

Read Two Books and Write Me in the Morning!
Bibliotherapy for social emotional intervention
in the inclusive classroom

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Abstract

This article explains a practical strategy for dealing with social emotional problems in the inclusive classroom environment. The potential need for bibliotherapy is introduced by discussing how role boundaries of teachers are changing and how teachers may take on a range of roles in their classrooms. An example of a social emotional scenario where bibliotherapy might be used in a classroom is presented, and the practice of bibliotherapy is defined. The setting, needed resources, story choice selection, lesson planning and potential benefits of bibliotherapy are explained in detail.

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How can teachers effectively respond to social emotional problems that invariably arise in the day to day functioning of a classroom?

“Thank you for giving teachers permission to assist students with emotional issues. While teachers are not guidance counsellors, they are an integral part of the therapeutic team as often they are the people students will share their concerns with, and they can observe when something is troubling a student” (Maich & Kean, 2004, p.26).

Education is becoming more interdisciplinary, leading teachers to collaborate and share roles with an increasing number of professionals outside the typical educational mandate (Mackey & McQueen, 1998). Such team-based collaboration is a dominant strategy for professionals providing interagency services to children during the current practice of inclusion (Carey, 1997; Maich, 2002). As part of the diversity in classrooms that inclusion inevitably creates, teachers are finding themselves with constantly redefined

professional role boundaries, and carrying out a range of roles that have historically belonged to other professionals (Wood, 1998). Teachers have been referred to as *carryover agents*, who carry out recommendations for direct service provisions from other community service professionals (Valletutti, 2004). As shown in Table 1, one group of approximately 120 educational professionals, primarily teachers, identified 14 such roles (Maich & Kean 2003).

Table 1: Perceptions of Role Overlap

- Actor
- Bank Teller
- Food Services Worker
- Fund Raiser
- Judge and Jury
- Mediator
- Nurse
- Occupational Therapist
- Parent
- Police Officer
- Psychologist
- Public Relations Officer
- Security Guard
- Social Worker (Maich & Kean, 2003)

Hayes (1995) explained that psychology can and should be shared knowledge practiced by non- psychologists, and noted schools as an optimal setting. Correspondingly, one role teachers describe themselves as performing is that of a psychologist in the classrooms, which can perhaps more aptly be described as a psychological educator or educational therapist (Hayes, 1995; Maich & Kean, 2003; Morse, 1992;). Pellitteri (2000) also recognized that teachers may inadvertently or deliberately carry out a formal or informal role in therapeutic intervention, which can be described as helping to “promote growth and change in their clients” (Corey, 1996, p.48-49). Within inclusive classrooms

where teachers are invariably meeting a range of student needs, including those of students with exceptionalities, the likelihood is strong that a range of students in any classroom will have experienced or will experience a similar range of social and emotional issues (Forgan & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2004). All students can benefit from learning skills to cope with social emotional challenges that invariably arise in the day to day functioning within and beyond the classroom environment (Forgan, 2002). The following scenario outlines a situation where a teacher might use bibliotherapy with a student experiencing social emotional difficulties.

Social Emotional Problem Scenario: Megan’s Move

In an isolated community on the island of Newfoundland, Canada, a Grade Four classroom teacher cares for a young student, Megan, whose family has announced that they will soon be moving to the province of Ontario. Up until recently, Megan’s father was a successful entrepreneur who had flourished in the local fishery and Megan’s mother was a senior employee at the local grocery store. Due to the provincial cod fishing moratorium and the continuous population shrinkage of their local community, a move was necessary to find new employment. Megan’s teacher notices that Megan sullenly slumps at her desk without the laughter that used to surround her, but when she asks Megan to share her feelings about this upcoming move, Megan says very little. Megan’s parents, however, indicate that Megan is indeed tremendously upset about their relocation, and would appreciate any words of wisdom the school staff might have that would give Megan comfort.

Megan’s teacher decides to use bibliotherapy to give Megan assistance in accepting her upcoming move. She uses the story Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt (Smucker, 1999), which is a tale of a young girl’s relocation to Upper Canada as her family flees impending war.

What is Bibliotherapy?

