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"Hey Wait! I Think I've Read about Something Like That!" Using Bibliotherapy to Help Teenagers Cope with Issues in Their Lives

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Introduction

Young adolescents today have a multitude of personal problems that confront them daily. These issues can be something as minor as a pimple that appeared overnight, or as major as seeing someone they love killed in front of their eyes. In many cases, dysfunctional family lives or the financial pressures of single parents trying to raise children have resulted in teens moving from place to place, and often from school to school. Hormones rage through their bodies, and they are trying desperately to find a niche to live in where life is a little easier, and a little safer for them. Just like adults, many teens have trouble compartmentalizing the various parts of their lives. They bring their concerns with them to school, and often are unable to focus on their academic life in the face of all the disruption in their physical, emotional, and spiritual lives. For some adolescents, this has been a way of life for them all the years they have been in school. As the years progressed, they fell further and further behind, experiencing less and less success in school. Many of them failed at some early age to acquire all the skills they needed to be good readers. All of these problems have produced a group of adolescents who, because of issues largely beyond their control, are regarded as students who will never be successful, and who will never have the skills to make a good life for themselves. Many times these students are above age level for the grade in which they are enrolled, and because of their disabilities they become behavior problems. In order to maintain discipline in the school, some administrators and teachers try to move the child on to a higher grade. We commonly refer to this as social promotion. But social promotion has its own drawbacks. When a child is grade-adjusted, he misses some of the foundational skills, and is forced to work even harder to be successful. Many adolescents fold under the pressure and just give up. They continue to be stereotyped as lower class, uneducated people who will never be successful.

Many of the students I teach in middle school live just such lives. They are poor readers, poor students, and it is my job to try to find ways in which I can add to their meager bank of reading skills, encourage them to read, and maybe help them become better students. One of the ways I have investigated is using bibliotherapy to help my students cope with the issues in their lives in a positive way. When I first became aware of this process, early in my teaching career, I realized that the only way it would be successful for students would be if they were to become motivated to read. I didn't know how to help my students *want* to read. Fortunately, through the efforts of educational redesign in Duval County, schools over the past ten years have put maximum emphasis on reading instruction focusing on students who are remedial readers, and trying to raise

reading levels in our county. Through working with my students year after year, I have realized that they *do* like to read. They enjoy reading books about their own personal interests, and at their own reading levels. Many times, the issues they bring to school with them are the very topics they want to read about, although for some students whose emotions are too raw as a result of their troubles, those issues are the *last* things about which they want to read. Bibliotherapy can offer an easier, emotionally safer way of coping with the problems that confront these adolescents.

Rationale for this Unit

An almost universal definition of bibliotherapy found in the literature is summarized by Karen Davis and Timothy Wilson, who say that "bibliotherapy is the process of growing toward emotional good health through the medium of literature" (1992, p. 2). Johnson, Wan, Templeton, Graham, and Sattler point out that the "documented use of bibliotherapy reaches back to the Ancient Greeks where it was primarily used with patients who were mentally ill, and continues through the twentieth century to present day use in a variety of settings" (2000, p. 2). McTague notes that "in 1916, Samuel Crothers prescribed books to his patients who needed help understanding their problems" (1998, p. 1). Obviously, there is a long history of using this technique with readers.

Several authors point out the difference between clinical bibliotherapy, defined as professional therapy under the guidance of a trained therapist, and developmental bibliotherapy, defined as teacher-suggested reading that might help students cope with issues in their lives (Davis and Wilson, 1992, Abdullah, 2002, Jeon, 1992, Johnson, 2000, Cornett and Cornett, 1980). Admittedly, most teachers are not trained professional therapists. However, good teachers get to know their students and the concerns that flow through their lives, and they want to help their students learn to cope with these problems in a positive way.

Children today must cope with a variety of difficulties, including, but not limited to, such situations as divorce, physical and/or mental abuse, substance abuse, handicaps, learning disabilities, value conflicts, isolation, and complex relationships (Cornett and Cornett, 1980, Davis and Wilson, 1992). Unfortunately, these issues don't stay at home when children come to school; children bring the issues to school with them, where they often get in the way of a child's success in the classroom. Cornett and Cornett point out that bibliotherapy can help to address those higher needs that the psychologist Abraham Maslow espoused (Cornett and Cornett, 1980). Aies lists many reasons for the use of bibliotherapy, all of which fall into Maslow's higher needs areas (1993). Aies also makes an important point in reference to teachers knowing the needs of their children well. She references the Bibliotherapy Fact Sheet, which notes, "...a practitioner must remember that [bibliotherapy] is more than just the casual recommendation of a certain book to an individual—it is a deliberate course of action that requires careful planning" (1993, p.2-3). This, perhaps, is what separates the process of bibliotherapy from simply reading a book that addresses an issue. The course of action involves the reader using the text to think her way through a problem and decide on a course of action that will help her to cope with the problem (Timmerman, Martin, and Martin, 1989).

