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Documentary Perspective of Bibliotherapy in Education

Johnson A. Afolayan

Implemented correctly, bibliotherapy may prove one of the better techniques in dealing with emotional conflicts among children and adolescents, as research reminds us that periods of development are critically contingent upon self-concepts and how individuals believe they are perceived by significant others. Because many individuals (children and adolescents) are reluctant to verbalize emotions such as fear, rejection, and depression openly, carefully selected books allow these individuals to understand themselves better, learn from the experiences of others and contemplate possible solutions to problems (Schrank, 1982). The purpose of this article is to provide knowledge and understanding of the history, concept and intent of the bibliotherapeutical processes.

History of bibliotherapy

The idea of reading for satisfying personal needs is not new. It has appeared over and over again throughout history. Around 300 B.C., an inscription was found on a library in Alexandria. It read, "The nourishment of the soul" (Cardenas, 1980, p. 3). The Greeks were also well aware of this concept. Aristotle recorded the therapeutic value of reading and stated that it aroused emotions within the person which did, in effect, heal (Cardenas, 1980). A library at Thebes bears the inscription, "The healing of the soul"

(Zaccaria and Moses, 1968, p. 12). Another similar inscription was found in a medieval abbey in Switzerland, "The medicine chest of the soul" (Salup and Salup, 1981, p. 3).

The Romans thought that reading orations to the mentally distressed was beneficial. Religious reading was a common practice in prisons and mental institutions during the Middle Ages (Gornicki, 1981). Even Shakespeare attested to this concept when he stated, "Come, and take choice of all my library and so beguile thy sorrow" (Cardenas, 1980, p. 4).

The first printed treatment using bibliotherapy was published by John Galt in 1840. Bibliotherapy became accepted as part of librarianship in 1904. The author of the term bibliotherapy was Crothers in 1916. Pomeroy made an important advancement in the 1930s with a study entitled "Bibliotherapy: A study in results of hospital library service." In the 1940s articles began to address both the philosophical and psychological bases of bibliotherapy, and in the 1950s graduate students completed dissertations on the topic. In the 1960s and 1970s case studies led in the contributions (Cardenas, 1980).

What is bibliotherapy?

Wolverton (1988) provided objective perspectives of bibliotherapy: 1) guiding through reading; 2) using books to help solve personal problems; 3) developing life skills; 4) improving self-concept and personality, a dynamic interaction between readers' personality and literature. Like so many other big words, bibliotherapy represents a basically simple idea: the use of books to help people (Cornett, 1980). The term bibliotherapy, also referred to as bibliocounseling, is a method by which children and adolescents undergoing emotional stress, anxiety or maladjustment

may seek therapy through readings of selected books in which main characters are experiencing problems the same as or similar to those of the readers. Following the readings are guided discussions and activities to allow students opportunities to express their reactions and offer solutions to the characters' problems (Keats, 1974).

Educational settings for bibliotherapy have been popular since the 1940s, with groups led mostly by the classroom teacher (Peryon, 1982). Schools have been obvious sites for bibliotherapy because of the educational goals, which include fostering development of a whole person able to deal with today's world (Rubin, 1979). The type of bibliotherapy that is often provided in schools is known as developmental bibliotherapy, which refers to the use of both imaginative and instructive materials with groups of normal individuals. The goal of developmental bibliotherapy is to promote normal development and self-actualization, as well as to maintain mental health in stressful situations (Rubin, 1979).

Schultheis (1970) states that one of the best ways for individuals to gain insight into themselves and to have a better understanding of themselves and others is for them to identify with a character in a story. This then becomes an experience through which they can share the feelings of others. The author believes that storybooks about everyday people, their hardships, self-sacrifice, and persistence when they are faced by great trials are valuable to children for guidance in their own lives. Bibliotherapy consists of three processes of interactions between the reader and literature; these are known as identification, catharsis and insight. In order for bibliotherapy to be effective and successful, these processes should occur in a sequential and ordered fashion.

Identification. According to Russell (1979), the identification process begins with a relationship between a reader, or listener, and a story character. The purpose of this relationship is to expand one's self-concept as readers are made aware that their situation is not a unique or isolated problem and that there are others who have experienced like or similar situations. Through identification, individuals are less inclined to consider themselves different in a negative sort of way.

Catharsis. Following the process by which readers establish a sense of identity with a story character, they begin to experience feelings and emotional ties for that character because they are now able to relate to the situation. Often times, the reader is able to understand the motives and options of the story character. Cianciolo (1965) asserts that when readers become emotionally involved, literature may have the effect of purging or purifying their emotional status. Following this release of emotions, the reader may be in a position to look for solutions to the story character's problem (Nickolai-Mays, 1987).