Bibliotherapy is a complex name for a process that is used by various professionals working with both adults and children, and in the case of schools, to assist with everyday situations that inevitably occur as part of the complex social and emotional classroom environment.

Bibliotherapy can be defined as “the use of books to help people solve problems” (Alex, 1993, cited in Forgan, 2002, p.75), or as “a child reading about a character who successfully resolves a problem similar to the one the child is experiencing” (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003).

“A book may be able to reach where an adult cannot” (Maich & Kean, 2003)

What Does the Literature Say About Bibliotherapy?

Bibliotherapy emerged from psychodynamic roots, and was first recorded in professional publications in the early nineteenth century as a description of a useful intervention for adult medical patients. Its application followed a progression from use with adult medical patients, to adults needing emotional remediation, and finally to the developmental needs of children (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003). In contrast, the first record of writing as a therapeutic tool was recorded well prior to this, in the previous century (Riordan, 1996).

The value of bibliotherapy was first attributed to a belief that messages in stories could positively affect unconscious processes, even if the unconscious mind was not actively processing such messages (Carlson, 2001). Children may find it easier to express themselves indirectly through the medium or metaphor of stories, an approach similar to therapy through the arts (Carlson, 2001; Peter, 1998).

As well as emerging from what is already a familiar process to most school children, solving problems through literature is considered both non-invasive and, thus, child-friendly (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003). Using stories or narratives also helps children to externalize, or to understand that a separation exists between

the self and the problem (White, 1984, cited in Carlson, 2001, p.94). Bibliotherapy can be an effective intervention when perhaps no other intervention is available for a child with a social emotional problem, in or beyond the school environment. Table 2 lists some potential social emotional areas where bibliotherapy may help.

Table 2: Example Social Emotional Issues

Anger, behaviour, body image, bullying, change, character development, culture, depression, discipline, economic struggle, failure, family discord, feelings, friendship, grief, homelessness, hopelessness, illness, independence, loneliness, mental illness, oppression, peer pressure, poverty, prejudice, problem solving, religion, respect, self acceptance, self esteem, social skills, special needs, substance abuse, teasing, and violence (Forgan, 2002; Pereira & Blue-Banning, 2000; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Turnbull, Vernon, 1998)

Getting Started

In order to implement effective bibliotherapy, an appropriate setting must first be in place. Researchers have suggested the following characteristics to develop a suitable environment:

1. comfort and respect
2. trust and rapport
3. knowledge of children, literature, reading and language (Carlson, 2001).

Budget-constrained teachers will be pleased that bibliotherapy can be initiated with a limited quantity of materials. Table 3

itemizes a basic teacher toolbox for creating bibliotherapeutic lessons:

“Children are naturally receptive to metaphor and story – symbols are an integral part of their world. Treating a troubled child in a therapeutic setting requires a medium that is both comfortable and meaningful to the child – story is such a medium” (Carlson, 2001, p.92).

Table 3: Teacher Toolbox: What do Teachers Need to Begin?

- an appropriate environment
- a specified emotional issue
- an annotated bibliography
- a well developed lesson plan
 - an appropriate story
 - a reinforcing activity

The Search for a Story

Finding an appropriate piece of bibliotherapeutic literature can be one of the greatest challenges to initiating bibliotherapy, but resources do exist that help expedite the search process. Curriculum publications are one type of readily available resources that often contain links to literature. In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, the setting for *Megan’s Move*, teachers can choose literature from “Selecting Children’s Literature: An Annotated Bibliography” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1999).

Convenient resources are general annotated bibliographies of a wide range of thematically arranged children’s literature, such as “A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children’s Picture Books” (Lima & Lima,

2001) or “Sensitive Issues: An Annotated Guide to Children’s Literature K-6” (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992). Numerous similarly grouped collections of literature references exist, centered on issues such as those presented in Table 2, and can be easily accessed through resources such as bookstores, libraries or internet resources. More specific bibliographies are also available, focusing on precise issues such as hope (Guetzloe & Rockwell, 2003), exceptionalities (Dyches & Burrow, 2004), autism (“Autism Resources from Monarch Books,” 2004) or developmental disabilities (Dyches & Prater, 2000).

