Overcoming differences in the classroom through bibliotherapy

Serena Mahoney

University of Mary
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Abstract

Applying bibliotherapy in the classroom setting allows for educators to help identify and solve many of the issues and challenges their students are dealing with and facing in their everyday lives. Students, especially those with exceptional needs, are often unable to accurately verbalize or understand their emotions, feelings, or behavioral responses in certain situations.

Bibliotherapy guides students through a healing process by identifying a target skill, emotion, or behavior and pairing it with appropriate literature, students are able to relate to the character or situation in the story and are better able to understand what they are feeling and doing in similar situations. Reflection and guided discussion further help to promote an understanding that their struggles are not isolated and in fact shared with many others, as well as empathy for others through identifying with characters who may be different. Students are encouraged to independently solve problems in the story and can better recognize antecedents and triggers to certain responses. With so much national attention on the issue of bullying in schools, bibliotherapy allows for literature about the many different people in society to bring more peace and community into the classroom.
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As society becomes increasingly globalized, so do its classrooms. Educators are seeing more diverse classrooms, as well as students with disparate issues and problems. Teachers have to develop strategies to meet each student’s individual needs while still encouraging academic learning and a community environment. Bibliotherapy is one strategy that helps students better understand the differences between them and accept them, not fear them, as well as to encourage them to become better problem-solvers through the use of fiction literature. Bibliotherapy can be used in a variety of situations and act as an intervention for target behaviors.

Cook, Earles-Vollrath, and Ganz (2006) examined the method of bibliotherapy, its benefits, and its use in the classroom setting, primarily on the elementary level. Bibliotherapy can be applied in two different categories: clinical bibliotherapy and developmental bibliotherapy. Clinical bibliotherapy occurs most often in a structured setting and administered by a counselor, therapist, or psychologist in order to treat individuals experiencing serious emotional or behavioral problems. Developmental bibliotherapy focuses on the interaction of literature and reader’s personalities through guided reading in a classroom or media room setting. Cook, et al. cite Pardeck (1995) in the six potential goals for the application of bibliotherapy:

1. To provide information.
2. To provide insight into a significant experience or situation.
3. To provide alternative solutions to the problem.
4. To simulate a discussion of what the actual problem is.
5. To communicate new values and attitudes with regard to the problem.
6. To help students understand that they are not the only one who has experienced the problem.
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Students, especially those with disabilities, often struggle with understanding and verbalizing their thoughts, feelings, and behavioral responses to situations. Bibliotherapy aids students using behavioral management strategies of modeling by connecting students with appropriate literature and literary characters they can identify with to help them reflect upon and understand their feelings and actions. This connection makes it easier for students to learn new ways to solve their problems and cope with difficulties and challenges with which they may be presented.

Bibliotherapy may be used individually, in small groups, or in large groups within the classroom. It is often used in teaching students about the variety of differences in people and ease fear about differences. The strategies for applying bibliotherapy generally consist of four basic stages (Pardeck, 1993):

1. Identify the problem, situation, behavior, or skill that the student is to acquire.
2. Select appropriate and accurate work of literature.
3. Present literature.
4. Follow reading with a discussion.

It is important that the chosen works of literature line up with and relate to the identified target behavior determined in the first stage. The facilitator must allow students time to process material which can be done through follow-up activities before beginning a discussion of the literature. Cook, et al. cite Golemann (1995) on the six benefits of bibliotherapy with students:

1. Less physical violence in the classroom.
2. Less name-calling.
3. Fewer put-downs.
4. Improved conflict-resolution strategies.
5. Increased sensitivity to peers.
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6. Increased ability to listen to peers.

Bibliotherapy allows students to recognize and better understand their individual characteristics, as well as the reactions to antecedents and triggers.

The focus on using bibliotherapy to help students problem-solve situations is also examined Iaquinta and Hipsky (2006). The process of bibliotherapy, according Iaquinta, et al. is based in classic psychotherapy principles of identification (in which student identifies with a situation or character), catharsis (student finds inspiration in the literature), and insight (which provides motivation for a positive change). Students often rely on teacher or parental figures to provide solutions to their problems, but bibliotherapy helps students become more independent problem-solvers through discussion of the situations and characters within the literature and make text-to-self connections. Discussing the text and relating to it personally allows students to share in universal experiences and understand that their feelings and situations are not limited to them, but are felt and experienced by many others. Students are then able to use the character’s experience to generate possible solutions.

The bibliotherapy process is further outlined by Stamps (2003) as consisting of a fourth stage—universalization. In this stage, students are able to place themselves in another’s situation and realize the similar challenges people face all over the world. This allows for students to also gain empathy for the situations and struggles of others and develop a better understanding of the world and fellow peers. While applying bibliotherapy into action, the facilitator (parent, teacher, therapist, and counselor) should question the student(s) about the issue, character, and story to receive insight him or herself of what the student is identifying with in the story. The facilitator must also allow the student enough time to process information and voice his or her opinions, feelings, and own questions.
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One of the essential components to bibliotherapy is choosing appropriate books that relate to the identified target behavior. Rozalski, Stewart, and Miller (2010) outline several important factors that must be taken into consideration when selecting a book for bibliotherapy. The grade and interest level of the book is important to determine whether students will be able to understand the book and identify to its theme or characters. The characters should be dynamic, presented positively, and avoid negative stereotypes. Current classroom setting and age group should relate to the context of the book. The message conveyed by the author should encourage reflection and discussion, offer strategies that help students cope with or problem solve difficult life situations, and provide hope for the students. Finally, if the book contains illustrations or pictures, they must portray the children in ways students can identify with, grab student attention, and aid in the understanding of the text. These all need to be examined to ensure the book fits the criteria and the student(s), as well as allowing for deeper discussion and reflection.

As stated earlier, bibliotherapy provides educators with a great way to introduce the idea of differences to students and allow them to gain a better understanding of the world and their peers. Lok (2009) explored the use of bibliotherapy with picture books in inclusive classrooms and in introducing a new student with exceptional needs into the classroom. Often when students encounter people who are different than the “norm”, it can lead to fear, but it can also lead to teasing, bullying, and isolation of that different person. Well-written and illustrated picture books that feature a character or characters that have the same disability as the inclusion student offer students an opportunity to learn more about this new student and recognize the similarities between them. Encouraging positive attitudes about the uniqueness of others ultimately benefits the inclusion student as well as the overall classroom culture.
There are so many different challenges and concerns plaguing students, particularly as attention on bullying in schools increases. Using bibliotherapy to address those differences and concerns may offer a way to promote tolerance and acceptance rather than fear and prejudice, as well as provide healing to those students who suffer from various stigmas or challenges. For my project, I have compiled a list of books to be used to explore those differences in the classroom that are often the targets of bullying, namely gender stereotypes, family structures, multiculturalism, social issues, and people with exceptional needs. The use of these books in combination with guided reading, meaningful activities, and discussion about the literature and its connection to the world and self, can help increase student sensitivity to peers and allow for a more communal classroom environment.
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References


