

# Practical Bibliotherapy Strategies for the Inclusive Elementary Classroom

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This article was developed to assist the regular education elementary classroom teacher in utilizing practical bibliotherapy strategies for the inclusive classroom. Using quality children's literature for bibliotherapy helps students to grow socio-emotionally by identifying with the main character in the story with a disability which leads to personal insight and growth. Teachers will learn how to use a checklist which was developed by the authors to select appropriate bibliotherapy literature and lead classroom discussions. A top ten list of books on bibliotherapy for the inclusive elementary classroom is provided.

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**KEY WORDS:** bibliotherapy; children's literature; inclusion; elementary classroom; special needs; classroom practices; educators; classroom teachers; disabilities; exceptionalities.

## BIBLIOTHERAPY

Educators have begun to recognize the increasingly critical need for delivering literacy instruction to children who are at-risk, disabled, or homeless (Ouzts, 1991). Particularly in today's inclusive classrooms, where teachers are perpetually encountering a range of student needs, literature about disabilities has a specific and valuable purpose: it can help students become more accepting of individual differences (Forgan & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2004). For example, a first grade teacher from California selected *A.D.D. not B.A.D.* (Penn, 2003) from the author's top ten list to read to her students. She remarked, "*A.D.D. not B.A.D.* was chosen because in today's classroom there are many children who have A.D.D. but are not identified. My experience with this book was rewarding and helpful. I introduced the

book with the question, "What does it mean to be different from everyone else?"

## WHAT IS BIBLIOTHERAPY?

Amer (1999) defines bibliotherapy as the use of children's literature to explore children's feelings about self-esteem, the experience of living with a chronic condition, and the ability to relate to a main character with a similar condition. Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to teach about the issues that one personally faces through identifying with a character in the book (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1994).

The process of bibliotherapy is based in classic psychotherapy principles of identification (with the character or situation in the story), catharsis (wherein the student gains inspiration), and insight (which leads to motivation for positive change) (Hebert & Kent 2000; Jalongo, 1983; & Lenkowsky, 1987).

## BIBLIOTHERAPY FOR UNDERSTANDING DISABILITIES

Bibliotherapy has been used to enhance understanding, self-esteem, and adjustment to a

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developmental crisis (Cohen, 1987). Teachers can use children's literature to help students solve problems and generate alternative responses to their issues. By learning a problem-solving strategy that the main character in the children's literature utilizes, students with disabilities can learn to become independent and effective problem solvers. To further illustrate how *A.D.D. not B.A.D.* (Penn, 2003) was used for problem-solving in a first grade classroom the teacher remarked, "How do you think Jimmy Jumping Bean (main character with A.D.D.) feels when he is acting this way?" "How can you not show this kind of behavior?" [*The teacher explained that individuals are not BAD they just need their space to act out these feelings sometimes.*] "Let's role-play a few scenarios and practice using words that would help others facing a similar situation." [*The teacher engaged students in role-play situations.*]

Students with emotional and behavioral learning needs struggle academically and with a sense of self. Bibliotherapy can begin to fill in these gaps for this population of students. Sridhar and Vaughn (2000) provided insight into the therapy by writing, "Bibliotherapy can be used more extensively for students with significant learning and behavior problems to enhance self-understanding, and as a tool for enhancing reading comprehension" (p. 75).

A social problem-solving approach that can be found through bibliotherapy is a positive technique for students with disabilities who may experience difficulties across settings and who can benefit from learning to solve problems similar to those discussed in children's literature (McCarty & Chalmers, 1997). Additionally, children in both general and special education can benefit because there is value in understanding a variety of disabilities and it is likely that students will encounter similar issues.

### **BIBLIOTHERAPY AS A PROBLEM-SOLVING TOOL**

Forgan (2002) examined how bibliotherapy can positively affect students with behavioral issues and explained that students with these problems are characterized as inefficient in recognizing and solving problems. He believes that these students rely on teachers to solve the problem for them because they have not learned to be independent problem solvers. Bibliotherapy can provide a way for students to talk through problems that the characters face in the book and then apply the same concepts to their own lives (McCarthy & Chalmers, 1997). Readers learn that all

characters share universal experiences: embarrassments, dreams, challenges, and triumphs (Rohner & Rosberg, 2003).

