

Joshua T. Jachna  
Professor Bob Broad  
English 100 Section 04  
01 May 2005

### Bibliotherapy: What, Why and How

In this research paper, I will be discussing what bibliotherapy is, why it should be used and how it works. The definition of bibliotherapy is "A form of supportive psychotherapy in which carefully selected reading materials are used to assist a subject in solving personal problems or for other therapeutic purposes" (Dictionary.com). As dry as that definition sounds, that is what bibliotherapy really is. The purpose of bibliotherapy on the other hand is much more intriguing: "to assist a youngster in overcoming the emotional turmoil related to a real-life problem by having him or her read literature on that topic" (Ramsey). With the definition and purpose in mind, let us explore where the art of bibliotherapy came from and who is responsible for its creation.

The idea of using literature to help shape the views and behaviors of others has been around for thousands of years. The great thinker Plato was one of the first to write about the vast possibilities of bibliotherapy and children. Plato once said:

"And shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tale which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we wish them to have when they are grown up? We cannot.... Anything received into the mind at this age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts..." (Denning).

Plato's idea of giving our youth only texts that are positive and intellectually stimulating has come a long way in the past twenty-three hundred years. More recently, scholars have said, "Literature is and has been through ages the great medium of thought transference. It is the mighty stronghold wherein are kept the gems of intellect... In its depths are reflected joy, sorrow, hope, despair -- every emotion that recorded life has known" (Crosse 925). This notion that books hold the truths of the world has

long been held, but the idea of using literature to help cure, or at least help people deal with their problems is much more recent.

The new form of bibliotherapy has taken on a more professional role in the world. It is widely used by psychologists and doctors along with teachers to deal with problems of both children and adults. Psychologists were seen using bibliotherapy more widely in the 1960's with the boom of self-help books. While teachers have only been seen using this technique within in the past fifteen years. This is partly due to the problems that stem from a child's upbringing and the lack of parental roles in the home.

This brings me to the next section of why should bibliotherapy be used. For the rest of the paper I will be focusing more on the teacher-student relationship more than the psychologist client-relationship. This is partly to due with my perspective audience of future teachers and educators.

Bibliotherapy, as stated above is directed towards helping people with their problems through the use of literature. When a child is struggling with an emotional problem, it will affect his life both inside and outside his home. If a child is dealing with a recent death in the family or a divorce battle between parents, his or her school work is going to suffer. This is why it is very important for children to find a way to overcome their feelings and move on with their life. A scarred childhood is something that follows children around for the rest of their life.

One reason why teachers have been seen using more and more bibliotherapy in the classroom is because teachers have now become larger parental figure in the school setting. Parents are often times only home with their children for a few hours a day. It is rare to see a household that only rely on one income, this meaning then that both parents are often gone for most of the day. If a child finishes school at three in the afternoon and the parents do not return home after work until five or six, how much quality time is really spent between the child and his or her parents? With dinner, homework time and then bed, oftentimes children might only get to spend two maybe three hours of quality time with their parents. This is where the teacher comes into play. Students spend usually six or more hours at school with their teachers and classmates. Some students even spend that whole time with one teacher, so it is safe to say that the teachers will be

able to more accurately see and diagnose problems students are having.

The importance of a strong family life is seen in statistics of children with only one parent at home. Of the American children under the age of 18, 69% live with both parents. While 28% or 20 million children under 18 live with one parent (Divorce Magazine). The chart below shows some of the scary statistics of what a single family setting can do to a child. Even though these statistics only show percentages for a fatherless environment, they can more broadly be adapted to show the effects on children who only have a single parent to assist in their upbringing.

<p><b>Fatherless homes account for:</b>  <b>63%</b> of youth suicides  <b>90%</b> of homeless/runaway children  <b>85%</b> of children with behavior problems  <b>71%</b> of high school dropouts  <b>85%</b> of youths in prison  Well over <b>50%</b> of teen mothers</p>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

As of the 2000 census (Divorce Magazine)

Now these statistics do not show the percentage of children that have trouble dealing with problems like bullying or "not fitting in", but they certainly show how hard it is for a child with only one parent. That is why the importance of the teacher-student relationship has increased in the recent years. Teachers are now in more of a position to spot and help deal with problems students might be having.

