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Bibliotherapy: Three Books for Improving Reading Enjoyment and Socioemotional Growth

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The purpose of this article is to provide strategies in teaching literature focusing on improving reading enjoyment and socioemotional growth. Three books have been chosen to illustrate various methodologies so students will respond positively to literature by experiencing it in new and varied ways. The strategies presented in the study will enable teachers at various grade levels to utilize these books in positive ways. This study utilizes the following three books:

Dacey's Song by Cynthia Voigt, Newbery Medal Winner of 1983.

Scorpions by Walter Myers, Newbery Honor Book of 1989.

An Elephant in the Living Room and the Workbook: The Children's Book by Marion Typpo & Jill Hastings.

Bibliotherapy and Reading

Reading experiences can play a significant role in cognitive and socioemotional growth of children and adolescents. A poor book sets children back; a mediocre book leaves them at a standstill; and a good book moves them ahead to growth, pleasure, new insights, and discoveries (Smith, 1967). With the break-

down of the family in our society and the great amount of violence that is engulfing our nation, bibliotherapy may be an effective way to help children and adolescents bond with worthwhile characters in well chosen literature and learn to cope with their emotional problems effectively.

According to Bernstein (1983), bibliotherapy is a process of gaining insight from reading fiction and nonfiction that leads to self-examination. To be successful, educators must (1) know when and how to introduce the materials, (2) be sufficiently familiar with the materials, and (3) know each student's particular need. As educators, we must sensitize children to themselves and to others through books (Ouzts, 1991). Through bibliotherapy children can develop their reading comprehension and later use that skill to understand their personal and social development in a better way (Jalongo, 1983).

In the school year of 1997-98, junior -and senior-level students from Campbellsville University's School of Education who were enrolled in reading and language arts methods courses went to public schools for field experiences. In various central Kentucky schools, these students worked closely with

guidance counselors and classroom teachers in their bibliotherapeutic programs.

Many of the students involved in afternoon or after-school bibliotherapeutic programs were below average readers and had negative attitudes toward reading. As for family background, many of them were from non-nuclear families. Some students lived with grandparents, a single parent, a stepparent, or foster parents. Some parents of these students had problems with alcohol and drugs. A few students in this group had been physically or sexually abused by their immediate family members or by more distant relatives.

About twenty books of different genres were used in the bibliotherapeutic program during the 1997-98 school year. Of the twenty books, *Dicey's Song*, *Scorpions*, and *An Elephant in the Living Room* were the most popular books. Classroom teachers selected these books because students could relate to the characters or situations in them and gain insight into their own situations.

Teaching Strategies for the Three Books

Dicey's Song

Dicey's Song has a vocabulary level of Grade 5 and up. Its interest level can be Grade 6 and up. Dicey is a 13-year-old female with three younger siblings, a sister, Maybeth, and two brothers, James and Samuel. They travel from Provincetown where they lived with their mother to Chesapeake Bay country where they will live with their grandmother. Dicey has been caring for the younger kids since their mother became ill and abandoned them. James is a gifted boy who tries to hide his giftedness because he does not want to be different. Maybeth is a learning-disabled girl who has a gift in music. Samuel, who strikes out in anger, is now trying too hard to be good now that they are living with their grandmother. Their mother is in an institution, where she dies during the story. The children must learn to adjust to a new life with their grandmother whom the townspeople consider eccentric.

Opening Activity

The teacher introduces the book by asking students to imagine that they have been abandoned in a large shopping mall with three younger siblings. Have students role-play the characters Dicey, James, Sammy, and Maybeth. The class may discuss realistic options for survival.

Group Activity 1—Figurative Language: Similes and Metaphors

Some similes in *Dicey's Song* are:

- fat like a cartoon person
- massive as a mountain
- quiet as a mouse
- like a field of gold.

Some metaphors in *Dicey's Song* are:

- riding the waves of her anger
- They were sort of rotten apples there.
- She unrolled the adventures of summer out.
- They would be a load off my mind.

In groups of two or three have students make a list of two similes and two metaphors. When they finish, have them write a story in which they use their similes and metaphors.

The following activity was adapted from *A Literature Unit for Dicey's Song* by Robbins (1993, p.18).

Group Activity 2—Setting

Chesapeake Bay, near which the Tillermans live, is a beautiful and historic area. To help students to picture and understand the setting in *Dicey's Song*, have them do research on Chesapeake Bay from an encyclopedia and locate Crisfield, Potomac River, West Point, Salisbury, and Washington, D.C., on an area map.

Group Activity 3—Characterization

Ask the students the following questions to determine whether they understand characterization.

1. What words or phrases best describe Dicey and her three younger siblings' appearance?
2. What four adjectives best describe Dicey's characteristics? Write a character

map with Dicey's name in the middle. Find four adjectives to describe Dicey and one episode from the story to support each adjective.

Group Activity 4—Plot

Ask the students the following questions to determine whether they understand the plot.

1. Describe how Dicey feels when she was accused of plagiarism.
2. How does Dicey resolve the problem?
3. Write a script dramatizing this episode.
4. Perform your script for your fellow students.