The literature points out that the process of bibliotherapy for the reader involves three basic steps: identification, catharsis, and insight (Cornett and Cornett, 1980). In the first step, the reader connects with a character in a novel, short story, poem, or play who is experiencing a situation similar to the one the reader is experiencing. Because of this connection, the reader begins to experience a vicarious catharsis that releases

emotions connected with the situation. Finally, the reader begins to gain insight into the situation in her life, along with possible solutions to the problem. The reader may see ways to cope with the problem through the actions of the character in the reading material, or she may be prompted to think through some alternative ways of dealing with it based on what she has read. Several researchers suggest that the value of bibliotherapy lies not just in the book recommended to the child, but also in the reading process that accompanies the book. Forgan suggests using such prereading strategies as Venn diagrams and KWL charts to help students begin to think about the book and the issues it addresses (2002, p.76). Borders and Paisley suggest that students use reading journals during the reading process to record their thoughts about the situations in the book (1992, p.135). Pardeck suggests a variety of post-reading activities which enable the reader to process and discuss what she has read. These activities might include creative writing, illustration, and role-playing (1995, p. 84). All of these activities allow students to actively think through the issues the character(s) are experiencing and begin to gain insight into ways to cope with their own problems.

All of the literature cautions that bibliotherapy be undertaken with much thought and careful application. Johnson, et al, for instance, urge that the process must "... include supportive, safe and positive discussion, use of positive reinforcement, character and situation predictability, nonjudgmental questioning, student-generated questioning, timing, and meaningful extension activities" (2000, p. 7). In short, the teacher can't just suggest a book to a child, and never have any follow-up activities which allow the child to process what she has read in view of the problems with which she is coping. Warner cautions that teachers must be careful not to expose a particular child's problem to the class because that could cause the child to be "teased" (1980, p.109), further exacerbating the concerns of that child. Additionally, teachers must be "sensitive to the adolescent's ability to own the problem" (Nickolai-Mays, 1987, p. 19). Some concerns run so deep in the child's life that she cannot, at any one particular time, talk about or begin to cope with them. The teacher must make every effort to know her students well enough, and develop a relationship with them, so that they are comfortable with and open to her suggestions for reading materials. The hope is that then the students will open up so that she can help lead them through the process of gaining insight into whatever it is that troubles them. We must remember, again, that we are not trained therapists, but only teachers wanting to help prepare our students to live life to the fullest.

This unit seems to be particularly germane to my students at Lake Shore Middle School. The school is located on the west side of Jacksonville, Florida. We are considered an urban school in a suburban area. Our school is naturally desegregated because the populations of the neighborhoods from which we pull are naturally desegregated. The majority of our students come from a lower socio-economic level. Sixty-eight percent of our students receive free or reduced lunch benefits. Academically, we have a large population of students who score at a Level One or Level Two in reading comprehension on our state assessment test, the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test. In an effort to cope with this large population of struggling readers, each team of students at each grade level has two Language Arts/Reading teachers. This model was adopted in order to lower class sizes in these classes, giving these teachers more time to focus on addressing the reading deficits of their students.

As many as ten years ago, I had a majority of students who simply did not want to read at all. I struggled daily to find ways to intrigue students with books and other reading materials in an effort get them to read. In the past five years, however, largely in part to some additional emphasis in our county on teaching reading strategies to the struggling readers, I have begun to see students who do want to read, but who still have reading difficulties that need to be addressed. I also have many students who have tremendously debilitating personal issues in their lives. I stock the shelves of my classroom with books that I hope will attract my students. I listen to student conversations about books, and monitor what they are reading. In watching what

my students read, I have begun to notice that the books on my shelves that are the most popular are those that deal with some of the very issues with which my students are confronted. These books are passed from student to student, and even to friends of my students on other teams and in other grade levels. Through personal responses written by my students about these books, I find that they like them because they can see themselves and their friends in the characters. The whole premise of bibliotherapy is that if a reader can be presented with books that show characters coping with a problem in a positive way, then perhaps she can adopt some of those coping strategies to cope with the same sorts of difficulty in her own life, and gain insight into her own strengths. Hopefully, my unit will encourage my students to continue to explore these and other books and the problems with which the characters are confronted; and then cause them to begin thinking deeply about ways to deal with the concerns that plague their lives.

