## Bibliotherapy: A tool to promote children's psychological well-being

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# Bibliotherapy: A tool to promote children's psychological well-being

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*The focus of this article is on bibliotherapy and child development. Particular attention is given to collaboration between psychologists and educators. The authors identify and discuss the benefits of bibliotherapy, provide guidelines for practice, and discuss implementation. Cautions, new directions, and particular issues relating to bibliotherapy in Portugal conclude this article.*

Children are exposed to different kinds of experiences and challenges as they grow. Their behaviors and development occur within a nested hierarchical context of interactions in micro and macro social influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), which reflect both their uniqueness and their multidimensionality. Therefore, children's environments should be a facilitator of their development, by addressing their needs and by providing multiple opportunities to explore and learn new problem-solving skills and social behaviors.

## School, teachers and psychologists: the importance of teamwork

Schools are the primary context in which children interact with each other. They do not serve only for teaching knowledge but also to educate students as citizens capable to define and achieve goals and to understand themselves and others. In school, children must learn how "to know," "to do," "to live together," and how "to be a person" (Delors et al., 2005), in a way that allows them to make decisions throughout their life.

So, it is important that schools address real-life situations that children might be experiencing and help them to analyze and learn how to cope with problems. Children may face problems in adjusting to school, making friends, working together, coping with fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration. Also they may be failing behind in school work, have lack of study skills, self-discipline, not be aware of their

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own aptitudes and abilities, and be upset about family events such as death of a loved one or the divorce of his/her parents.

All these questions need to be addressed and worked in a nonthreatening way, developing students' resilience and preparing them for the future. Teachers are very important in promoting resilience among children. Many children have in their teacher, a model to follow, and in school a secure environment where they could find support and understanding. Teachers are in the perfect position to help promote children's development, due to their familiarity with the developmental and learning theories, and more importantly, their regular contact with children. They know children's strengths and difficulties and how they act toward problems, and so they have the possibility to signalize when additional support is needed by a psychologist.

For all these reasons, teachers' work is not easy. Therefore, teamwork between school psychologists and teachers seems essential. When teachers perceive that a student is struggling they should request help from a psychologist. Psychologists could help understand child development and how it affects learning and behavior. They could also assist teachers to use other resources and strategies to help them address children's social, emotional, and behavioral needs, thus promoting the child development, and also they could strengthen the relationships between educators, parents, and community, which are always a big challenge.

One powerful tool that psychologist could develop among teachers to address the children's needs is bibliotherapy. What is in fact bibliotherapy? How can it be used? Is it possible to use bibliotherapy within classrooms when many curriculum activities have to be taught? What are the key components to promote teamwork between teachers and psychologists in this context? How to prepare future facilitators of bibliotherapy? In this article, we will attempt to answer these questions and demonstrate bibliotherapy's value as a tool that should be promoted in a school context. We will also discuss the importance of working with teachers to promote this particular strategy. Note that we will only focus on the implementation of bibliotherapy with young children, although bibliotherapy may be an important tool throughout all ages.

## The books' value: bibliotherapy

We think our life through narratives (Gonçalves, 2000a). The narratives we build guide our future organization, our emotional processes and interpersonal relationships.

Throughout life, adults have seen books as powerful tools. The book is an instrument that opens space to reflection, interpretations, and dialogues. It gives the opportunity to exercise the choice of thinking and behaving due to the multiple possible interpretations that can be made from a situation, creating new meanings.

Books are essential to promote emotional, social, and cognitive development of children. They guide children's thinking, shape their behavior, and even help solve problems. It allows discussing and analyzing situations in a nonfrightening way, which also facilitates the apprehension/comprehension of meanings, and transforms children as captains of their knowledge (Rosário, 2004).

What is the purpose of a story? Those who don't understand may think that it only serves to entertain. But that is not true. Stories have the power to transform the daily life. They call sorrows by their name, and sing the fear in songs, and so sorrows and fears get lighter and smaller. (Alves, 1999)

## What is bibliotherapy?

Bibliotherapy is a projective indirect intervention that uses carefully selected thematic books or reading materials of any kind, such as biographies, novels, poems, short stories, to help children cope with changes, emotional or mental problems (Branco, 2001; Lucas, Caldin, & Silva, 2006). It is reported to be effective with people of all ages, cultures, and in a wide range of settings (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005). Bibliotherapy has to be conducted by a trained person, such as a psychologist, a teacher, or librarian.

Bibliotherapy is not simply a reading activity, but the combination of reading with a method of reflecting on the reading. Dialogue is one of the key factors in this form of therapy. It also involves activities like creative writing, art, and others.