This activity was adapted from *A Literature Unit for Dicey's Song* by Robbins (1993, p.23)

Group Activity 5—Point of View

Ask the students the following questions to determine whether they understand point of view.

1. Is there a change in Dicey as the story progresses? Predict Dicey's future.
2. If Dicey were a boy instead of a girl, how might her life have been changed?

Group Activity 6—Symbolism

Cynthia Voigt uses several symbolic references in relation to music, a sailboat, and a tree. Ask students why this book is titled *Dicey's Song*. What does music bring to Maybeth, who is a learning-disabled girl with a gift for music? Why does Dicey want to refinish the old sailboat she had found in Grandma's barn? How is the boat connected to her

adjustment to her new life in the Chesapeake Bay country that had once been her mother's childhood home? Is the wide-branched paper mulberry tree with thick leaves a symbol of the setting of the story—a family tree of the Tillermans? Draw your family tree as far back as you are able.

Follow-up Activity

Share some of the folk songs that Dicey and her family sing when they are feeling lonely, scared, or just remembering times gone by. Sing the songs, record them on cassette tape, or make a video.

Scorpions

Scorpions is the 1989 Newbery Honor book, a recommended book for reluctant adult readers by the American Library Association. In this inner city setting, Walter Myers' characters face person-against-society conflicts created by the contemporary world of drug dealers and gangs. They also face person-against-self conflicts created by inner fears and consequences related to owning a gun.



Mitzi Reynolds, a guidance counselor at West Marion Elementary School in Loretto, Ky., helps fifth-graders Danielle and Adam select books. Reynolds introduced bibliotherapy to the school in rural central Kentucky.

Jamal's older brother Randy is in jail for robbery. In the beginning of the story, Jamal was tortured by the feeling of being small and weak. After reluctantly taking on the leadership of the Harlem gang, the Scorpions, Jamal finds that his enemies treat him with respect when he obtains a gun. However, with the gun, Jamal and his friend Tito are plunged into constant threats. Because of the gun, Jamal loses his best friend, Tito. Readers of this story will understand that there is danger when people are involved with violent gangs, drugs and guns.

Opening Activity

The teacher shows the cover of the book and asks the students to predict what the story might be about by just looking at the cover illustrations. Are you interested in stories about violence at schools? Discuss shootings that happened at schools in the 1990s. What is a scorpion? Is it a lizard in the story? Why or why not? Put on your critical thinking cap and guess.

Group Activity 1—Vocabulary Game

The purpose of the game is to match the vocabulary words with their definitions. Students are required to get definitions from the story context. Divide the class into groups of two or three students. Have students make two sets of cards the same size and color. On one set have them write the words. On the other set have them write the definitions of the words from the story context. All cards are then mixed together and placed face down on the table. A player picks two cards. If the pair matches the word with its definition from the context, the player keeps the cards and takes another turn. If the cards do not match, return the cards to their places face down on the table and another player takes a turn. Players must concentrate to remember the locations of words and definitions. The game continues until all matches have been made.

Vocabulary lists: Words from chapters 1-6 include scorpion, wino, crackhead, testify, warlord, karate, parole, yacht, tough, thought, asthma, Puerto Rico, juvenile,

delicatessen. Words from chapters 7-12 include punk, squarely, staggered, sprawling, stumbled, shivered, splinter, tingly, secretary, bodega, ignorant, dominos, pivoted, raggedy.

Group Activity 2—Characters

1. What words and episodes best describe Jamal's behavior and feelings at the beginning when he feels that the teachers, kids, and even his father all laughed at him? (Chapters 3, 4, and 6) Find words and phrases that describe Jamal gaining confidence after obtaining a gun. (Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10)

2. What is the purpose of minor characters such as Mack and Dwayne in the story? For example, how do they help to provide a contrast to a main character? Select students to read from the story several short episodes that involve several characters and a narrator. Have the students illustrate how each character would speak. The dialogue encourages the students to determine what personality and social role each character plays. For example, Jamal and Tito went to the clubhouse to see Mack.

3. Make a character collage. Cut out words and pictures from magazines or newspapers that describe a character in the story. Put the character's name in the collage.

Group Activity 3—Readers' Theater for the Plot

Tell the students that good stories come to life when dramatized. So why not give it a try? In groups of four or five students, write a script for a scene from *Scorpions*. Rehearse together so everyone knows what to do and say. Readers' Theater is different from formal dramas because Readers' Theater students do not have to memorize the lines word by word. They are allowed to improvise. Prepare costumes and some simple props, then perform for another class and invite parents and friends to see. One good scene from the book for the Readers' Theater is found in Chapter 10, the fight between Jamal and Dwayne. The scene pushes the story to the climax, and it is the first time the gun appears and casts a tragic shadow for the sad ending.



Some of West Marion Elementary School teacher Connie Rakes' fourth-graders discuss a book.

