

# Teaching Across Differences: Using *Elvis & Romeo* to Foster Inclusive Classroom Communities

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## ABSTRACT

This teaching tip explores how children’s literature can support social-emotional learning in elementary classrooms. Using *Elvis & Romeo* (Soman & Davis, 2025), a picturebook featuring two dogs with contrasting personalities who gradually learn to appreciate one another, it demonstrates strategies such as story-based language, discussion prompts, and classroom routines like “Unlikely Pairs Week” to foster empathy, perspective-taking, and inclusive behavior. Embedding the story across daily activities helps students develop social skills, self-regulation, and meaningful peer connections while reinforcing literacy. The phased implementation framework also aligns with ELA standards in reading comprehension, speaking, and listening, allowing teachers to address SEL goals within standards-based instruction.

## KEYWORDS

social-emotional learning; literacy instruction; children’s literature; peer relationships; perspective taking; friendship development

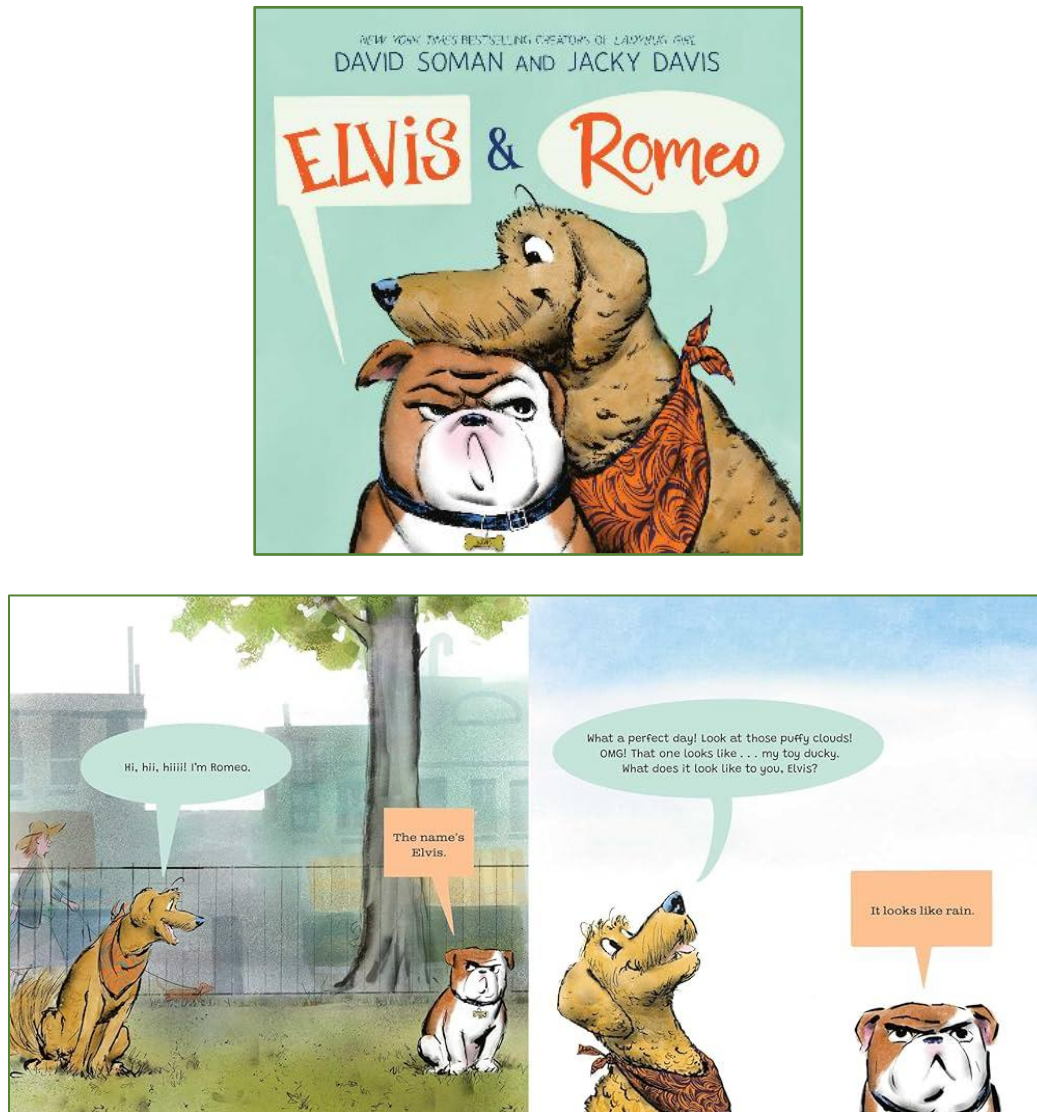
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is a critical component of children’s development, supporting their ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions, skills essential for both well-being and academic success (Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning, 2026). In recent years, increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and social disconnection among children have highlighted the need for intentional instruction in these competencies, positioning SEL as a vital component of both academic and mental health support in schools (Tatsiopoulou et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). Children’s literature serves as a powerful tool for strengthening these competencies (Parker & Cronin, 2025). Through engaging stories and relatable characters, picture books provide developmentally appropriate opportunities to introduce and reinforce SEL concepts (Mondi & Reynolds, 2020).

