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Bibliotherapy : the use of books as an intervention with children and adolescents

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Bibliotherapy : the use of books as an intervention with children and adolescents

Abstract

Bibliotherapy is defined as "the use of literature and poetry in the treatment of people with emotional problems or mental illness" (Pardeck, 1994, p.421). The purpose of this paper is to explore bibliotherapy and to identify the advantages of using it with children and adolescents. Readers will gain an understanding of the stages of bibliotherapy, the goals of bibliotherapy, how to implement bibliotherapy into a counseling program, and the benefits and limitations of bibliotherapy. In addition, suggestions for working with specific client populations are given.

BIBLIOTHERAPY: THE USE OF BOOKS AS AN INTERVENTION WITH
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Bibliotherapy is defined as “the use of literature and poetry in the treatment of people with emotional problems or mental illness” (Pardeck, 1994, p.421). Literature is used in numerous ways in counseling and with a variety of client populations (Gladding, 1992; Watson, 1980; Yauman, 1991). Individuals gain insight and are able to release emotions in a healthy manner through reading. When used effectively, bibliotherapy can offer life guidance to clients of all ages. School counselors use bibliotherapy to help students cope with changes and struggles (Pardeck, 1994). It can be used to model appropriate behavior and to help provide children with a sense of normalcy.

For decades, bibliotherapy has been practiced in two distinct forms (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). The first, and oldest, dates back to the 1930s, when librarians began compiling lists of books for therapeutic purposes (Rubin, 1978). In this type of bibliotherapy, any written material that helped individuals modify their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors was considered to have therapeutic value (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Thus, counselors working with librarians “prescribed” selected literature for clients experiencing problems. Clients would then respond to the materials they had read. Change was brought about through catharsis, insight, or the copying of character behaviors (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

The premise underlying this approach was that clients’ identification with literary characters similar to themselves was helpful in releasing emotions, gaining new directions in life, and promoting new ways of interacting (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). The effectiveness of such an approach was limited only by the availability of materials on certain topics, client readiness, and ability to read. Although this type of bibliotherapy

has not been given a formal name, it can be thought of as “reactive,” with the client reacting either negatively or positively to the materials prescribed (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

More recently, however, bibliotherapy has come to be viewed by counselors as an interactive process whereby student growth and change occur as a result of the guided dialogue with the counselor (Christenbury, Beale, & Smith Patch, 1996). This newer form of bibliotherapy, called “interactive bibliotherapy,” stresses the process of growth, change, and healing that occurs in clients. This is not centered entirely in the reading of material by individuals, but in the guided dialogue about the material (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). According to material cited by Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1986):

In interactive bibliotherapy, a trained facilitator uses guided discussions to help the clinical or developmental participant(s) integrate both feelings and cognitive responses to a selected work of literature, which may be a printed text, some form of audiovisual material, or creative writing by the participant. (p.17)

Muro and Kottman (1995) also viewed interactive bibliotherapy as a natural and easy way for the counselor to enter into the tentative and sometimes confusing world of the client. Discussing the implication of what was read is often a less threatening way for clients to share their thoughts and feelings on sensitive personal issues with the counselor. Interactive bibliotherapy is more planned and deliberate than the reactive form. In interactive bibliotherapy, there are several assumptions: (a) bibliotherapy is an active interpersonal process; (b) literature includes a broad array of works; (c) there are both clinical and developmental aspects of this process, which can be conducted on an individual or group level; (d) the results of bibliotherapy are positive, such as improved

self-esteem or enhanced social skills; and (e) the effectiveness of bibliotherapy depends in part on the skill of the counselor-facilitator (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

The purpose of this paper is to explore bibliotherapy and to identify the advantages of using it with children and adolescents. Readers will gain an understanding of the stages of bibliotherapy, the goals of bibliotherapy, how to implement bibliotherapy into a counseling program, and the benefits and limitations of bibliotherapy. In addition, suggestions for working with specific client populations are given.

Stages of Bibliotherapy

Students progress through three stages in the bibliotherapeutic process. Experts have offered identification, catharsis, and insight as the stages that underpin the process (Gould & Mignone, 1994).

1. *Identification.* If conditions are right, the reader begins to empathize with a real or fictional character in a story. When the reader becomes aware of the parallels between his or her life and the life of the character in the book, a kind of “shock of recognition” occurs, emotions run high, and the reader’s perceptions of the characters and situations become colored by the needs he or she currently has (Cornett & Cornett, 1980). Gould and Mignone (1994) believed that students must see similarities between the characters and themselves in order for identification to occur. The identification does not have to be a conscious revelation, as often the student makes unconscious connections. In this first stage, universalization occurs and children realize they are not alone (Kramer & Smith, 1998). When children and adolescents read or listen to stories about characters with problems, they realize that other

people have faced and overcome similar problems. It can be comforting for children to learn about others who are undergoing similar challenges.