Overall, bibliotherapy is a dynamic and interactive process, "that helps children to recognize that life includes challenges that have impact on how people survive while developing a hardly resilient spirit in face of an array of circumstances" (Davis, 1992, p. 5). Bibliotherapy does not claim to cure, but rather to enlighten and to promote insight. It is intended as an adjunct to treatment (Caldin, 2009).

The rationale for using books as a coping mechanism for children with emotional and behavioral problems, or as a teaching tool, lies in the premise that people identify themselves with similar characters.

Children often have difficulty to identify and communicate their feelings. As children read and empathize with characters in the book, they gain insight into problems they may be experiencing, such as illness, separation, death, poverty, disability, alienation, and others. This identification and insight leads to a release of emotion, new goal-directed behavior, and new ways of interacting with others (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Research studies have suggested that bibliotherapy has been shown to reduce anxiety (Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006), to influence both students' behaviors and attitudes (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006) and to impart social and developmental skills (Prater et al., 2006).

Summarizing the bibliotherapy process occurs in four main steps. The first is recognition, whereby the reader experiences a sense of familiarity. The second is examination, where the reader begins to look at issues in the book and react emotionally. The third is juxtaposition, when the reader develops understanding and insight through an interaction with the therapist. The fourth is self-application, when the reader integrates the insights gained from the reading process into his or her own life (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986/1994, cited in McCulliss, 2012).

Yusuf and Mohd (2008) wrote:

When we read a good book, we bring in, our own needs and problems to the reading experience while interpreting the words according to our own

frame of reference. We became involved with the characters and we could relate to them. As they worked through a problem, we too would be emotionally involved in the struggle. We became interested with the main issues discussed in the literature and most of the time it does concern us. When we finished reading a book, we would often gain new insight about our own situation and ways to handle them. More than that, we would renew our hope to carry on with life and its challenges (pp. 76–77).

## Bibliotherapy's benefits and disadvantages

Since children tend to model characters that they identify with, bibliotherapy could be useful on identifying the thoughts and feelings of characters, through which children could identify, examine, and express their own thoughts, behaviors, and feelings (Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Prater et al., 2006). In other words, bibliotherapy helps increase the empathic understanding of others as it promotes interpersonal skills and emotional maturity. Also it enhances self-expression and self-concept.

Also through realizing that others have similar problems or situations, and by providing children with factual information about those problems experienced, it promotes the sense of belonging and decreases conflict. Emotions such as stress, anxiety, and loneliness can be reduced. Bibliotherapy also improves problem-solving and coping skills (Mitchell-Kamalie, 2002).

Although bibliotherapy has many advantages, its effectiveness may be limited by the availability of books or other materials on certain topics. Also the client could have no motivation for reading, or could be defensive when discussing the characters or could also project their own motives on to characters, thus reinforcing their own perceptions and solutions. Some of these limitations can be overcome through the regular implementation of it and the use of group discussions and other activities (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Other limitations can be pointed if the facilitator has limited knowledge of human development and developmental problems, and inadequate knowledge about appropriate literature. Facilitators thus need to be properly trained.

## Bibliotherapy: fields of practice

McCulliss (2012) stated that distinctions can be made between the way bibliotherapy occurs (reactive and interactive), the types of materials used (imaginative and didactic), and the purposes served by the practice (self-actualization and problem-solving, social acceptance/attitude, psychotherapeutic, and education). Frequently, bibliotherapy is divided into three fields of practice: clinical, client-developed, and developmental.

Clinical bibliotherapy is used with those clients exhibiting significant emotional or behavioral problems. It occurs in a structured setting, supervised by a therapist, counselor, or psychiatrist (Cook et al., 2006). The goals range from promoting

insight to change in behavior and to promote mental health. Both client and therapists could discuss the issue that is being focused on and explore the alternatives to the problem. The therapist role is to facilitate the expression of clients' emotions, to seek possible resolution of his dilemma and to guide him to deal with the situation (Davis, 1992; Yusuf & Mohd, 2008).

Client-developmental bibliotherapy provides for creative opportunities by developing a different, imaginative ending to a story, by discussing the effects of making specific changes in the story line. In this type of therapy, the client writes as if he was one of the characters addressing a specific area of concern, common to both him and the character (McCulliss, 2012).

Developmental bibliotherapy uses literature in healthy individuals, seeking to maintain emotional and mental well-being or self-actualization (McCulliss, 2012). In school settings, the use of structured developmental bibliotherapy sessions can be helpful to develop children's coping skills. It has been proved efficient in changing student's perceptions and behaviors toward students with disabilities in their classroom (Prater, 2003) and in teaching problem-solving (McCulliss, 2012; Rozalski, Steward & Miller, 2010).

