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# Children's Books: Mirrors for Self-Understanding

by Bonnie Schulwitz

*But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and I am never more myself than when I do.(13)*

As Lewis so insightfully states, literature provides the valuable substance into which man can escape — to places, to things, to people — and concomitantly attain a heightened awareness of himself. The achievement of such understanding can begin early in one's life. Many factors can contribute to a child's self-understanding with the aid of discerning parents and teachers. One such factor is the utilization of children's literature.

The use of books to promote understanding of personal situations and problems is termed *bibliotherapy*. Parents and teachers can employ bibliotherapy to aid the growing child in developing a healthy adjustment to life. In a general context, bibliotherapy is interpreted as a aid to all children, not merely those encountering emotional problems, for every child faces potentially difficult situations throughout life. Bibliotherapy can function in aiding the resolution of these difficulties or in preventing them from developing. This article explores 1) a brief review of the theory underlying bibliotherapy and 2) the practical application of bibliotherapy by classroom teachers.

## Rationale

Reading materials have traditionally played a significant role in both the instructional and guidance aspects of

the educative process. Rationale for the study and application of these materials via the processes of bibliotherapy finds its roots in the purposes of children's literature substantiated by many authorities. In enumerating the aims of literature for children, Huck and Kuhn suggest that it provides valuable insight into human behavior.(9) Arbuthnot states that "books can help a child satisfy his needs."(2) Whitehead lists the first of eight objectives of children's literature:

1. To help the child understand himself and his present problems. Literature offers some security in demonstrating to the child that others may have similar problems, and they have lived with them or successfully solved them. The child can then realize comfort in the fact that others have faced his problems — that his problems are not different than those of others.(20)

Indeed, the fact that "when life is difficult, books can give us a temporary release from trouble or new insights into the problems we face"(2) lends support to the very premise upon which the concept of bibliotherapy is based.

## Theory

Germane to the theoretical constructs of bibliotherapy is the idea that there is an integral relationship between the dynamics of the personality and the nature of vicarious experience which is achieved through the reading process.(18) Because literature characterizes life, the reader is able to vicariously re-live his own life, thereby experiencing the benefit of biblio-



therapy as it functions to give him new perspectives on present problems he may have or perspectives to deal with problems he may face in the future. The process of bibliotherapy involves:

1. Identification with the story.
2. Catharsis as a result of the identification, and
3. Insight in gaining new awareness of self and others.

### Application

In assuming a vital role, the teacher can play a meaningful part in contributing to the development of a well-adjusted personality. Heilman(7) emphasizes this point by relating that there has been an awareness on the part of many clinicians in child guidance clinics as well as remedial clinics that the school, or more specifically, the teacher, is in a therapeutic relationship to children because of the very nature of the school and the activities which are carried on in the school. Studies indicate that from kindergarten through college there are many children who need help in adjusting to life; so many, in fact, that schools may be justly criticized for paying too much attention to the development of intellectual prowess and too little to the education of feelings.(10)

Bibliotherapy can offer an opportunity for the exploration of feelings. In accord with this premise, Cianciolo offers suggestions about the ways a teacher may apply bibliotherapy: 1) To try to solve a child's existing problems by presenting a book concerned with a similar problem. Thus the child has the benefit of viewing the problem and its solution through the book. This experience should provide help in solving his problem. 2) To prevent possible problems in that after a child has read about a problem others are experiencing, he may be better able to cope with the problem if it arises in his life, i.e., to solve it or at least make it less intense.(3)

All teachers should be aware of the effects of reading and realize that many children can be helped through literature to resolve developmental problems. In developing this awareness, it must be the teacher's responsibility to understand the concept and dynamics of bibliotherapy for application where deemed beneficial. Familiarity with children's literature and its appropriateness to the particular age group with which the teacher is working is a necessary corollary. The teacher must certainly become familiar with the uniqueness of each child, as well as his needs and problems, in order to utilize the direct application of bibliotherapy in guiding him to helpful books.

The indirect application of bibliotherapy may at times prove advantageous. This approach can assume two directions - discussion of a book after reading it to the class, with an emphasis upon its theme, or a discussion of a problem involved in several books. Arbuthnot(2) relates an example of a teacher using this indirect method. After reading a story concerning a child's fears, the class discussed fears experienced by everyone. The children then were able to face this emotion rationally, sharing ideas, reaching healthy conclusions in the process of this common experience. This kind of discussion may even serve as an "ice breaker" to a particular child, providing the motivation for a child to talk about his problem. Comer(5) reported a concomitant benefit in increased empathy of other class members to a problem child as the result of this type of class discussion.

Finally, a teacher must realize the limitations of bibliotherapy and her use of it. Bibliotherapy cannot be viewed as an absolute prevention or cure but rather as a possible means to these ends. The University of Chicago research study reviewed by Cianciolo(3) emphasizes the fact that



the effects of bibliotherapy are contributory to changes rather than direct results as prevention or cure. Russell and Shrodes(16) caution that a particular selection may not be good for all children as what is meaningful to one child is not necessarily relevant to another. Each child brings his own intricate set of perceptions and reactions to literature based upon his needs at that particular time as well as his past experiences. A further limitation is implicit in the fact that interaction between the individual and the literature may not even take place. We cannot automatically assume that all children are receptive. In fact, they may not be willing to accept the teacher-suggested books but prefer to discover them independently. As Spache states, "whether bibliotherapy will occur may be dependent upon such factors as the age of the reader, the present status of his problem, and his emotional state, not to mention his ability to profit from the prescribed reading."(19) Another possible limitation is that identification may not always lead through the phases to the final phase — insight. Other behavior mechanisms may interfere with the success of the therapeutic process.(16) Readiness is another factor which may impose limitations. Generally the most favorable time for introducing the direct method of bibliotherapy is when a working relationship involving mutual trust has been established, the student's problem has been described and explored, and the student is exhibiting involvement in coping with his problem.(14)

With these limitations in mind,

however, the informed teacher may realistically plan for the application of either the direct or indirect methods of bibliotherapy — the means by which she can effectively utilize selected literature. Literature must be carefully selected to suit the child's developmental level and cultural background. In addition, the following guidelines should be considered by teachers: The book should be written on the child's independent reading level; the author should recognize characteristics of the children that are in keeping with research and he should deal with problems in a manner that can be supported by research; the problem faced by the book should be brought out as a main issue and it should be presented without moralizing; the book should be about the modern child or it should be so universal in appeal that the difference in time or locale is of little importance.(4)

Teachers seeking references of recommended books will find a wealth available in both books and periodicals. The most comprehensive single bibliography of professional literature concerning bibliotherapy is the one compiled by Corinne Riggs and published by the International Reading Association. In the multiplicity of publications listed, this author found the following most helpful: American Council of Education's *Reading Ladders for Human Relations* editions, and authors Cianciolo, Eakin, Kircher, Larrick, and Spache. See the bibliography of professional literature which follows for specific titles.

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