This unit addresses the use of bibliotherapy in two ways. First, the class will be involved in a novel study of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. This book deals with many of the concerns facing my students today, including loneliness, social alienation, alienation or loss of familial love, complications of friendship, the struggle to overcome adversity, making responsible choices, and taking responsibility for one's own actions. Without singling any student out, all students in the class will be able to see possible ways to cope with some of the problems they are personally facing as the class examines and analyzes this novel. In various writing assignments, such as their responses in dialogue journals and essays, as well as conversation with their peers and the teacher, students will be afforded the opportunity to thoughtfully consider ways that the characters deal with the issues that face them, and perhaps make the choice to try some of these solutions themselves. The dialogue journals will be read carefully by the teacher, and notes taken to help facilitate conferencing between the students and the teacher.

Secondly, through administering and then considering student answers to the Reading Survey and the Issue Completion Exercise, I will begin to develop an understanding of the problems my students are facing, and I can begin to suggest to them books that portray characters coping positively with the same predicaments. I will conference regularly and independently with my students, discussing the books they are reading as well as our class novel, and will try to elicit conversation about the concerns in the books that mirror the concerns in their personal lives. These conversations are intended to develop relationships with my students that will give me the opportunity to try to help my students through the rocky spots in their lives.

Goals for this Unit

I have five main goals for this unit. First, I want to analyze available data to determine the appropriate reading levels of my students. Secondly, I want to determine through surveys and conferences what types of materials my students enjoy reading. Next, I want to determine as best I can what issues are foremost in my students' lives right now. Then I want to find and stock my library shelves with books that show characters dealing positively with as many of these problems as possible. Finally, I want to help my students talk through the issues in their lives in non-threatening situations, such as dialogue journals, reading circles, and conferences, by discussing how the characters in their books cope with some of the same issues in positive ways.

While this is an effort to instruct in the affective realm of education, I am aware that my instruction must align with the standards adopted by Duval County. All middle schoolers are expected to master these standards by the end of the eighth grade. This unit will meet the Reading and Writing standards as outlined by Duval

County Public Schools. For a complete list of standards, refer to the appendix.

Unit Timeline

July - August 4, 2006

The teacher will complete the preparation for the unit.

August 7 - 11, 2006

The teacher will administer the Reading Survey and the Issues Completion Activities.

August 14 - 18, 2006

The teacher will conference individually with students about their reading choices.

August 21 - September 29, 2006

The teacher will facilitate student participation in independent reading, literature circles, and conferences. During this time the class will be involved as a whole in the study of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*.

October 2 - 9, 2006

The teacher will conference individually with students about the insights they have gained about issues found in the materials they have read.

Preparation for the Unit

In preparation for this unit, the teacher will access all available data about students' reading abilities. These data will include Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test reading comprehension scores, Qualitative Reading Inventory comprehension scores, fluency probe scores, and course grades for the previous year. The teacher will then locate or develop a reading survey that will outline student reading interests and practices and will locate or develop a completion activity that will allow the teacher to have insight about the issues students are confronting in their own lives. In order to be able to begin recommending texts to students, the teacher will research annotated bibliographies dealing with a variety of problems that might be confronting her students. As always, there never seem to be enough books in the classroom libraries. Therefore, the teacher will begin to seek out and acquire funding, and then purchase copies of as many of the titles as possible to add to her classroom library shelves. The teacher should try to choose a variety of reading materials from a variety of reading levels. In order to help students choose books that are at their independent reading levels, the teacher will develop a way to code reading materials to show reading levels. The teacher will also create a resource box with index cards listing book titles that deal with a variety of issues. Finally, the teacher will develop lesson plans which give students ways to select books appropriate to their reading levels and interests, while teaching appropriate group interaction behaviors and appropriate conferencing behaviors. These lessons will become very important as students work through their independent reading choices as well as the class novel. In an effort to evaluate the success of this unit, the teacher will develop a culminating reflection exercise designed to discover what insights students have gained from their reading.

Unit Lessons

Lesson Plan One: How Do You Know What You Want to Read?

Time Frame: Two Days

Essential Statements:

- Knowing and choosing what we like to read can enhance our reading experiences.
- Reading can open a window on ways we can deal with life's problems.

There are two purposes for this lesson. One is for the teacher to administer a reading survey and the Issues Completion exercise so that the teacher will have some information to use as she begins to conference with students. The second purpose is to familiarize students with the books available in the classroom library. Knowing what books are in the library, and actually interviewing many of these books, will help my students to choose books of interest to them. This will be done with a Book Pass.