Through the guided class discussion of the character's problem, students can converse about the issue and come to understand that other people experience the same types of problems. This dialogue helps students as they develop insight into the character's difficulty and discuss the merits and shortcomings of any solutions. In addition, the class can generate possible solutions to their own problems by using their newly acquired insight. In a post-reading discussion following the reading of *A.D.D. not B.A.D.* (Penn, 2003), the first grade teacher remarks to her students, "Have you ever had a ladybug crawl on your hand? Close your eyes and imagine that I am dropping a ladybug down the back of your shirt." [The teacher walks around the room pretending to do so as depicted in the book...within five seconds the teacher reported that the students were all wiggling and screaming...finally, they were all wiggled out and sat down.] The teacher proceeded to ask the students, "What do you think would happen if you got those feelings all the time?" One student replied, "My body wouldn't stop moving and I would get very tired." A second student remarked, "I would feel very sad because my friends wouldn't like me." The teacher then leads students into a classroom discussion where they brainstorm positive ways to interact with students in their classroom who might have A.D.D.

### **USING BIBLIOTHERAPY IN THE CLASSROOM**

Pellitteri (2000) acknowledged that teachers may unintentionally 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, pp. 48-49). Depending on their developmental levels and interests, students can express themselves through activities ranging from art to dramatization, to discussing the events and characters at a deeper level (McCarty & Chalmers, 1997). Bibliotherapy has also been shown to produce a positive change in self-concept, reading readiness, and achievement (Afolyan, 1992; Lauren, 1995; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000).

One of the benefits of bibliotherapy is that it models successful coping strategies for students.

Duimstra (2003) found that teachers could address the issue of teasing and bullying through children's literature. As children identify with characters in the literature, they will begin to understand that not only have others faced the same problems but also that multiple solutions are possible. In addition, children with and without disabilities may be more willing to engage in open discussion about their feelings with the book as a focal point.

When choosing appropriate children's literature Maich and Kean (2004) suggest answering the following questions based on findings by Carlson (2001) and Cartledge and Kiarie (2001): (a) Is the story simple, clear, brief, nonrepetitious, and believable?, (b) Is it at an appropriate reading level and developmental level?, (c) Does the story fit with relevant feelings, needs, interests, and goal?, (d) Does it demonstrate cultural diversity, gender inclusivity, and sensitivity to aggression?, and (e) Do characters show coping skills and does the problem situation show resolution? (Maich & Kean, 2004, p. 7).

Bibliotherapy lessons include the following four elements according to Forgan (2002): (a) pre-reading, (b) guided reading, (c) post-reading discussion, and (c) a problem-solving/reinforcement activity (p. 76). Prater (2003) explained that future teachers need to be exposed to portrayals of individuals with disabilities in children's literature and she suggests several ways to utilize these books in different classes including writing lesson plans involving the children's literature.

The practical application of Forgan's (2002) lesson elements are illustrated in a narrative account as conveyed by a first-grade teacher (Figure 1). The figure illuminates the first grade teacher's efforts to engage their students in a bibliotherapy lesson using a book they chose from the *Top Ten List* in Appendix B.

Practical strategies for the inclusive classroom are important for teachers for the intergration of bibliotherapy in their classrooms. By utilizing the *Checklist to Evaluate Children's Literature with Characters Who Have Disabilities* (Appendix A) and the *Top Ten List of Children's Literature about Characters with Disabilities* (Appendix B) that is included in this article, regular elementary education teachers can present quality literature for bibliotherapy in the inclusive classroom. The use of bibliotherapy will help teachers to encourage students to be more accepting of individual differences and challenges.

## APPENDIX A

### Checklist to Evaluate Children's Literature with Characters Who Have Disabilities

#### I. ILLUSTRATIONS:

- (a) Avoids stereotypes and tokenism within illustration;
- (b) depicts children with disabilities in leadership and action roles.

#### II. STORY LINE:

- (a) Conveys a story that is realistic, empathetic, and sensitive to the child with the disability and thereby encourages a positive attitude;
- (b) enables the child with the disability to resolve the problem;
- (c) conveys the same story line if the main character did not have a disability.