2. *Catharsis*. A catharsis is often described as an “ah ha” experience. When empathetic identification reaches its peak, the reader is able to release pent-up emotions under safe circumstances (Cornett & Cornett, 1980). The reader feels secure because he or she is not actually the person involved in the emotional circumstance, but the similarities in the character’s life and the reader’s life enable the reader to get a new perspective on his or her problem. At this stage, a therapeutic connection is made; an emotional corrective experience can diminish the pain and promote healing (Gould & Mignone, 1994). For the catharsis to occur, the student must experience an emotional release that is expressed by either verbal or nonverbal means (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993).
3. *Insight*. As a result of the catharsis, the client achieves an integration of mind and emotions (Cornett & Cornett, 1980). Possible solutions are identified. During this stage, the client develops new strategies for dealing with the presenting problems (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). Gould and Mignone (1994) noted that insight allows students to explore increased options for healthy choice making. In this final step of the bibliotherapy process, students grow in self-knowledge as well as knowledge about the world (Kramer & Smith, 1998).

Goals of Bibliotherapy

According to Watson, (1980) the goals of bibliotherapy are (a) to teach people to think constructively and positively; (b) to encourage people to talk freely about their problems; (c) to help people analyze their attitudes and modes of behavior; (d) to point out that there is more than one solution to a problem; (e) to stimulate people to adjust to problems, which will lessen conflict with society; and (f) to assist people in comparing their problems with those of others. More recently, Pardeck (1994) noted similar goals of bibliotherapy: (a) to provide information about the problems; (b) to provide insight into problems; (c) to stimulate discussions about problems; (d) to communicate new values and attitudes; (e) to create an awareness that others have dealt with similar problems; and (f) to provide solutions to problems. The counselor's guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading can be effective because books are dynamic and have the potential to bring about change in the attitudes, habits, skills, and understanding of the people who read them.

The Process of Implementing Bibliotherapy

According to Pardeck (1994), bibliotherapy consists of four stages: identification, selection, presentation, and follow-up. The counselor must carefully consider each of these stages. The first stage, identification, requires that the counselor be sensitive to the client's needs. Before proceeding with the bibliotherapeutic treatment, the counselor must consider the client's readiness, since inappropriate timing may impede the process. Normally, the client is ready for the initiation of bibliotherapy when rapport, trust, and confidence have been established between the counselor and the client; the client and the

counselor have agreed upon the presenting problems; and some preliminary exploration of the problem has occurred (Pardeck, 1994).

The selection process takes skill and insight. The books that are selected should not give a false sense of hope and must provide correct information about a presenting problem. Further, the assignment of reading needs to be based on the counselor's understanding of the psychological needs of the client (Pardeck, 1994). The presentation of the book must be carefully planned, allowing for maximum benefits. The counselor must be aware of the client's willingness to try a new intervention. If the counselor presents the intervention too early, the client may not achieve the desired effect. Once the client is ready for the bibliotherapeutic process and book selection is complete, the next concern is introducing the book. Most counselors feel that it is best to suggest books rather than to prescribe them to a client (Pardeck, 1994).

After the client has read the suggested material, the client shares what he or she gained from the reading with the counselor. In the follow-up stage through this process, insight is developed that helps the client better understand the presenting problem (Pardeck, 1994). In a review of studies, Pardeck (1994) found there is agreement among most studies conducted on bibliotherapy that the reading of a book must be accompanied by discussion and/or counseling in order to be therapeutic.

Student Populations

Depending on the program and its intent, any child or adolescent can be an appropriate participant in bibliotherapy (Doll & Doll, 1997). Although bibliotherapy can be helpful to each and every client population, this author focuses on only a few.

Victims of Child Abuse

Bibliotherapy is one way of helping children who are victims of abuse. Some children's novels vividly describe the problems and situations of child abuse as a major theme (Watson, 1980). Students often benefit from using recently published junior novels which are written for young people ages 10 through 15, since children can easily relate to the characters and their struggles. These novels can be helpful instruments in counseling abused children and, possibly, their families.

Watson (1980) contended that, regardless of how brutally assaulted or completely neglected they have been, many children tend to suffer silently rather than to admit the abusive treatment they receive at home. A counselor may effectively involve a child with an emotional and psychological attachment to a literary character. The child can participate vicariously in incidents that are developed in a well-written story. Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) suggested that selected books should reflect as nearly as possible the abused child's family situation and other critical circumstances related to the abuse. Matching story characters with the child's own experience will help the child experience identification and projection.

