Voices Literature & Writing
Learner-Verification Study

An independent study conducted by the University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center

Social-Emotional Learning + Literacy = Academic Success
Can social-emotional skills be strengthened at the same time as literacy skills?

Educators assert that social-emotional development is a necessary precursor to academic success in all content areas. Literacy skills form the foundation for nearly all other academic knowledge and skills—students read to learn, whether they read books or screens. Zaner-Bloser’s Voices Literature & Writing (VL&W) integrates social-emotional learning (SEL) into supplemental literacy instruction focusing on deep comprehension and oral language skills. How well does this pairing work in VL&W?

Study design

During the 2012–2013 school year, more than 1,700 K–6 students participated in an evaluation of the Voices Literature & Writing program. Four schools took part in the quasi-experimental study: two elementary schools in each of two school districts were randomly assigned to either receive the Voices Literature & Writing curriculum (treatment group) or use their existing literacy and social-emotional learning materials (comparison group). All four schools had roughly equivalent class sizes, and their students were similar in other characteristics.

Students in all four schools were assessed at the beginning and at the end of the school year for literacy skills and social-emotional development. In addition, the 88 teachers taking part in the evaluation completed a survey at the beginning of the school year that asked about their schools and their teaching experience. Teachers generally had similar education levels and classroom experience in all four schools. During the school year, teachers completed monthly activity logs and, at the end of the year, answered survey questions about their experiences with Voices Literature & Writing or their existing materials.

Students who used VL&W in Grades K–3 showed significant gains in interpersonal understanding and perspective taking.

Global scores for students in Kindergarten through Grade 3 showed no significant differences in the general Rel-Q mean scores, but comparing the three dimensions assessed by that Rel-Q (interpersonal understanding, perspective taking, and interpersonal skills) showed that VL&W students’ mean scores were significantly higher than comparison students’ in interpersonal understanding and perspective taking (Fig. 1). In the K–3 group, comparison students’ posttest scores actually resulted in a decrease of their group mean scores.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal understanding</th>
<th>Perspective taking</th>
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<td>VL&amp;W students</td>
<td>Comparison students</td>
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Figure 1. K–3 VL&W students’ growth in SEL versus comparison students
Students in Grades 4 through 6 using VL&W materials showed the same mean gains as students in the comparison schools. Comparing the two schools that received the highest PBIS scores, however, shows that the VL&W students’ mean scores were significantly higher than comparison students’ in the personal meaning area.

These results may be due to the relatively short period of the evaluation study: one school year may not be enough time to demonstrate positive and substantial gains in social and emotional skills. VL&W is designed to develop skills cumulatively across the grade levels of the program, and a three- or four-year study could gauge the real effects of sustained social-emotional learning programs.

Students in classrooms using VL&W showed gains in literacy.

Students in VL&W classrooms showed significant gains over the school year in oral language comprehension compared to other students. The results of the Woodcock-Johnson III assessment of oral language found that VL&W students in Grades K–3 showed larger, statistically significant gains over the school year versus the comparison students in their Story Recall and Understanding Directions scores as well as their overall Oral Language scores (Fig. 2).

VL&W students in Grade 3 through 6 who completed the GMRT showed higher overall mean scores at the end of the school year than did their comparison counterparts (Fig. 3). Their initial average scores were lower and their ending scores were higher, resulting in a statistically significant gain (p > .01) of 12 points.

Younger K–2 students in all four schools showed similar progress in literacy development: all grades showed significant average gains from their pretest to posttest scores in Listening Comprehension on the GMRT.

### How was literacy measured?

**Independent national literacy instruments**

At the beginning and the end of the school year, students in Kindergarten and Grades 1–6 completed the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT), which measures reading comprehension (Grades K–2) and vocabulary (Grades 3–6). Kindergarten students took a paper-and-pencil, pre-reading version of the assessment, and the remaining students completed the appropriate grade-level assessment online. In addition, one classroom at each level was randomly selected to be tested using the Story Recall and Understanding Directions subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson III (WJ3), an assessment of oral language comprehension used to get a direct assessment of deep comprehension skills.

“The stories were great and getting the students to talk about what they were thinking helped them grow and talk about their thoughts in a more concrete way.”

—VL&W teacher
CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) suggests that there are five SEL core competencies (Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making), which Voices Literature & Writing addresses. The Voices Literature & Writing evaluation has been nominated to the CASEL research team for review and consideration for inclusion in the CASEL Guide of effective social and emotional learning programs.

In addition, **VL&W students showed remarkable, significant gains in comprehension.** The gain of 10 points for the VL&W students was statistically significant (p > .01), as was the decline in the comparison students’ scores (p > .05) on the GMRT’s subtest in comprehension (Fig. 4). **VL&W students’ scores in the vocabulary subtest showed a significant mean gain from pretest to posttest of 15 points and was similar to comparison students’ average gain.**

**Teacher perceptions**

Teachers who implemented Voices Literature & Writing found the program effective as well as innovative and challenging. 85% of VL&W teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I definitely see a place for Voices in my future classrooms,” and nine in 10 teachers agreed that the VL&W program is different from any other program they have seen or used.

**After using VL&W for the school year, 75% of teachers rated it good or excellent overall. Teachers were also asked about their perception of the effectiveness of the program in several different instructional areas. In all areas, the majority of teachers rated the program somewhat to very effective (Fig. 5).**

In responses to open-ended survey questions, teachers enthusiastically supported key areas of the Voices Literature & Writing program. Teachers wrote that the read-aloud literature used was effective and engaging for their students and that it effectively stimulated class discussion. In addition, many teachers found the digital resources included with the program useful. Importantly, teachers who noted what went well with the program implementation thought that the daily writing in response to read-alouds and vocabulary focus were distinctive and effective features of the program.

**“The lessons are very structured, organized, and appropriate for the standards we are to teach.”**

—VL&W teacher