“Children are able to see reflections of themselves, their times, their country, their concerns [in literature]” and “whatever the nature of the story, well-written realistic fiction will always help readers gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1999, pgs.1,13).

Another challenge in choosing stories is finding a balance between the quality of literature and its relevance (Carlson, 2001). Potential stories for bibliotherapy can be characterized by their intent, which either focuses more on sharing a story, written by authors who are dedicated to being “true to the story” (Little, 2001, p.221), or alternatively centering on teaching a specific lesson, including particular content, or supporting curriculum objectives. In the mainstream press, such stories are labeled as *Message Lit*, and an increasing trend towards the presence of social and environmental issues is noted (Covert, 2004). One example of a purposely therapeutic story or message lit is “Morning Light” (Merrifield & Collins, 1995), which is introduced as “an educational story book for children and their caregivers about HIV/AIDS and saying goodbye.” Lessons

can also be found, however, in many examples of literature that does not have such an intentional educational approach, such as how the main character in “Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt” used in *Megan’s Move* finds peace in her fictional family move.

Other considerations for appropriate story choice include answering favorably to such questions as: Is the story simple, clear, brief, non repetitious, and believable? Is it at an appropriate reading level and developmental level? Does the story fit with relevant feelings, needs, interests, and goals? Does it demonstrate cultural diversity, gender inclusivity, and sensitivity to aggression? Do characters show coping skills and does the problem situation show resolution? (Carlson, 2001; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001).

Lesson Planning

Bibliotherapy can be integrated into an already existing teacher instructional preferences, or may fit well with a pre-existing Language Arts lesson structure. Specific instructional frameworks also exist that are recommended for instruction through bibliotherapy. Table 4 is one such

example of a possible format for classroom use. This format follows a four-step process from resource preparation and lesson planning, through story reading recommendations, ideas for focusing discussions, and suggestions for planning related activities.

Table 4: Lesson Plan Outline

<p><u>Step 1: Preparation</u> Objective: Book Title: Background Knowledge Link:</p>	Carefully selecting and becoming familiar with appropriate literature; linking content with background knowledge through pre-reading discussion or activity
<p><u>Step 2: Reading</u> Uninterrupted Reading: Brief Individual Reflection:</p>	Uninterrupted teacher-led reading with reflection through individual thought or brief journal reflection
<p><u>Step 3: Dialogue</u> Question Prompts:</p>	Teacher-led discussion in a specific sequence following plot retelling; evaluation of emotions; assessment of situations
<p><u>Step 4: Activity</u> Description:</p>	Expressive and reinforcing; creative and diverse; may integrate specific strategy instruction
(Forgan, 2002; Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003)	

Experienced and creative teachers skilled in Language Arts instruction will be able to research or create activities to enhance Step 4 of the format for bibliotherapy suggested. As recommendations for Step 4 of bibliotherapeutic lessons suggest, planned activities should include expression, reinforcement, creativity and diversity. Bibliotherapeutic activities should retain a

focus on social and emotional issues rather than story content, such as the examples shown in the gray box entitled “Lesson Activity Examples” which emphasize problem solving and emotional content. Suggestions for specific activities that can apply to a range of literature and may enhance a bibliotherapeutic lesson include the examples in that gray box.

Lesson Activity Examples

<p>Draw:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different “thermometers” showing feelings • characters and their emotions • cartoon sequences • Venn diagrams of character/student differences 	<p>Identify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compliments and insults • character strengths and weaknesses • problem solving steps • character opinions and story evidence
<p>Write:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • story ending showing various emotions • news releases about story events • future biographies • fortunately / unfortunately statements 	<p>Create:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a bulletin board about feelings • a board game about story emotions • a literary treasure hunt • a “bank” of issues or problems
(Bauer & Baluis, 1995; Forgan, 2002; Guetzloe & Rockwell, 2003; Cartledge & Kairie, 2001; Riordan, 1996; Myles & Simpson, 2001; Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003 & Vernon, 1998)	