Once a teacher has observed a child dealing with a problem, where do they go from there? One of the first and most important things for a teacher to do is to contact the parents of the child in need. This is very important because the parents have the legal say-so on what their child is exposed to. Once the teacher has contacted the parents and has received their consent, the next step is to clear the procedure with the school and administration. This is important because a teacher should never put his or her job in jeopardy. This is not saying that the child's wellbeing is not important, but the teacher also needs to watch out for his or herself first.

If both the parents and administration have cleared the teacher to work with the child, then next step is to find a book that fits the students' needs. This is where a bibliotherapy sourcebook comes in very handy. These "sourcebooks" are guides that assist teachers, psychologists and or parents find a book that will

specifically fit the child's problem. Some samples of sourcebooks include: Bibliotherapy for Classroom Use by Jan G. Philpot, Bibliotherapy with Young People by Beth Doll and Bibliotherapy: Books to Help Young Children by Beth Overstad. Within these guide books, lists of texts that will fit the dilemma are sorted by age and then problem so that the moderator (teacher) does not give a child a book that they will not identify with. It is very important for a moderator to use a book that fits the proper age group because it is crucial that the student identify with the character.

Once a child has been given a carefully selected book for his or her own problem, it is important that the moderator sit down with and work with the child in order to guide them in their healing process. There are three steps in the bibliotherapy process, "identification, catharsis, and insight" (Bosey 29). "These three stages are the platforms for understanding and resolution in the child's life" (Wilhelm 42)

The first stage, identification, begins after a child has read the assigned book, and finds a character that he or she can identify with. This character can either be real or fictitious but should be around the same age as the student. This is because students usually listen to children their own age. Children will believe and identify with children their own age because adults oftentimes are intimidating and in their eyes, "no longer with it." Once a child has read the book and made a connection with one of its characters, they enter the next stage of bibliotherapy, catharsis.

This stage is where a child will become "emotionally involved in the story and is able to release pent-up emotions under safe conditions" (Bosey 18). Catharsis means, "A technique used to relieve tension and anxiety by bringing repressed feelings and fears to consciousness" (Dictionary.com). The reason this step is so important is because it is this step that most children really open up and let their feelings out. Only after a person has opened up and exposed themselves can they really delve into why they are feeling a certain way. This step is necessary to reach the third stage of "insight."

Within this step, the child will "become aware that his or her problems might also be addressed or solved" (Saunders 64). Because the child became so emotionally involved with the main character in the text, he or she will discover that their problems are very similar to those of the character in the book. With this new insight, the

child finds possible solutions to the characters problems along with their own. Using this process, a child can find possible solutions without just worrying about themselves, but with the help of characters in a book.

Using one of the sourcebooks available at any major bookstore, Bibliotherapy for Classroom Use by Jan G. Philpot, I found three novels that were recommended for various problems that plague school children. The first book that I had chosen was Because of Winn Dixie by Kate DiCamillo. This is a story of a girl who moves to a new town with her father and struggles to fit in. When she adopts an old raggedy dog, things start to change; she begins to see the world through different eyes. This story was under the sourcebook heading of both, alienation and self-esteem in the age group of nine and older. This book would be great for children who are struggling to fit in, just like the main character, Opel.

Another book that was recommended was Franny K. Stein: Lunch Walks Among Us by Jim Benton. In this book, Franny, a young mad scientist, does not fit in with her classmates at school. She is a talented young scientist who likes bugs and dolls that do not look like Barbie. She struggles to find out how she can fit it and make some new friends. After discovering what she has to do, she changes herself to be more like her prospective friends. Franny then comes to realize that she does not need to change who she is to have friends, but instead to be who she is and just find common ground with others. She realizes that she is not the one who has something wrong, but it is her other classmates who are just being to judgmental. After she saves her teacher and classmates from the horrible "Jack-O-Lantern" monster, her friends accept her for being what she is, a young female mad scientist. This story is for the age group of five and up, but can also appeal to a much older audience. This story is more focused toward students who are struggling with being an outcast, and not fitting the mold. Whether the child is a mad scientist themselves or just someone who does not fit in, this story shows that it is not what you have on the outside that matters, but instead what you are made up of on the inside that really counts. This is a great book for younger readers while still being able to appeal to the older crowd as well.

