynamics behind the (sometimes seemingly baffling) actions of other people, and how they contribute to differences among people.

For example, in the “Where’s Claude?” quest, the student discovers that Emil, a friend at school, is giving away his favorite toys. He says that their too babyish to play with anymore. Later in the quest Emil reveals that he really misses his teddy bear Claude. The student is asked to investigate why if Emil misses his toys did he throw them away in the first place? Curioso helps us discover through the power of “Mind Reading” that Emil is trying to be more like his older brother because he looks up to him and is trying to emulate him—and that this is why he threw away his toys.

Several of the Curioso abilities (which are acquired with the growth of reading skills) are focused on character motivation and point of view. For example, the “Mind Reader” ability enables the student to discover character traits about the various residents of Bookerton.

Empathy

Almost all of the quests involve discovering the reasons for someone’s distress and then helping that person. In the “Carrot is Lost!” quest, Benita (who usually focuses on physical fitness) is upset because she has lost her dog, Carrot, at the park. The student helps her calm down and find a book about animal tracking. After they problem-solve together to find Carrot, Benita is relieved but realizes that she needs to pay more attention to Carrot when she’s out on jogs; she was focused only on making her best running time and didn’t pay attention to her best friend.

Again, Bookerton—the setting for the program—is a diverse community of 12 humans of varying races and ages (and a dog) with a wide range of problems and interests. Students thus learn about and engage with a variety of perspectives different from their own.

Relationship skills

Communication

As a complement to the main focus on reading, interactions in Bookerton also encourage students to hone their listening skills. Most of the clues in the quests are verbal—the students can learn what they need to by listening carefully to what the various characters have to say. (They can always listen again if they realize they’ve missed something the first time.)

Relationship-building

Along with the Curioso, the student’s other most important relationship in Bookerton is with Alyx. Alyx starts out in the role of a mentor and guide. She is there to both frame and make explicit for the youngest students how to engage with the game world. As students mature, this relationship changes from mentor to trusted confidant and helper; Alyx first takes on the role of finding useful books and then encourages students to track them down all by themselves. Alyx also helps the student build friendly relationships with the other characters in Bookerton, from classmate Li-Li (who is always wrapped up in a book and often misplaces things), to Lyle (the café owner and aspiring thespian), to Gary (the senior citizen who is the local historian).



Social engagement

Bookerton is an active community where everyone has an occupation and a role to play in community events. One big narrative arc, encompassing multiple quests, is a play put on by the whole town; the student helps ensure that every member of the community can make a contribution. Another large narrative arc is about the founding of the community; the student helps sort out facts from fiction by collecting legends, biographies, and first person accounts.

Teamwork

The culminating quests in each narrative arc focus on teamwork. For instance, in the arc in which the town puts on a play, everyone’s help is needed, and everyone needs help from the student—from Mrs. Lombard needing to learn to sew, to Lyle having to get over stage fright, to Gary wanting to tell a good yarn. The student becomes the catalyst who makes the team work possible and effective, and then participates in celebrating the happy results.

Research has shown that incorporating SEL into the general curriculum improves social and emotional competence, behavior, and academic skills. SEL doesn’t have to be a separate program or initiative in a school. It can be incorporated across the curriculum and school day for all students. Amplify Reading incorporates key principles of SEL to expose students to key SEL competencies and to ensure that the reading skills students are gaining are lasting and meaningful.