Group Activity 4—Theme

1. What does the title tell you about the book? What does the story say about gangs, drugs, and violence? Is the theme important and worthwhile in our society for people to think about?

2. Divide the class into three groups and give each group one of the following topics: (a) Jamal against society, (b) Jamal against individual, (c) Jamal against himself. Ask each group to discuss and list as many plots from the story that pertain to the given topic. Each group will share its findings with the class.

Ending Activity:

1. Design a dust jacket for *Scorpions*. Include on the cover the title, author, and an important scene, image, or characters on the cover. On the inside flaps include a book summary, a teaser (a hint at the plot that will make people want to read the book), and quotable recommendations for the book (For example: "A realistic, spare, and almost unbearable sad story." – Publishers Weekly)

2. Write a letter to the author of the story telling him or her why you enjoyed reading the book. Tell the author the parts you liked

and ask how and where the ideas for the book came from.

An Elephant in the Living Room and The Workbook: The Children's Book

This is an informational book written for teachers to use with children ages 7 through adolescents who are living in families where drinking or drug use is or has been a problem. The Workbook provides activities and strategies on how to use *An Elephant in the Living Room*.

Group Activity 1—Facts about Alcohol and Drugs

The teacher provides pictures of empty liquor bottles, marijuana, and heroin to help the students identify types of alcohol and drugs. Then the teacher reads aloud Chapter One of the workbook to a group of students. In Chapter One Drinking and Drug Problems, Typpo and Hastings (1984) told the students the following important facts:

1. Alcoholism is a sickness that many people have.
2. Alcohol (like beer, wine, scotch), marijuana, and heroin are drugs that change a person's feelings. They are mood-changing drugs.

3. People who use alcohol or other drugs at home or work are sick. They depend on alcohol or other mood-changing drugs to try to feel better.

4. You can't make someone alcoholic. A person's alcoholism is not your fault.

5. You can't make someone stop drinking.

6. An alcoholic must get help to stop drinking from a doctor, a counselor, or a special hospital that treats alcoholics. (p. 6)

Group Activity 2—Family Problems and Coping Skills

Discuss Chapter Three and Chapter Four of the workbook in which many different family problems occur. Think what students can do if they are in a specific scenario. Teachers should do this with caution.

Caution: The teacher needs to realize that students do not need to speak openly about their home situation in order to be helped. It is wise not to push or coax students into participating in some discussions. It is okay to pass their turns in group.

Scenario

Jean is 10 years old. Her mom drinks heavily. One day when Jean gets home from school, her mom is asleep on the couch. She can't even wake up for dinner. She forgets all about her children. Jean feels neglected and left out. She wishes that she lived in her friend Susan's family where her mom bakes cookies, makes Susan's clothes, and teaches her to play the piano. It seems to Jean that Susan's family never has any problems.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. Did you ever feel that your family was the only family that had problems?

2. Did you ever wish you lived in another family? What kind of family would you like to live in?

We should understand that all families have problems. They may have problems different from your family, but all families have problems. The key is to handle the problem in a good way. Coping with a problem will not always make it go away, but coping with a problem will make it easier to live with. Learning to handle the problem in a good way will help family members to grow and to be closer to each other.

Group Activity 3—Making Good Choices

Chapter Six of the workbook discusses making good choices. Tom is 12 years old. His parents just recently divorced. Tom's dad is an alcoholic and can't take care of Tom. Tom lives with his mom. Because his mom just got a new job in a different city, they moved and Tom has a new school. He is lonely and wants to make friends. Paul, one of the kids in his class, invites Tom to his house to drink some of Paul's dad's beer. Tom wants very much to be accepted by Paul, but he also knows the trouble alcohol can cause. He knows it is against the law for kids his age to drink alcohol. Still Tom is nervous and he does not know how to respond.

Suggestion: Use the following three steps for good decision-making to help Tom decide what to do.

Step One:

What needs to be decided?

Step two:

What are Tom's choices?

Step Three:

Think about the choices. What might happen if Tom decides to drink the beer? What might happen if Tom decides not to drink the beer? Which decision would show that Tom is taking good care of himself? Make a plus (+) and minus (-) chart for each decision. Put the good things that would happen because of the choice on the + side. Put the bad things that would happen on the - side. Choose the better alternative. Circle it.

Conclusions

About two hundred students at different grade levels and in different public schools in central Kentucky were involved in bibliotherapeutic programs in the school year of 1997-1998. Feedback from the university students' field experiences reflected that public school students enjoyed reading a book that they selected. They enjoyed the reading for various reasons, but letting them choose it made them feel that they were independent readers. Besides making their own choices, many students preferred to read in a group. Through group discussion and university students' tutoring, students felt that they could write some responses about the book they had read. As a result, their writing ability also improved. Although this field experiment was short and was used with a small number of teachers and students, it indicated that use of bibliotherapy did improve students' reading enjoyment and created a more positive outlet for expression of feelings and emotions for the reader. Students did learn to analyze attitudes and behaviors discussed in the books in a realistic manner; therefore, they were able to find alternative solutions to realistic problems in their lives.

Resources

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