These vicarious experiences, which can be similar to the actual experiences of the child, may arouse psychological processes. The child may gain new insights into personal problems, and they may even find a solution. The cathartic reaction of realizing that others suffer in much the same manner can be a respite from the isolation and suffering felt by most abused children (Kramer & Smith, 1998; Watson, 1980).

When using a carefully and sensitively written novel about an abused child, the counselor can explore with the student, first by asking for the child's interpretation of the

story, and then proceeding gradually towards applying the story to the child's own life (Watson, 1980). The counselor should help the child to consider the relationships that exist between the book's characters. The child should be directed to determine reasons for the effects of certain behavior of parents and children in the story. Watson (1980) suggested that asking a child to discuss the feelings of literary characters and the cause of the feelings, before asking how the situation applies to his or her own life, allows the child to view the characters in all dimensions.

As the child begins to understand and feel the characters' viewpoints, the counselor can help him or her apply the story's insights and solutions to his or her own life. The counselor can ask the child to identify with literary characters and their conflicts and to generalize solutions to such conflicts. Such questions eventually move the child from being an observer to being a participant in the drama (Watson, 1980). Often the books on child abuse conclude with either the abused child or the abusive parent getting help, offering solutions that an abused child may be able to apply directly to his or her own situation (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). Other books have vague endings, not always pleasant, that can lead to important open-ended discussions between the child and the counselor concerning alternate strategies for solutions to the problems. With guidance, books can assist the abused child in experiencing insight by helping him or her to develop new ways to deal with the problems associated with abuse.

Children of Divorce

The family is no longer the stable unit it used to be. Today's children face a variety of changes through divorce, and they are often exposed to new types of family structures (Kramer & Smith, 1998). Counselors can use bibliotherapy to help children

whose parents are divorced recognize that they are not alone and learn suitable ways of dealing with the stress of the family changes that occur with divorce.

Children often have difficulty expressing their emotions. Bibliotherapy helps children to get in touch with the feelings of fear, guilt, or shame related to the family changes that some children experience (Yauman, 1991). Counselors who carefully select books can also design related activities that can also help ease the pain of divorce.

It is essential for school counselors to devote adequate attention to children of divorce. These children can experience a decline in school performance, depression, low self-esteem, and problems with peer interactions (Kramer & Smith, 1998). By using bibliotherapy to address sensitive topics, children see that they are not alone. Books on divorce can be a good way to model positive ways to cope with divorce.

Counselors who use interactive bibliotherapy when treating children of divorce must be sure that the story is realistic (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). For example, a story about a couple reuniting and the family living happily ever after should be avoided. It is also best to select books that do not blame a particular character in the story for the family breakdown.

Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) explained that books about divorce must explore both positive and negative emotions that characters experience when their parents divorce. Books dealing with divorce should focus on coping with everyday problems of life after the divorce, including major changes such as the financial situation of the family, a possible move, and added household responsibilities (Kramer & Smith, 1998).

Children with Fears

One of the most common emotions children have to cope with is fear.

Bibliotherapy provides children with an effective means for dealing with fears (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). Since young children 5-8, as compared to older children and adolescents, report more intense and greater numbers of fears, bibliotherapy is particularly useful for this population (Doll & Doll, 1997). Counselors need to remember that children have a limited understanding of fears and that their imaginations are extremely vivid. For example, young children may have a fear of sleeping alone. They may think that a monster lives in the closet and comes out when no one else is in the room. Reading or listening to a book about a child who also has a fear of monsters can help them understand and cope with the fear. They will learn how the character conquered his or her fear.

Vernon (1995) explained that children may be afraid of physical danger, thunderstorms, getting injured, being in an accident, or being left alone. She noted that children worry about a variety of other everyday issues such as friends, grades, sickness, or whether or not they will be picked for a team. Children also often fear illness and death, especially after the loss of a loved one. When using bibliotherapy to address these issues, counselors should be careful to review the books in advance, as some books can be more confusing than helpful. Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) asserted that children's literature has been widely used as a rich resource for helping students understand and overcome fears. Fiction provides children with an essentially safe environment where otherwise scary or alarming experiences may be structured or explained.

Children and adolescents, as well as adults, all have fears at times. Although young children tend to be thought of as having the most fears, adolescents also face several issues with feelings of anxiety. Vernon (1993) identified numerous concerns for high school students: fear of dealing with their own sexuality, fear of activities requiring bodily exposure, fear of being confronted by a teacher, fear of being picked first or last, and fear of not being prepared for life after graduation. All of these fears are legitimate developmental problems. Bibliotherapy is one way to address these fears.