Thoughtfully selected texts, paired with structured discussion, allow students to explore difference, conflict, and belonging in a safe, low-risk context, practicing perspective-taking, social reasoning, and empathy (Deliman et al., 2024; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Morton & Akram, 2022; Neuenschwander et al., 2025). To illustrate this, when a story presents characters who are new, different, or experiencing conflict, students can practice navigating similar social scenarios, such as welcoming a new classmate or engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds, in a guided and supportive way. By embedding SEL into shared reading experiences, teachers can move students beyond surface-level messages of kindness toward a deeper understanding of relationships, social norms, and emotional regulation, while also enriching literacy development.

Children’s literature provides a rich context for embedding SEL within literacy instruction, allowing students to explore emotions, relationships, and social challenges in a safe, structured way. One clear example is *Elvis & Romeo* (Soman & Davis, 2025), which demonstrates many of these SEL concepts in action. By portraying two dogs with contrasting personalities who gradually

learn to appreciate one another, the book models perspective-taking, patience, empathy, and conflict navigation, while keeping students engaged through humor and relatable characters. Using texts like this one allows teachers to move beyond abstract discussions of kindness, providing students with concrete examples of social interactions that mirror real-life classroom dynamics.

**Figure 1: Book Cover and Sample Page from *Elvis & Romeo***



### Children's Picturebook: *Elvis & Romeo*

*Elvis & Romeo* (Soman & Davis, 2025) is a contemporary children's picturebook designed primarily for early elementary readers (approximately grades K–3). The book is approximately 32 pages long and features full-color, expressive illustrations that emphasize character emotion through facial expressions, body language, and visual contrast between settings and characters. The illustrations (see Figure 1) play a central role in supporting students' inferencing skills and emotional interpretation, making the text particularly well-suited for social-emotional learning instruction.

The story follows two dogs with contrasting temperaments: Elvis, a grumpy bulldog who values routine and solitude, and Romeo, a playful labradoodle who seeks interaction and friendship. When Romeo moves next door, Elvis initially resists his attempts at connection, reflecting dynamics that are common in elementary classrooms, such as differences in social energy, friendship preferences, and responses to new peers. While Romeo remains consistently enthusiastic and socially driven, Elvis prefers quiet and space, creating a natural tension that evolves over time.

What makes the book particularly valuable for instruction is its realistic portrayal of friendship as a gradual and reciprocal process. Both characters slowly adjust to one another, illustrating that meaningful relationships develop through repeated interaction, patience, and perspective-taking (Ellinger et al., 2023; Meter & Card, 2016). The use of animal characters further supports engagement by creating psychological distance, allowing students to explore emotions and social dynamics without defensiveness. Research suggests that anthropomorphic characters can enhance empathy and perspective-taking while developing inclusive interpretation across diverse learners (Atherton et al., 2025; Hooykaas et al., 2022; Muhammad, 2020; Priiki & Kolehmainen, 2025).

Humor also strengthens the text's instructional value. Elvis's reluctance and Romeo's persistence create lighthearted moments that make social conflict approachable, reduce emotional barriers, and encourage reflection on peer relationships (Darwich et al., 2024; Paine et al., 2025). Together, the illustration style, character contrast, and playful interactions provide a layered foundation for teaching social-emotional concepts within literacy instruction.

### Implementation Framework

While *Elvis & Romeo* illustrates how friendships can grow across differences, its lessons are most effective when integrated thoughtfully into classroom routines. A structured, phased approach helps students connect the story to real-life social experiences, practice perspective-taking, and develop inclusive, cooperative behaviors.

#### 1. Initial Introduction (Week 1)

Introduce *Elvis & Romeo* through an initial read-aloud experience with minimal interruption to allow students to engage with the narrative as a whole. The instructional goal of this phase is to build initial comprehension, activate prior knowledge, and establish emotional and narrative engagement with the text.

Following the read-aloud, the teacher facilitates a brief, low-inference discussion to surface initial reactions and connections. Suggested prompts include: "What did you notice about Elvis and Romeo?" and "Have you ever felt like either character?" These questions are intentionally open-ended to encourage personal connection and invite multiple perspectives without guiding students toward a specific interpretation (Ghosh, 2024).

This phase serves as a foundation for later analytical work by ensuring students have an accessible entry point into the text and an opportunity to begin forming early understandings of character and relationship dynamics.

#### 2. Explicit Analysis (Week 2)

During the explicit analysis phase, teachers facilitate structured discussion to help students deepen their understanding of character traits, relationships, and differences in temperament. Explicit

discussion helps students link the story to their own experiences and understand social differences (Muhammad, 2020). The goal of this phase is for students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and begin making connections between character actions, emotions, and real-life social interactions. Teachers may use guiding questions such as:

- “How are Elvis and Romeo different in how they like to spend their time?”
- “What do we learn about Elvis when he chooses to be alone?”
- “Why do you think Romeo continues to approach Elvis even when he pulls away?”
- “Have you ever experienced a friendship where people needed different types of space or interaction?”