For instance, a teacher was concerned about a student who stopped doing her homework and other school assignments and also, paid no attention to classes. The teacher knew that her grandfather had recently died. She requested the help of the psychologist on how to address this question. The psychologist helped the teacher elaborate and conduct a plan of bibliotherapy sessions. Throughout the sessions, the grief process was carried on. Talking about feelings of other people who face the loss of a loved one (person or animal) promotes the sense of belonging, decreases the feeling of being alone, and helps create a new meaning for their own grieving process. Another example, a teacher becomes aware that some of his students are being teased by others, due to some difficulties on the learning process. He felt the need to address these questions and to promote the acceptance of difference, tolerance, and respect. With the help of the school psychologist, he started weekly sessions of bibliotherapy to address these questions. After some time he noted that some of those students felt more confident and more able to solve these problems. They have had the opportunity to see that other people face similar problems and were able to solve them, thus promoting reflective thinking on how to solve these problems.

## Developmental bibliotherapy key factors

Developmental bibliotherapy can be used by psychologists, educators, teachers, parents, and others at any time on many levels and in all school grades. When implementing developmental bibliotherapy in school settings, it is important to attend to some key factors:

• It could be used as a book, a story section, a video, a poem . . . that serves the purpose of educators.

- Bibliotherapy might be implemented with small or large groups, or even with one person. However, the benefits increase when applied to a group, thus it creates a sense of belonging among members and provides the sense of security. Also the group dynamic allows members to share common experiences and this will lessen anxieties. Working in a group may lead an individual to develop a different perspective and a new understanding of problems. The ideal group size is six to eight participants. The group should be homogeneous. Members need to be close in chronological age or be approximately at the same developmental level so that the book selected can be suited for all group members (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993).
- Bibliotherapy should occur occasionally and spaced in time. For instance, once a week. It is not a magic one-time action, but a cyclic process with small effects cumulating and the potential of major change coming in a series of small, nontraumatic transformations of attitudes or behaviors (Rubin, 1978 cit. Mitchell-Kamalie, 2002), after a trusting relationship, as being created between the practitioner and the child. There are no pre-established number of sessions for bibliotherapy to take place. The number of sessions should be suitable to the group's needs. A book can be managed with children through many sessions, as it serves the purposes.
- It is important to create a place in the classroom setting for bibliotherapy sessions to take place, where drawings or other works can be exposed.

## Guidelines to conduct a bibliotherapy session

Implementing bibliotherapy involves four steps: identification, selection, presentation, and follow-up.

### Identification

Try to identify a specific problem that a child may be facing in your classroom. This task can be done through observation, parent conferences, and writing assignments.

### Selection

Identify potential literature that contains characters who struggle with a similar issue. Do not forget that the main goal of bibliotherapy is to make the children aware that there is more than one solution to a problem and to guide them on how to make a good decision by considering the pros and cons of each alternative.

Read the material prior to using it or recommending it. Long and complex stories must be avoided. Stories should take about 30 minutes or less to read. Be sure if it is appropriate for the child's age, gender, maturity, and background, and their particular intellectual, emotional, and social needs and also their interests. Otherwise the story will have no effect. "Students' interests are the most important single influence upon their attitudes towards reading." It is important to identify potential books that contain characters that are living similar problems and books that have

realistic characters and outcomes. The form of the book also makes a difference. Illustrations/pictures, for instance, should be clear and colorful (if any) (Foss, 2010).

For instance, children ranging between 3 and 6 years, due to their capacity to self-regulate behaviors and the importance that peers have for them, they may be more interested on books that address questions of their daily life problems. For seven-year-old children, stories of adventures (family or community) or even fairy tales are good choices. For that age, stories should have more images than text, and characters should have their characteristics pointed (good/bad . . .). For older children, real stories or fairy tales more elaborate are preferable, with images and text with simple sentences (Rosário, 2004). It is also important to take into account the author's message. It must encourage children to reflect and discuss, empathize with the feelings/actions of other children, hold strategies that could help to adjust and solve daily difficulties, and also advocate for the acceptance and well-being of all children (Rozalski et al., 2010).

## Implementation

Prior to each bibliotherapy session, it is essential to develop a work plan. It allows us to work in a precise way with the students' problems and find solutions. The plan should justify the pertinence of its implementation, the goals (learning goals), the didactic resources, and the methodology to be used. Also it should encourage children to reflect about the strategies of problem-solving, modeled by characters, and apply those strategies to their lives and situations.

Decide about the setting and time for sessions, and how the sessions will be introduced to children. Choose a method to involve a child or children with the literature. Materials should be presented to the child as a choice (Mitchell-Kamalie, 2002). Motivate children with introductory activities. Ask them questions to get a discussion going on a topic or invite them to recite a poem or sing a song related to the topic. It is also important to introduce the story "this story is all about . . ." focusing on the principal issue.