Coping with Adolescence

It is estimated that several thousand novels for adolescents have been published since 1990 (Christenbury, Beale, & Smith Patch, 1996). This number is significant because the use of literature for adolescents is a long-recognized helping strategy used by counselors to help young people cope with the changes associated with this stage of development. Adolescence is often a time of turmoil and confusion as young people search for their identity. Many teens feel they are alone and unique in their struggle (Christenbury, Beale, & Smith Patch, 1996). Therefore, bibliotherapy serves a useful function in helping adolescents realize possibilities for their own lives (Gladding, 1992). Among the topics covered for the adolescent population are selections in family relationships, identity, sex and sexuality, and gender issues. Gladding (1992) suggested that biographies and autobiographies are especially relevant to the adolescent population because they give teenagers insight into what they can be, what they can achieve, and how they can grow. Using creative writing after these books have been read is an appropriate and effective way to follow up. Pardeck (1994) suggested that after reading the book, the adolescent could develop a synopsis of the book using a different

viewpoint, compose a diary for a character in the book, or write a letter from one character in the book to another.

Benefits and Limitations

Bibliotherapy has obvious value on many levels. It provides the opportunity for the participants to more fully recognize themselves or certain characteristics they have; it assists them in understanding the complexity of human thought and behavior by exposing them to a multitude of characters; and it may promote the development of interests outside of themselves by exposing them to different patterns of living (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Bibliotherapy can also increase the clients' interest in literature.

As with most counseling approaches, there are a number of limitations and precautions one should consider when using bibliotherapy. Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) stated, "probably the most important limitation to bibliotherapy is that it should never be used as a single approach to treatment" p.16. Gladding and Gladding (1991) noted certain limitations that exist in bibliotherapy. These limitations center on the personality of the participant(s), the skill of the counselor, and the interactive process.

Participant Limitations

There are some limitations in using bibliotherapy with children in that they may project their own motives onto characters and thus reinforce their own perceptions and solutions (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). In addition, participants may discount the action of characters and thus fail to identify with them or even use them as scapegoats. Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) explained that the client may intellectualize about a problem when reading about it and fail to identify with a character in the story, resulting in a form of projection that only serves to relieve the student of any responsibility for resolution of a

problem. Other limitations include a lack of social experiences, failure to recognize oneself in a character, flights into fantasy, and defensiveness (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). However, some of these limitations can be overcome through the continuation of the process itself, role playing or dramatization of the events, clear didactic explanations by the counselor of what the theme of the literature is, and the use of group discussions (Staley & Mangieri, 1984).

Counselor Limitations

Counselor limitations can seriously hinder the bibliotherapeutic process, thus defeating its purpose. One serious deficit is for the counselor to have limited knowledge of human development and developmental problems associated with transition from one stage to another (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). A second limitation is only having surface knowledge about appropriate material. Counselors must prepare for bibliotherapy by selecting an appropriate book and reading it in advance of meeting with the child or adolescent (Kramer & Smith, 1998). Assignment of bibliographic material which is either too sophisticated or too simple is a real “turn off” to the client. Further, the assignment of books that are “preachy” are usually unproductive. A third drawback is not keeping up with primary source material or suggesting the same material to every client, regardless of the problem (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Some of these limitations can be overcome by gaining an understanding and a working knowledge of primary reference material, keeping an accurate and detailed record of what sources have been used with what type of clients and how effective they have been, and using bibliotherapy in conjunction with other primary mainstream approaches to counseling (Staley & Mangieri, 1984).

Process Limitations

The final area where limitations may occur is in the bibliotherapy process itself. The process can be disrupted by inappropriate client actions, such as failure to read suggested material or an unwillingness to discuss issues (Kramer & Smith, 1998). The process is also limited when the counselor insists on making a point at the client's expense (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). A third limiting dimension in the process is when both the client and the counselor stay on surface issues (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Ways of dealing with these drawbacks are to suspend sessions until both the participant and the counselor are ready and willing to work, to tape and critique selected sessions so counselors can monitor their own reactions to certain clients or problem areas, and to use as many sessions as possible when conducting bibliotherapy or to come back to issues in stories that have been treated superficially in previous sessions (Staley & Mangieri, 1984).

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy is an interesting, diverse, and potentially powerful method for counselors to use. It can be employed on many levels and in virtually all client populations. Traditionally, bibliotherapy has involved the assignment of literary materials to clients and their reaction to the reading. Recently bibliotherapy includes a more involved interactive process as well.

The current version of bibliotherapy allows the counselor to use a dialogue to interact with the child or adolescent. Such an interaction helps students to see the relationship between themselves and the characters. Further, the students' understanding of this relationship can be an extremely valuable component of counseling.

Bibliotherapy has been demonstrated to be a successful tool to use with a wide variety of problems.

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