This discussion can be facilitated as a whole-group conversation following a read-aloud or through structured small-group discussions, depending on classroom needs. Teachers may also incorporate turn-and-talk opportunities to ensure that all students have time to process ideas and rehearse their thinking before sharing with the larger group.

### **3. Language Development (Weeks 3–4)**

Introduce story-based terms such as “Elvis time” for quiet, reflective moments and “Romeo energy” for exuberant, social engagement. These shared terms, paired with visual supports, give students tools to discuss behavior and feelings, fostering inclusion and community awareness (Allen et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016).

To ensure these terms are reinforced over time, teachers can intentionally embed them into daily classroom language and routines. For example, students might be prompted with:

- “Is this an Elvis time or Romeo energy moment?”
- “How can we support both Elvis time and Romeo energy in our group work today?”

Ongoing reinforcement can also occur through visual anchor charts, classroom norms, and teacher modeling during transitions, group work, and conflict resolution. Teachers may revisit the vocabulary during morning meetings or reflection circles, encouraging students to self-identify their needs and respectfully recognize the needs of their peers. This consistent integration supports students in internalizing shared language for behavior and emotion regulation, strengthening both social awareness and classroom community cohesion.

### **4. Situated Application (Ongoing)**

Integrate the framework’s language, concepts, and routines into authentic classroom contexts where students can apply SEL skills in real time. The instructional goal of this phase is to support transfer of learning by embedding empathy, perspective-taking, and self-regulation into daily social interactions rather than treating them as isolated lessons.

Strategies such as “Unlikely Pairs Week,” in which students from different friendship groups collaborate on structured academic tasks, create intentional opportunities for students to navigate difference, practice cooperation, and develop flexible social thinking. In addition, the establishment of an “Elvis Corner,” a designated quiet space for sensory regulation and reflection, provides a consistent, accessible structure for self-regulation and emotional management throughout the school day.

These embedded practices help normalize differences in temperament and social needs, reduce stigma around emotional regulation strategies, and support students in developing respectful, adaptive responses to peer interactions. Over time, this ongoing application contributes to a classroom culture grounded in empathy, inclusion, and collaborative problem-solving.

### 5. Student Ownership (Throughout Year)

Support students in gradually assuming independent responsibility for applying the framework language and strategies in their daily interactions. The instructional goal of this phase is to shift from teacher-guided practice to student-driven use of SEL skills for self-advocacy, peer support, and social regulation. Students are encouraged to independently recognize their emotional and social needs, use shared language (e.g., Elvis time, Romeo energy), and select appropriate strategies for navigating interpersonal situations across differences.

This sustained practice promotes authentic internalization of SEL concepts, strengthens social autonomy, and builds students' capacity to make thoughtful, context-sensitive decisions in peer relationships (Farchi & Peled-Avram, 2025). Over time, students begin not only to respond to social situations but also to proactively regulate, support peers, and contribute to a more inclusive classroom community.

### Alignment to ELA Standards

Reading and discussing *Elvis & Romeo* also deepens alignment with English Language Arts (ELA) standards related to reading comprehension, speaking, and listening. As students engage with the text, they practice foundational literacy skills, such as identifying character traits, describing relationships, determining central ideas, and inferring character motivation. These skills align with expectations for reading literature, where students are asked to demonstrate understanding of characters, setting, and plot development through evidence from the text.

In addition, structured discussion of the story supports speaking and listening standards by providing opportunities for students to engage in collaborative conversations, build on the ideas of peers, and use textual evidence to justify their thinking. Through teacher-guided discussion prompts and peer interaction, students learn to articulate their ideas clearly, listen actively, and respond respectfully to differing perspectives.

The use of shared vocabulary and repeated discussion routines further strengthens academic language development and oral communication skills. In this way, *Elvis & Romeo* serves a dual instructional purpose: it promotes social-emotional learning while simultaneously reinforcing key literacy standards in reading, speaking, and listening. This integration allows teachers to address SEL goals within the expectations of standards-based instruction in meaningful, authentic contexts.

### Conclusion

Contemporary elementary students face growing challenges in navigating social diversity. Post-pandemic social gaps, social media, and polarized communities make it harder to form relationships across differences (Dvorsky et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2021). *Elvis & Romeo* fosters these skills through reflection, play, and repeated interactions, helping students develop cognitive flexibility, self-awareness, and communication. When used in classroom instruction, students have responded positively to the text, demonstrating high engagement with the characters and frequently referencing the characters Elvis and Romeo in discussions of real-life peer interactions,

particularly regarding friendship differences and emotional regulation. Two dogs, one grumpy, one exuberant, show that differences need not be divided, and that patience and empathy can transform first impressions into meaningful connections. The story's lessons extend beyond the classroom, offering guidance for students, teachers, and communities alike.

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