

TEACHERS' ADEQUACY IN APPLICATIONS OF BIBLIOTHERAPY IN CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

A typical elementary school student spends around 1000 hours in a given year at school. Research shows that one-fifth of these school age children struggle with a diagnosable psychological disorder but only five percent receives help from a mental health professional (Doll, 1996 as cited in Doll & Doll, 1997). In this case, during the time the student is at school, the classroom teacher cannot ignore these issues. Yet it is unclear how one can address these emotional topics other than referring the student to a mental health professional who is going to spend far less time with him/her than the teacher. If education aims to provide meaningful so permanent learning, teachers can't ignore emotional and social problems of the child.

One major tool for helping students deal with social and emotional problems is the children's literature. In addition to mental health professionals, teachers occasionally use books to help their students which is called bibliotherapy in common sense. They all have good intentions. However there is no clear answer to the adequacy of their skills as "bibliotherapists". This paper aims to investigate the teacher's preparedness in his/her application of bibliotherapy.

Definition of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is defined in different ways by various sources. Any lay person would define it something like "therapy with the books". It is known by many names such as bibliocounseling, biblioeducation, bibliopsychology, library therapeutics and literatherapy (Rubin, 1978; as cited in Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). Pardeck and Pardeck (1989) defines it as a way of building interaction between a facilitator and a participant using literature. In 1989, bibliotherapy was defined as a tool that can be used to facilitate healing (Smith, 1989) and growing toward emotional good health (Davis & Wilson, 1992) through books. By 90s the definition became more sophisticated that reflected the disputes about who should practice bibliotherapy: "Bibliotherapy is the therapeutic use of literature with guidance or intervention from a therapist" (Cohen, 1994). A more education oriented definition was provided by Coombs (2000): "Bibliotherapy is a technique that uses literature to help students develop self awareness and to better understand their problems." However the most powerful and comprehensive definition of bibliotherapy would be a process of interaction between the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of the reader and literature under the guidance of a trained helper. Care should be given to the phrase "trained helper" in this definition which points out the fact that the person who utilizes bibliotherapy is not necessarily a therapist but a "trained" helper who has basic skills and knowledge about psychotherapy, literature and development to utilize bibliotherapy.

As it is evident from the definitions, bibliotherapy was introduced as a tool for psychological health that can be utilized by mental health professionals. However by time it evolved to a form that teachers practice. In classrooms it is the process in which teachers select and refer appropriate reading materials depending on the needs of individual students to support their development of self awareness, problem solving skills and understanding of problems (Johnson et al., 2000). Even if it seems as a definition narrowed for particular use in classrooms by exchanging words like "healing" with "development" and "problems" with "needs", it is still critical to allow and/or expect teachers to intervene inner world of the child with their questionable knowledge and skills about psychology that they will need in every stage starting with "defining psychological needs" of the "individual" child.

Classroom Teachers and Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy in the educational sense that is defined in this paper is a form of practice can be challenging for one who uses it. Because one has to be skilled in therapeutic methods, knowledgeable about children's literature (Pardeck, 1990), and be familiar with developmental psychology. Claiming that bibliotherapy doesn't need sophisticated human expertise and can be applied by teachers, librarians, doctors, even lawyers (Bernstein, 1989 as

cited in Doll & Doll, 1997) would be a quite loose approach to the premises and the unique application of bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy in the classroom lies on the assumption that teachers know their students very well and they are skilled in building and carrying a special relationship between themselves and every student that each child feels completely comfortable about opening and going through the process of healing. However these cannot go further than being assumptions with the questionable skills of the teacher in this aspect. This is one side of the coin. Unfortunately on the other side of the coin, as mentioned earlier, the prevalence of psychological disorders in children in elementary classrooms is significantly high (Doll, 1996 as cited in Doll & Doll, 1997). So it is unavoidable for teachers to be detached from the psychological problems that the students face that are sometimes very serious.

It should be accepted that using books in classroom to deal with psychological issues may have its unique benefits; children feel connectedness to others and realize that others may experience the same feelings which may be evident from the discussion or other activities among the students following the reading materials (Chatton, 1988). But there is always a risk of turning this into a therapy session which may bring harmful consequences for the students unless it is applied or supervised by a professional who is trained in this technique.

In summary the leading question for this paper is "Can classroom teachers apply bibliotherapy?". The paper will particularly look at the most current literature on the uses and effectiveness of bibliotherapy in classroom environment; the process and techniques for bibliotherapy; the teacher's competence in bibliotherapy with regards to his/her teacher education program and experience; and the risks of mishandling the social emotional issues in a classroom. The project aims to provide practical implications for the classroom teachers and suggestions for future research in applying bibliotherapy in classroom environment.

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