#### III. LIFESTYLES:

Encourages positive value judgments.

#### IV. WEIGH THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE:

Generates balance between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

#### V. CONSIDER THE EFFECT ON A CHILD'S SELF-IMAGE:

Promotes a child with a disability as a positive role-model for non-disabled peers.

#### VI. CONSIDER THE AUTHOR OR ILLUSTRATOR'S BACKGROUND:

Contains layers of meaning.

#### VII. WHAT IS THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE?:

Consider the author's perspective as it might strengthen or weaken the story.

#### VIII. WATCH FOR LOADED WORDS:

Avoids loaded words.

#### IX. COPYRIGHT DATE AND TARGET AGE

(Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1980; Derman-Sparks & The ABC Task Force, 1989).

## APPENDIX B

### Top Ten List of Children's Literature About Children with Disabilities

1. Davis, P. A. (2000). *Brian's bird*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.
2. Fraustino, L. R. (2001). *The hickory chair*. New York: Author A. Levine Books.
3. Glatzer, J. (2002). *Taking Down Syndrome to school*. Valley Park, MO: JayJo Books.
4. Lears, L. (2005). *Nathan's wish*. Morton, Ill: Albert Whitman & Co.
5. Millman, I. (2000). *Moses goes to school*. New York: Frances Foster Books, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
6. McMahan, P. (2000). *Dancing wheels*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, Co.
7. Penn, A. (2003). *A.D.D. not B.A.D.* Washington, DC: Child & Family Press.
8. Rodriguez, B. (2000). *Sarah's sleepover*. New York: Penguin Group.
9. Rickert, J. R. (2000). *Russ and the firehouse*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.
10. Riggio, A. (1997). *Secret signs: Along the underground railroad*. Honesdale, PA: Caroline House.

## Pre-Reading

## Teacher Narrative

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Book Introduction: *Secret Signs* [A book chosen from the Top Ten List (Appendix A) .]

Teacher Narrative: Prior to reading the story, I made connections to the knowledge that my class had recently learned regarding the civil rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Then, new knowledge about the underground railroad was provided. The story of the people who helped the slaves travel north to freedom and the need for secrecy so that the slaves could reach their freedom was then discussed. There was a need to explain that the underground railroad was not underground and not a railroad. First-graders, being very literal and concrete in their thinking, did not fully grasp the abstractness of this concept. In addition to this information, the main character's deafness was discussed. The class knew a little sign language from prior usage through songs. I asked the question whether they thought a boy who was deaf could help other people. All of the students emphatically answered yes. I asked them to make a prediction whether they thought that the boy's sign language would be the way that helped the people. Again, all of the students said that they thought this would be his way of helping. The students responded this way because of the title of the book.

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 Guided Reading

## Teacher Narrative

Teacher Narrative: Next, I read the story to the students. I asked questions throughout the reading. The students continued to think that the boy could help pass along the secret message to help the girl in the indigo shawl find her way to the next station on the railroad. They continued to think that his sign language would be the way the he would help.

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 Post-Reading Discussion

## Teacher Narrative

Teacher Narrative: After reading the story to the class, we discussed their predictions and compared them with the actual outcome of the story. The students said that the used his gift of painting, not his gift of sign language, to help the girl find the secret sign for the next stop on her journey to freedom. They all agreed that he was a "really good painter." We discussed how people have many gifts and talents. The students agreed that because he was deaf didn't mean that he couldn't do anything else to help other people. They said that everyone can help others and that we should all work together to help each other.

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 Problem-Solving/Reinforcement Activity

## Teacher Narrative

Teacher Narrative: After the discussion, I taught the manual alphabet to the students. They loved learning it. I told them that we will be doing much more with sign language throughout the rest of the year. Then, each student was given a circle of paper. Inside the circle, I asked them to draw something in the classroom that they wanted someone to find. After the "secret signs" were completed, each circle was placed inside a special viewer and each student had the opportunity to find the location that was represented inside the circle.

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Fig. 1. Bibliotherapy lesson from a first grade classroom.

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