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# Creating Possibilities Through Bibliotherapy

A Conference Presentation

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I have found that at international, national, and state conferences, in my presentations when I have referenced *Bibliotherapy*, in the Q&A session most questions were about this strategy even though it was **not** the focus of the presentation. This suggests an obvious and strong interest in this best practice strategy. *Bibliotherapy* is a counselling technique that has been adapted for classroom use. It is the technique of having students read about individuals in literature who may have similar problems. Basically, *Bibliotherapy* is a tool for helping people deal with problems or issues through reading novels or short stories about characters that possess similar problems. Because reading appeals to the imagination, *Bibliotherapy* provides an interaction between the readers and the story/action of the novel, leading to a less threatening situation than direct confrontation, thus “defusing” the problem. The idea is to help individuals realize that others have the same problems and that they are not alone. This is often the first and most important step in effectively dealing with their situation. The term “therapeutic reading” or “developmental reading” is also used.

There are four steps in bibliotherapy:

1. Identification: The individual recognizes the story’s conflict as a real situation.
2. Catharsis: The individual recognizes that s/he has the same problem.
3. Insight: The individual identifies possible solutions.

4. Application: The individual applies the insights to his/her own life.

By guiding individuals through these four steps either individually or in a group, we create an accepting environment in which the problem(s) can be discussed and eventually dealt with. This technique has become a popular strategy in working with gifted students. Since many of our gifted students are avid readers, bibliotherapy is a very effective way to respond to their social/emotional needs. Part of the success of *Bibliotherapy* in working with gifted learners is because we are using gifted students' strength areas: i.e. reading and problem solving. *Bibliotherapy* can be used in various ways: to explain problems/issues; to define problems/issues; and to solve problems/issues. In this session, we will define and describe the strategy, provide guide-lines for implementation, and share resources that will help participants locate literature that directly addresses a variety of issues. A Resource List will be provided.

**Goals of this session:**

1. Define and describe the technique of bibliotherapy;
2. Provide suggestions for introducing bibliotherapy into the classroom;
3. Identify various resources and novels that relate to specific issues.

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**Bibliotherapy Defined:**

Bibliotherapy is a tool for helping people deal with their problems through reading novels or stories about characters that possess similar problems. Because reading appeals to the imagination, bibliotherapy provides an interaction between the readers and the story of novel, which can be less threatening than direct confrontation.

(Adderholdt-Elliott and Eler)

**Bibliotherapy Approaches**

Bibliotherapy, a counseling technique adapted for classroom use, is guidance in solving personal problems through the use of selected readings. It may be either:

Therapeutic: A problem exists

or

Preventative: A shared concern or issue prompts an interest and is addressed before a problem exists.

This technique has become a popular strategy in dealing with gifted students. Since many of our gifted students are avid readers, bibliotherapy is a very effective way to respond to their affective needs.

### **Why Bibliotherapy?**

- ◆ Uses student strength areas: i.e. reading and problem solving;
- ◆ Gifted students are often avid readers;
- ◆ Developmentally, it is an appropriate tool for counseling teens;
- ◆ An effective way to deal with the *affective needs* of gifted students;
- ◆ “Defuses” a problem by showing that it is a shared and/or a common problem;
- ◆ Can be used to explain problems;
- ◆ Can be used to solve problems.

### **Steps in Bibliotherapy**

1. **Identification:** The individual recognizes the novel’s conflict as a real situation.
2. **Catharsis:** The individual recognizes that s/he has the same problem.
3. **Insight:** The individual identifies possible solutions
4. **Application:** The individual applies the insights to his/her own life.

### **Using Bibliotherapy**

1. Establish a climate of trust, respect, and caring: a must!
2. Plan structured thematic units using young adult literature that addresses the affective needs of gifted students.
3. Plan structured activities that provide for student responses to their feelings, such as the use of journals and the “Temperature Taking Activity” listed below. \*
4. Know your students and know children’s and young adult literature.
5. Recognize that there are some problems that you as a teacher or even a counselor are not equipped to handle and be ready to refer to a physician, psychologist, or psychiatrist.

#### **Your Goals:**

- Defuse the problem;
- Create an accepting environment in which the problem(s) can be discussed;

- Create recognition and ownership of the problem;
- Create a support group that is pledged to tackle the problem together.

### **Choosing the Books:**

1. Select challenging literature: Make sure it is not “bor-ing”! This is especially important for gifted readers;
2. Select “good” literature – find the best that is out there;
3. Use as many book lists as sources that you can find; [See Resource List below]
4. Look for situations in novels that evoke emotions;
5. Look for situations in novels that offer alternatives;
6. Look for characters with whom the reader can identify;
7. Don’t forget non-fiction.
  - a. Perfectionism: *What’s Bad about Being Too Good* by Adderholdt, M. & J. Goldberg.
  - b. Understanding Giftedness: *Gifted Kids Survival Guide* by Galbriath, J & J. Delisle.  
(Seney based on Halsted)

### **The Process:**

1. Select the book;
2. Read the book: If it doesn’t hold your attention, it will not hold a gifted reader’s attention!
3. Plan discussion questions;
4. Introduce the book, which can be done in a book talk. Hitting these points:
  - a. Hint at the plot or conflict in the book;
  - b. Suggest ways that the conflict(s) might related to the readers;
  - c. Tell enough about the characters to initiate identification with them;
  - d. Tell the readers why **you** like the book and why you think they might like it too!
5. Ensure that all students have read the book before the discussion(s) begin.
6. Set the parameters:
  - a. Confidentiality is important. The group should understand that what is said in the group is not repeated elsewhere. You might have to “cap” students from saying too much that is too personal or that later they will regret sharing.
  - b. Encourage students to share their coping strategies.
  - c. Let the conversation flow where the group wants it to go.
  - d. Outline good discussion techniques with the group before beginning. Especially stress the importance of listening: the first step in communication and that everyone must have a chance to talk.
  - e. Remember that your role should not be too intrusive – you are to facilitate and encourage.