Insight. At this point readers become aware that the problem they are experiencing does not have to remain static, since storybook characters usually solve their problems and thus become positive role models for children to follow (Russell, 1979). According to Baruth and Phillips (1976), insight allows readers the opportunity to analyze the character and situation, and subsequently develop opinions regarding behaviors or actions adopted by the character in their attempts to deal with problems. As readers place themselves in positions to evaluate conditions and circumstances, they then begin to view themselves in control of the situations in terms of the story outcome. These feelings of control may be transferred into individuals' real-life situa-

tions and thus generate awareness that just as they felt in control of the character's best interest, so could they take charge of their own problem in terms of coping and searching for alternative solutions. Finally, insight may be viewed as maturation from a sense of helpless submission to that of hopeful objectivity (Cornett, 1989).

Techniques in administering bibliotherapy

In order to use bibliotherapy effectively, the administrator (i.e., the adult who guides the process) should be knowledgeable about the processes involved and have an in-depth understanding of basic guidelines that are necessary to promote favorable outcomes. The administrator has the responsibility of matching the appropriate book to the right individual so that the reader progresses from the identification stage of maturity to insight (Cornett, 1980).

All those who use bibliotherapy should understand that the process does not consist merely of selecting a book relative to a child's problem, but must also include frequent interaction and communication between the administrator and the student. Ouzts (1991) suggests that readers should be given the opportunity to verbalize their reactions to the literature as it relates to their situations. Planned follow-up discussions and activities must guide students through the fundamental processes of identification, catharsis, and insight. "We cannot ignore the emotional aspect of learning and adjustment" (Ouzts, 1991, p. 200).

The students should be encouraged to relate the situation of the story to their own situation and discuss possible measures by which the conflict can be resolved. It is equally important that administrators have prior knowledge of the book's content, as well as an understanding of the problem experienced by the student. The reading ability of the

students and their psychological, physical and emotional status of development should also be considered. This information is likely to have an impact on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy for specific individuals. As Schrank (1982) has pointed out, no single approach to resolving conflicts is a panacea.

The following guide, derived from Bohning (1981) is recommended for use by administrators or bibliotherapists.

- 1) The administrators should have sufficient knowledge of the background and history of bibliotherapy prior to implementation, and they should believe in the effectiveness of this approach. Bohning suggests the following sources to develop background knowledge: Shepherd and Iles (1976), Brown (1975), and Riggs (1971).
- 2) Administrators of bibliotherapy must recognize the importance of prior knowledge of the contents of books assigned to students so that follow-up activities and discussions can yield the greatest advantages. In addition to familiarity with books, administrators should have knowledge of the intended age range of readers for whom the book is most suited.
- 3) When matching a book with a reader, the administrator should be sensitive to the student's personality. Techniques are offered in the *Classroom Teacher's Manual for Bibliotherapy* (Schultheis and Pavlik, 1977). This manual is also helpful in developing follow-up lessons which include planning, assimilating techniques, and evaluation methods.
- 4) Following reading assignments, students should be assigned the tasks of probing the emotions and motives of the characters, identifying causes and effects of situations, drawing conclusions as to possible alternative solutions to problems, and dramatizing events involving main characters.
- 5) Preparation should be made to help students cope in desirable ways and enhance positive and acceptable attitudes of adjustment through this guided reading approach.

Because administrators now have improved knowledge of the problems and concerns of their students, they are better prepared to extend discussions and activities transferred from the stories' situations to the students' actual situations. 6) Administrators should keep abreast of current research, information and trends regarding bibliotherapy to maintain success in its use. Such broadening of knowledge can be obtained through the Institute for the Study of Bibliotherapy which publishes current information through newsletters. Other sources for staying informed include workshops, in-service sessions, and conferences pertaining to bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy implementation precautions

Prior to implementing bibliotherapy, administrators should be aware of several factors that could determine its degree of effectiveness. Edwards and Simpson (1986) have stressed the importance of administrators' realization that bibliotherapy is not simply a matter of assigning books to be read. Happy endings that are so common in literature do not always become manifested in real-life situations. As mentioned earlier, matters that should be considered before using bibliotherapy include an in-depth knowledge of the student's background and a clear understanding of the nature of bibliotherapy.

