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BREAKING THE EMOTIONAL BARRIER THROUGH THE BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC PROCESS

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Success in school is usually measured by grades and test scores, and most people seem to believe that the well-educated person will achieve success in life. How often this has been a myth! Even the time honored belief that elementary school years are happy times for children is being questioned by statistics which indicate that suicide is on the increase among young people. The effects of the many social changes that have occurred in the last few decades have afflicted many students with such problems as family divorce, family mobility, sexual identity, cultural differences, handicapping conditions, and now the threat of nuclear war.

In today's classrooms the teacher is often confronted with students who are burdened with stress and depression, thus, teacher frustration becomes one of the results of these social and emotional attitudes which are found in classrooms. These social attitudes may be related to reading achievement or reading underachievement which is affecting many school systems. Poor self-concept is one phenomenon directly related to underachievement in school. Thus, it is detrimental to both the learner and the learning process to consider the intellect without consideration of the social aspect of learning.

Monteith (1981) has stated that a high degree of stress, whatever its cause, will alter children's behavior and ability to perform in the classroom. How can the teacher break these attitudinal barriers to learning and at the same time develop social and emotional abilities of those students who are experiencing personal difficulties?

First, the classroom teacher needs to be aware of Selye's Principle of Deviation, i.e., nothing erases unpleasant thoughts more effectively than conscious concentration on pleasant ones. Bibliotherapy is a technique or process that can be used in any classroom to enhance academic achievement and possibly break emotional barriers which impede learning for many students. Monteith suggests that teachers need to watch for specific kinds of stress as absentmindedness, nervousness, weariness, moodiness, withdrawal, declining grades, physical complaints, and acting out.

Bibliotherapy means therapy through books and is an effective technique which can be used to help children cope with their problems and thus promote mental health. And with this improved mental

health children should be better able to achieve in the classroom. Today one often hears of books being recommended to others when difficulties arise. On *Death and Dying* by Kubler-Ross has often been recommended for those experiencing death, recommended for both the terminally ill as well as those helping the terminally ill. The Bible has often been recommended to others.

Books may offer possible solutions to problems or even present the solution that could lessen a person's inner turmoil and thus break attitudinal barriers to learning. Reading about a situation has the potential to sharpen perception and deepen understanding. Intervention through a book's approach may make the difference between an emotionally well-adjusted person and one who may later develop mental anguish.

In a study conducted by Carter and Harris (1982) those characteristics which make a book popular were analyzed and students gave their reasons for favoring a certain title. Characterization was mentioned most as that quality of a book which made it popular. The students frequently asserted that a character in a book was "just like me." This suggests that self-identification in books is of paramount importance in providing books to children who have emotional barriers to learning. Teachers need to be aware of students' attitudes when planning instruction so that positive attitudes can be developed. It is important that the right book for the right child at the right time be used as the primary criterion for developing attitudes.

What, then, are the criteria for selection of books for the bibliotherapeutic process? Books should be written on the child's level of reading ability to avoid compounding an emotional problem with a reading problem if one already exists. Books should be about modern children or have a universal appeal, be realistic, and present solutions to problems. It is imperative that teachers expose children to reading activities beyond the basal text at the elementary level so that positive attitudes may be developed.

Bibliotherapy consists of three fundamental processes between readers and literature: identification, catharsis, and insight. Russell (1970) called identification the holistic name for the process under which the other two processes are subsumed. It begins with the affiliation between the reader in a story, poem, or play. This may enhance one's view of self or reduce a sense of being different from others. Identification is most successfully achieved when the process of agreement or disagreement is accompanied by a strong emotional reaction. Schultheis (1972) stated that it is a means for children to identify with characters who have a similar problem to help the children understand themselves. When a reader shares a character's motivations and expresses emotions of the character, catharsis is said to occur. Cianciolo (1965) explained that the emotional situations in literature provide a purge of emotions for the reader. The third step, insight, occurs when readers see themselves in the behavior of the character.

Timing is of importance when providing books in the bibliotherapeutic process (Bernstein, 1978). Materials should be readily available, but the choice should be left to the individual. Time allowances and encouragement should be provided for the enjoyment of that particular book which may help reduce stress. While account-

ability in the reading class is important, the subjective reasons for providing books is equally important.