- f. Help the group focus by highlighting the motivations of the characters, the problems in the book, and the solutions presented.  
(Seney based on Halsted)
7. Begin the discussion with a few fact questions to ensure that the group has read the book and to assess the group's general level of understanding and response to the book.
  - a. Set of general interpretative questions developed by *Halsted*:
    - i. What is the central character's biggest problem?
    - ii. How do you think he/she feels when...?
    - iii. What strengths does he/she have that help him/her cope?
    - iv. How has someone you know handled the same situation?
    - v. What would you have done?
    - vi. If you were his/her best friend, what advice would you give?
    - vii. How would that help the situation?
    - viii. What effect do the people in the book have on one another?
  - b. In having students write in response to some of the interpretative questions, use as a guide the stages of bibliotherapy: identification, catharsis, and insight by interpreting as: recognizing, feeling, and thinking.

8. **An Example:** Based on *Jacob, I Have Loved* by Katherine Patterson. [Latest paperback edition: 1990] Questions are from Halsted page 135. *Book Description: Amazon.com:*

*Sara Louise Bradshaw is sick and tired of her beautiful twin Caroline. Ever since they were born, Caroline has been the pretty one, the talented one, the better sister. Even now, Caroline seems to take everything: Louise's friends, their parents' love, her dreams for the future.*

*For once in her life, Louise wants to be the special one. But in order to do that, she must first figure out who she is . . . and find a way to make a place for herself outside her sister's shadow.*

### **Guiding Questions:**

- Hinting at the plot and conflict: *In Jacob I Have Loved, Louise's abilities are unrecognized, and all of the family's resources go for voice lessons for her musically gifted twin, Caroline.*
- Ways the conflict might relate to the group: *Louise grows up believing that her family loves Caroline more than they love her. Have you ever felt that way?*
- Guide the group to identify with the characters: *Louise is hard-working and resourceful but not much interested in schoolwork or in her own future until circumstances force her to make a decision.*
- Share why you like the book: *I like this book, especially because I like each of the characters – even Caroline – by the end of the book.*

- Let the discussion follow its course remembering the first three Stages of Bibliotherapy: Identification [*Recognizing*], Catharsis [*Feeling*], Insight [*Thinking*], Application, [*Applying to one's own situation*] comes later.

### One Last Cautionary Note:

- You must exercise caution: There is always the possibility that deeper problems may be present.
- As a teacher, you probably have not been trained as a counselor, so you must be sensitive enough and be ready to refer students to a counselor, who may in turn refer to a physician, a psychologist, or a psychiatrist.
- You must control the depth of the discussion. It is not necessary to go into great and explicit details. That is for trained professionals to handle. Students should be protected from saying too much that they may later regret saying or be embarrassing.
- Halsted [Page 111] lists these qualities of discussion leaders using bibliotherapy. The leader must have:
  - Maturity: self-awareness, self-acceptance, tolerance of others;
  - Integrity: respect for self and others that enables the therapist to avoid exploitation of emotions;
  - Responsibility: an attitude of responsiveness, as well as a willingness to guide group participants through potentially difficult discussions;
  - Adaptability: the ability to adjust plans to meet the needs of the group at the moment and to allow participants their own interpretations.

From: Hynes, A. & M. Hynes-Berry: *Bibliotherapy: The Interactive Process: A Handbook*.

- In addition: the leader must acquire and develop therapeutic attitudes such as:
  - Empathy: the ability to understand another person's feelings without actually experiencing them;
  - Respect: the recognition of the value of another person's feelings and of his or her inherent worth and uniqueness;
  - Genuineness: sincerity, spontaneity, openness; awareness and acceptance of one's own inner experiences.

*Halsted: Page 111*

9. **Finally:** One last great quote from Judith Halsted on Bibliotherapy:

*To use developmental bibliotherapy with gifted children, leaders should also know and enjoy children's literature, understand child development in general and that of gifted children in particular, have the trust of the children with who they are working, and know something about counseling and discussion techniques. [Page 111]*

**\*Temperature Taking Activity:**

- ✓ Ask "How do you feel \_\_\_\_\_ right now? (select one or more to add in the space) "physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally"
- ✓ Have students respond in their journals using this writing prompt formula:  
My temperature is...  
That is my (physical, intellectual or emotional) temperature because...

**Resources for Appropriate Books to Use in Bibliotherapy**

*Annotated Bibliography* (Chapter 8) in Halsted's *Some of My Best Friends are Books*. [Pages 237-499]

"Books for Children Featuring Gifted Children" in Silverman's *Counseling the Gifted*. [Pages 337-345]

Schroeder-Davis' *Appendix* in Kerr's *A Handbook for Counseling the Gifted and Talented*.

*The Book Finder 4: When Kids Need Books* by Spredemann-Dreyer.

**And Finally – Very Important:**

*Index of Categories for Annotated Bibliography* (Chapter 8) in Halsted's *Some of My Best Friends are Books*. [Pages 543-557]. Identifies books in her Annotated Bibliography by themes appropriate for Bibliotherapy. Example: in the Middle School Section: Differentness – *Jacob, I Have Loved* – and many more.

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## **Web Sties**

[www.infj.com/INFJ Bibliotherapy.htm](http://www.infj.com/INFJ_Bibliotherapy.htm)

[www.ericdigests.org/2003-4/bibliotherapy.html](http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-4/bibliotherapy.html)