The last book that I chose out of the sourcebook was called Keesha's House by Helen Frost. This is the story of seven teenagers who all have major problems in their lives. Whether it is an alcoholic father, a sexual assaulting stepfather or being pregnant, these young adults all find

safety and acceptance among each other. This story deals with much more adult topics than do the other two novels, but do it in a very adult manner. This story fell under the sourcebook topic of problem teens along with a string of other topics such as sexual assault, pregnancy, alcoholism and homosexuality along with others. The age bracket for this book was early high school, ages thirteen and up.

The important thing about these three books is that they all contain very real characters, meaning they all share problems that children deal with everyday. Even Franny K. Stein, even though she is a mad scientist, she still has the very real problem of not fitting in. This is one of the most important parts in choosing a book, having characters that students connect with, and having their problems be realistic.

The question then arises, what should you do if a child can not or does not like to read? The answer is quite simple, although the solution is not. The suggested alternative is this: "If a child has difficulty understanding the proposed text, the moderator can read to the student or work to find an easier text" (Wilhelm 37). When a child refuses to read, this might also be a sign that the child has some inhibitions or insecurities about reading. This is when a graphic novel becomes a great alternative. There are still a limited number of graphic novels that might be used in bibliotherapy. I was unable to find any during my research, but Japanese "Manga" books are quickly becoming popular in the United States. These graphic novels read just like a comic book, but have a much wider range of topics and cover common themes in bibliotherapy. If neither of the previous two alternatives work, the use of Audio Books might be the only alternative. You might say that these are just like being read a book, but the difference is that they can use the Audio Books on their own time. "With the use of texts on audio tapes, children can listen where they feel most comfortable. This will lower their defenses and allow for better reception of material" (Bosey 13).

A very important aspect of bibliotherapy that is often overlooked is the follow-up from teachers. Students are not instantly cured after completing their three steps of bibliotherapy; it takes work afterward with the teacher or moderator for the student to overcome their dilemma. One thing that is very important is that the teacher must ask questions, constantly. Without any type of discussion, the teacher has no clue whether the student is making any

progress. Another exercise that is helpful is the use of worksheets, "with the use of worksheets or handouts, the patient can express their feelings and or emotions without using spoken word; these type of patients express themselves best through written word" (Saunders 83).

Another great alternative for students to express themselves is through art. Not every child expresses their truest feelings through speech or writing, but instead through pictures and drawings. Whether you choose to show the child pictures or have them draw their own, this interpretation might better fit the child. As the saying goes "a picture is worth a thousand words" fits this idea exactly.

After seeing what bibliotherapy is, and how it works, you are probably asking yourself, does it really work? There have been 17 studies on students and their use of bibliotherapy in the United States. All of the studies showed that there was significant improvement when compared to no assistance given at all. "The advantages of bibliotherapy are many, and the disadvantages relatively few" (Blasingame). And according to Wilhelm, "all of which have found it more helpful than no treatment."

Through my research, I found that the use of bibliotherapy has many positive aspects while having no drawbacks. I have yet to see a reason why every school should not have a trained professional on staff. With the future of our Nation in the hands of the young, it is important to do whatever is needed to ensure their wellbeing. That is why I plead all of those who are future educators; look into bibliotherapy when you begin teaching, because you could very well help save a little girl or boys life.

## Works Cited

- Benton, Jim. Franny K. Stein Mad Scientist: Lunch Walks Among Us. New York: Aladdin, 2003.
- Bosey, Daniel. Bibliotherapy: Theory and Practice. Austin: White Star Publishing, 1973.
- Crosse, Theodosia. Literature and Character: The Place of Good Literature in Character Building. Welfare Magazine, 19, 1928, pp. 925-931.
- Denning, Stephen. The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations. London: Butterworth Heinemann, 2000.
- DiCamillo, Kate. Because of Winn-Dixie. Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 2000.
- Dicionary.com. Home Page. 20 Apr. 1999. Lexico Publishing Group, LLC. 29 Feb. 2005. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/>>.
- Divorce Magazine. Home Page. 1996. Segue Esprit Inc. 27 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.divorcemag.com/statistics/statsUS.shtml>>.
- Frost, Helen. Keesha's House. New York: Frances Foster Books, 2003.
- Ramsey, Inez. Bibliotherapy and Children's Books. 02 Mar. 2003. James Madison University. 14 Mar. 2005 <<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/bibliotherapy.htm>>.

Saunders, Lumas. Bibliotherapy: How to Manual for Teachers.

New York: Lessons Publishing, 2004.

Wilhelm, Anthony. Bibliotherapy: A Thinker's Guide.

Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1997.