In *Megan's Move*, Megan's teacher might follow up story reading with an activity designed to focus on the emotional content of "Selina and Bear Paw Quilt" (Smucker, 1995), carefully taking Megan's difficulties accepting her upcoming move into account in lesson planning. Megan's teacher could decide to involve all students in her class in what she entitles "Treasures in Trips." During Step 4 of her bibliotherapeutic lesson, she may ask her students to plan a trip as the story character did, and to draw a map of a journey while focusing on specifying all the treasures that can be found along the way during such a moving adventure, such as wildlife sightings, artifact collecting, landmark viewing, and new friends. In this way, Megan's teacher can emphasize social and emotional growth, and Megan and her peers can simultaneously meet Language Arts objectives such as "describe, share and discuss their personal reactions to text" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1998, p.50), Health Science objectives such as "know

how to express concern for others in the class" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1994, p.24) and Social Studies objectives, such as "use maps, globes and pictures to describe location and place" (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, n.d., p.26).

As an alternative for bibliotherapeutic planning, prepared lesson plans linked to children's literature can be found in published resources. For example, Begun (1995) in "Ready-to-Use Social Skills Lessons and Activities" provides teachers with detailed lesson plans that provide behavioural objectives, step-by-step activity sequences, skill practice with prepared activity sheets, ideas for independent use, suggestions for lesson continuation outside of individual lessons, and links to children's literature. Caution must be used in accessing these latter resources, though, as lessons emerge first from a social emotional issue and later provide links to literature, rather than emerging from story content.

Where Does it Fit?

As seen in the above example of *Megan's Move*, bibliotherapy has the potential to be integrated with a range of academic curriculum objectives, as part of typical curriculum units, such as a teaching about self esteem as part of Health Science; in vocabulary study as part of Language Arts, such as teaching words related to feelings; or as part of an individualized program, such as learning problem solving skills (Guetzloe & Rockwell, 2003; Vernon, 1998).

"No matter what time of day the teacher or other professional chooses to implement this technique, bibliotherapy should be a natural addition to the regular curriculum" (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003).

As well as corresponding with planned curriculum, bibliotherapy needs to fit an already full school day. Bibliotherapy can be used individually, in small groups, or in whole class teaching. It can be used periodically or routinely, in reaction to personal or classroom community issues, or

as a preventative method. For teachers that plan to use bibliotherapy regularly as part of a planned schedule, it can be planned as part of regular reading periods, at the beginning or end of the school day, or as part of library visits (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003).

Potential Benefits

Author Jean Little reflected that although she disapproves of bibliotherapy, and rejected the idea that books should be prescribed for solving problems, she also believes that “all book lovers found healing in much that they read” (1991, p.251).

The therapeutic process of bibliotherapy has been typically divided into three proposed stages, which can be labeled identification, release, and insight (Bauer & Balius, 1995; Carlson, 2001; Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003). In *Megan's Move*, for example, Megan might identify with the main story character, Selina in “Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt”, who is also experiencing a traumatic family move, and may be able to experience the emotional

release of some of her negative feelings about her own upcoming move by talking about how Selina feels about her move in the story. She may gain insight into her own situation by examining how a book character deals with the problem of moving, yet ultimately finds peace.

Table 6 lists nine areas which Alex (1993), cited in Forgan (2002) suggests as potential areas for intervention through the process of bibliotherapy:

Table 6: *Benefits of Bibliotherapy*

1. An awareness that others have faced similar problems.
 2. The knowledge that alternative solutions to problems exist.
 3. The development of a freedom to talk about problems.
 4. The growth of problem solving skills.
 5. The further development of a positive self concept.
 6. Relief of emotional or mental stress.
 7. The development of honesty in self image.
 8. The growth of interests beyond just the self.
 9. The fostering of a better understanding of human behaviour
-

Determining Success

How can the success of bibliotherapy be assessed? If a child has made a connection with a story, bibliotherapy has been successful. If a positive change in emotional health has been accomplished, then bibliotherapy has been worthwhile (Carlson, 2001). If one child in a classroom is able to face a social emotional problem with new strength and greater skills, the very use of bibliotherapy will have been its own reward.

“The meaning of educational benefit is not limited to only the academic needs of the student social and emotional concerns are subsumed in the concept of educational benefit” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1998, cited in Pellitteri, 2000, p.387).

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