After gaining clear and thorough information on a student's background, careful selections of books should be made. This requires the administrator to have excellent book sources and to be able to recommend literature in good judgment (Edwards and Simpson, 1986). Nickolai-Mays (1987) asserts that administrators should be sensitive to students' abilities to see their own problems. Students unable to do so see no purpose in therapy. Therefore, they may reject reading assignments and become ill-tempered

or despondent in nature. Edwards and Simpson (1986) contend that not all counselors, teachers or parents are qualified to administer bibliotherapy. Certain personal traits of administrators are necessary for success in this area; such traits are patience, self-confidence, emotional stability, and tendencies to empathize with students.

Limitations of bibliotherapy

According to Edwards and Simpson (1986), bibliotherapy is not intended for severe emotional disorders. When such situations exist, parents should seek consultation from appropriate professionals. Teachers and administrators should be familiar with students' personality traits and problems when using the method of bibliotherapy. Many students may be introverted by nature rather than as a result of external forces. To force bibliotherapy upon such students could compound existing problems. Bibliotherapy should not be viewed as a cure-all for all emotional problems. It has been reported that in some situations, reading about problems related to those of the readers could have adverse effects which may intensify those problems (Bohning, 1981).

Studies of bibliotherapy

Many studies have been completed which deal with the effects of bibliotherapy on an individual's self-concept, which plays a major role in academic achievement. Queen (1976) believes that the reading or sharing of a story that depicts children with similar fears and tensions lessens pain caused by feeling that one's sufferings are unique. Fears are further lessened when the child realizes that someone cared enough about these situations that bother children to take the time to write about them.

Use of fairy tales in bibliotherapy focuses on the concept that using imaginative literature can give the child a safe way to experience new thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. They can be used with all age groups, allowing individuals to take from each fairy tale the things they need. Fairy tales also give people a way to use the imagination to deal with problems and help them find deeper meaning in their lives and struggles (Gornicki, 1981).

Bibliotherapy can aid in reducing the feelings of isolation and shame that the maltreated or abused child experiences. Because the teacher often spends more time with the child than other adults outside the family, teachers may be influential in helping them through the adjustment period (Neely, 1985). Karlin (1985) points out that children who are suffering from physical, psychological, or sexual abuse need to realize that they are not alone, that someone else has experienced and understands their situation. In this situation the teacher should be alert as to what to look for with regard to abuse.

With behaviorally disordered youths, it is often difficult for them to realize their own problems without attempting to relate to those with similar ones. Due to this, the introduction of personal growth literature aids them in identifying with a character suffering personal difficulties similar to their own. It also aids children in that they gain insight into their own problems after seeing or reading how someone else copes with the same situation (DeFrances, 1982).

Bibliotherapy has also been shown to improve the self-concept of the timid or rejected child.

The value of bibliotherapy may lie in its ability to bridge the gap in developing deeper involvement in

interpersonal relationships and more accepting activities toward each other. The real or imagined association with a character in a story may increase the feelings of belonging by reducing the sense of difference from others (DeFrances, 1982, p. 15).

In addition to improving self-concept and needs, the development of values is enhanced through the use of bibliotherapy. Children learn to know themselves better, understand human behavior, find interest outside themselves, promote techniques of identification, and contribute to the socialization of the individual (DeFrances, 1982).

Bibliotherapy has also been shown to aid in the area of academics. Garagn (1983) found that bibliotherapy aided in improving the self-esteem of junior high students enrolled in remedial reading classes. These are among her suggestions: if bibliotherapy is used as a classroom procedure, supplement it with a supportive process; investigate individual cases where self-esteem has been improved; and measure the self-esteem of the subjects when they are in senior high school to determine if self-esteem has improved longitudinally.

Ray (1983) found that reading readiness was improved through the use of bibliotherapy with kindergarten children. He found a favorable impact on pupil perception, as well as achievement. A similar study by Peryon (1982) focused on the reader's attitude and self-concept. It was concluded that bibliotherapy and guidance treatment could yield positive and social adjustment.

Lindsey and Frith (1981) believe that since reading books helps students identify and model appropriate behaviors of both real and fictitious characters, it can be extremely helpful to those students who are struggling with

self-identification. It also helps result in a closer bond and acceptance level of the child and parent. This increased acceptance should, they feel, improve the students' self-concept and academic performance.

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy is a useful technique by which children and adolescents may learn to cope with some of the many emotional problems today's youth frequently encounter. Bibliotherapy, as with any therapeutic approach, has its limitations. Openly presenting these limitations guards against misleading interpretations and implications of educational outcomes in all situations.

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