Book Pass Teaching and Learning Activities:

1. Prior to the lesson, the teacher will group desks in quads, or in otherwise configured small groupings. In the center of each group, the teacher will place a stack of classroom library books. The books should be from various genres and reading levels, if possible.
2. The teacher will begin the lesson by reviewing the highlights of the discussion from the previous day, using the chart constructed during the class discussion.
3. Using a book from the classroom library, the teacher will review the way to interview a book. This will be a modeling activity. The teacher should look at and talk about what she notices about the cover of the book. She should read and comment on the blurb on the back of the book. She should look at the table of contents, if present, to get an idea of the chapter titles. She should read a little from the front of the book, and a little from the middle of the book. All the while, the teacher expresses her own opinions about the book.
4. The teacher should then help students review the interview process by asking them what they noticed her doing. She should make sure students understand the process.
5. She will then explain the class activity, the Book Pass. Students will divide their notebook paper into two columns lengthwise. At the top of the left column, students should write "Book Title and Author." At the top of the right column, students should write "Comments." The teacher will explain the following procedure:
 - Students will choose one book from the stacks in the center of their groups.
 - The teacher will tell students they are going to interview some books, and hopefully find one they might like to read.
 - The teacher will direct students to write the name and author of their books in the left-hand column on their paper.
 - The teacher will set the timer for four minutes. Students are to go through the interview process with the book they have selected. When the timer rings, students will take two minutes to write their comments about the book in the right-hand column on their papers. Students should comment on whatever they have noticed about the book.
 - When the timer rings again students will take the book from the student on their right, or select a new

book from the stack in the center of the quad.

- This activity should continue until students have interviewed at least four books, or until the teacher wants to stop the activity.

6. In a class discussion, students will be asked to discuss which one of the books on the interview list they might want to read, and why. Students should then check out their books, and spend twenty minutes in independent reading.

Note: If students want the same book, suggest alternate titles, or let the student go to the Media Center to check out the school's copy of that book. Thankfully, this doesn't seem to happen very frequently.)

7. Student observation sheets should be placed in the Reading section of their notebooks to be used in the future for reference when choosing books to read.

When this lesson is complete the teacher will begin independent conferences. These conferences will be shaped by what students have written on their Reading Survey and Issues Completion Activities. The teacher should be prepared to offer a suggestion to each student about a book or books that address some of the issues they have noted on their surveys. The point of this first conference is to begin to build a relationship with the student, fostering a climate of openness to sharing and suggestions. Obviously, conferences are limited by time. To get used to spending only four-five minutes with each student, the teacher might want to set the timer. This will help the teacher to stick to the conference schedule. Conferences might be held during independent reading time or during student work periods. The teacher might aim to conference with two or three students daily until the class has been covered. Also during this conference the teacher might direct students to the resource box she has created. She should tell students that they might browse through that box to get ideas when looking for a new book to read. She can show the student an index card and explain its elements: The book title, the author's name, the publication date, the number of pages, the reading level of the book, the concerns with which the book deals, and a short summary of the plot. Students should realize that this is a resource to help them find reading material that deals with the concerns that bother them.

Lesson Plan Two: Thinking About Characters

Time Frame: One - Three Days

Essential Statement:

- Making connections with the characters in a novel can help a reader to understand the themes of that novel.

Teaching and Learning Activities connected with *The Outsiders*:

1. The teacher will provide each group with a piece of chart paper and markers.
2. The teacher will create a stick-figure characterization chart (idea taken from Janet Allen's *Yellow Brick Roads*: See appendix for sample) of Dallas Winston to model for students how to do the characterization. (Dally is a character that most students don't immediately think of when given this assignment.)
3. Students will create their own charts for a character in the book, using Ponyboy's thumbnail sketches in Chapter 1 to help them. Students will present their sketches to the class, explaining why they chose the particular traits of that character.
4. Students will independently read Chapter 2 in the book. After reading this chapter, students will respond to the following prompt in their reading journals:

Which character in the story do you think you most resemble? Why?

5. The teacher will read the responses in the students' reading journals, and record this information to use when recommending books to students.

Lesson Plan Three: Chapter 12: "When I stepped out ..."

Time Frame: One - Two Days

Essential Statements:

- Thinking and writing about the painful issues in our lives can help us gain some insight into them, and possibly begin to solve them.

Teaching and Learning Activities:

1. The teacher should read this last chapter in the book aloud to students. During the reading, the teacher should facilitate discussion by using the chapter questions for Chapter 12 (chapter questions have been provided in the appendix for reference.)
2. During final conferencing with students related to this section of the book, the discussion should center around the idea that what Pony has learned to do, which is the reflection process he goes through in this last chapter, is what the students themselves have also learned to do as they have read both the novel and their own independently read books.

Further Insight into this Unit:

One of the important things to remember when using bibliotherapy in the classroom is that students should not be embarrassed in front of their peers. The teacher has to be careful when recommending books to students that deal with the issues in their lives. Just recommending the books is not enough, and sometimes too much discussion with the child about the problem may be embarrassing and counter-productive. This unit attempts to address several common issues that teenagers experience in the novel study of *The Outsiders*. Analyzing the survey, the completion activity, and the information gleaned through conferences with students can help the teacher make individual recommendations to students and avoid embarrassing them.

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