Many recent books for children deal with serious issues and the number of books appropriate for bibliotherapy has grown rapidly in recent years. The Book Finder: A Guide to Children's Literature about the Needs and Problems of Youth Aged 2-15 by Dreyer is an excellent source of information. The Book Finder lists books by subject or problem area, author, and title. Lists of books for use in bibliotherapy for loss, separation, and death have also been provided by Cianciolo (1965), Bernstein (1978), Arbuthnot (1957), and Schultheis (1972). Another source which provides a list of books for children is Children's Choices: Teaching with Books Children Like (Roser and Frith, 1983).

As with all types of therapy, bibliotherapy has its limitations. Zaccaria (1968) stated that some people tend to rationalize problems when reading about them, and in some cases, fears and anxieties about mental health are reinforced by reading about them. A recent study conducted by Newhouse and Loker (1983) has pointed out that there was no significant reduction in children's fear when reading about certain fears such as fear of animals, strangers, dark, or high places. It should be evident that reading Jaws would not reduce fear of the ocean. Shrank (1982) has stated that proceeding too quickly with a book suggestion or reading may subvert the process of bibliotherapy and Russell and Shrodes (1950) have stated that there is no guarantee that a particular piece of literature will influence a child or, if an influence exists, that it will operate in the desired direction. The reading teacher serving as bibliotherapist must be cognizant of the problem that exists and offer books which may enhance a child's personal, social, emotional, and, hopefully, academic development. The reading teacher should also be aware of the child's fears and dislikes as well as what the child appreciates.

In attempting to foster emotional health in a child, it is well to offer the teacher some guides or goals. According to Haring (1974), there is no clear-cut definition of mental health. However, professionals do agree on the following characteristics of a mentally healthy child, so the reading teacher should attempt to support these characteristics. A mentally healthy child is one who:

1. Maintains a realistic understanding of self and an acceptance of self as a worthwhile person (a positive self-concept);
2. Builds and maintains positive relationships with other people (interpersonal or social skills);
3. Perceives reality accurately, including setting goals which are obtainable;
4. Organizes thoughts and actions appropriately;
5. Achieves academically at a level which is reasonable for the child's abilities, and/or
6. Generally acts the ways a person the child's age and sex is supposed to act and is able to function independently.

Teachers need not be skilled therapists nor the child a

seriously maladjusted individual needing clinical treatment. Bibliotherapy is not the province of psychotherapists alone. Educators now accept the process and are using bibliotherapy in schools. Bibliotherapy conveys the idea that all teachers must be aware of the effect of reading on children, and must realize that through literature, most children can be helped to solve the developmental problems of adjustment which they face (Jalongo, 1983). Jalongo recommends that the reading teacher carefully select books in helping students with peer acceptance, family relationships, failures and disappointments, physical limitations and economic crises while Monteith (1981) recommends bibliotherapy to combat feelings of anger, guilt, and loneliness in dealing with children of divorce.

Jalongo states that there are three criteria to be used in selecting books for bibliotherapy: potential for controversy, accuracy or credibility, and value to literature. Sanacore (1982) has noted that many censorship crises in public education are related to language arts material and has urged discretion in the selection of material. The seven most controversial subjects that Sanacore has pointed out are those of politics, religion, ethnic groups, alcohol, drugs, strong language, and sex. He has given special attention to the subjects of alcohol and sex, emphasizing that careful consideration must be given, as these are very controversial subjects.

Bibliotherapy can be of value to a child's overall development and may help in breaking emotional barriers to learning. Even though studies on bibliotherapy have not always indicated positive significant results, it would appear that to the teacher who is willing to become familiar with children's literature and who is willing to work within the framework of a normal classroom to develop character, morals, attitudes, and self worth, bibliotherapy would be worth a try. Books cannot replace the teacher, but can provide an added dimension of sharing thoughts and feelings. The reading teacher occupies a strategic position in the development of emotions of children and it is through this development that the teacher is able to help shape the future of children who are experiencing stress and crises in their lives.

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