Members may listen to a storyteller, a reader, or a recording. While reading, is important that you show enthusiasm. Also focus more on images and less in the text. Bibliotherapy sessions aim to be magical, to promote a relaxation time and to stimulate imagination, thus creating new meanings (Lucas et al., 2006).

## Follow-up activities

Finally, follow-up activities should occur, while the reading is ongoing throughout sessions (Foss, 2010), to make sure that the message does not get lost in trivial points, to promote reflection and to make positive changes in behavior or attitude.

In the group, discuss the story in a nonfrightening way. Reinforce children's reflections and pay attention to children's comments. Do not transform the discussion in a sermon. Firstly, you should make questions intended to data collection *What is . . .? Where did . . .?, When . . .?*. Then, make questions that allow argument construction *How did you know that . . .; Why that . . .?* Consequently, make

questions aimed to finding solutions *What could happen if . . .? Where do you think that . . .?.* Finally, make questions that exercise decision-making *How do you solve this problem . . .? Why? What would you do if . . .?* (Rosário, 2004). Questions directed to the person's feelings should be made in a careful way, trying to maintain some emotional distance, necessary in bibliotherapy (Davis, 1992).

Other follow-up activities should be designed, such as retelling the story, acting out roles, using puppets, writing reactions, drawing, using computer and/or other art materials. These activities may help children discover that they are not alone. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, there are a variety of ways to deal with a dilemma and they can decide on a course of action.

Prior to each session while the reading is ongoing, it is important to reflect about the previous session. Also it is important to finish the session with an evaluation of the process, results, and direct children's thinking to self-evaluation.

When deemed necessary, involve the children's parents in the process. Offer suggestions for additional reading selections and/or activities to assist the children in dealing with their emotions and specific difficulties.

> The true author of one history is the reader that throughout the proposed activities, identifies herself with the presented situation and uses that experience to write and to rewrite their own history, with the new knowledge . . .
>
> (Adapted from Cheu, 2001, cit. Bachert, 2006).

### Final words: how to introduce bibliotherapy in schools?

We want children to be active in learning, prepared for a more demanding society, and to develop into good citizens. We want children more capable of solving problems and with prosocial behaviors. However, do we promote true learning among children? Do we instigate reflection, critical and creative thinking? How many times do we forget to say to children that they have an important role on constructing their own future? Sometimes children are stuck in their own difficulties/fears and see no future, and so, they do not invest in learning. Other times, they are so centered on winning, that they find difficulties to accept and respect others or, do not accept that mistakes are an important part in the learning process.

These questions must be deemed by educators. Schools, teachers, psychologists, and parents are the scaffolders of children's development. They should guide children to take over their learning process, and to draw new possibilities for their lives.

Therefore, teachers must promote reflection and consequently show children that their behaviors have an impact on others behaviors and in their social environment. For doing so, they should be supported by psychologists, in finding new strategies that address these issues.

Life as a narrative is not a final product. It is always written in dialogues, reflections, and decisions that we constantly make.

Therefore, bibliotherapy can be a useful tool when promoting child development (including mental health, resilience, and life projects). It could, in fact, help enhance children's resilience, assertiveness, self-confidence, their ability to reflect, to solve problems persisting when confronted with obstacles, and key competences in a more demanding society. Bibliotherapy could help children to improve their personal and social judgment, enhance empathy, tolerance, respect, and acceptance of others, key factors in a society. For teachers, the implementation of bibliotherapy also has many advantages. It could help strengthen the bonds between students and their teachers, as it addresses developmental problems in a nonthreatening way; prevents behavioral problems and diminishes classroom conflict; enhances teamwork, acceptance, and tolerance. Also it could help developing children's critical and creative thinking.

For all these reasons, bibliotherapy sessions should be implemented in classroom settings, by the curriculum teachers, as they know their students' needs and have a powerful bond with them. If this is not possible (e.g., for second/third grade teachers), bibliotherapy sessions could occur in complementary activities, oriented by the school psychologist, a noncurriculum teacher or a librarian, working always in a team with the teacher of those students.

Although bibliotherapy is a very powerful tool, it is not very widespread in Portugal as yet. Few Portuguese researchers have dedicated their studies to bibliotherapy applied in school contexts (e.g., Mendes, 2008; Silva, 2011; Van-Zeller, 2011). There are some studies and projects that work in the field of self-regulation/decision-making and other transversal aspects of learning, using narratives as a primary tool, and activities that promote the reflection. For instance, for the first to third grade students there is the project named "Sarilhos do Amarelo" (Rosário, Núñez, & González-Pienda, 2007) and "As Aventuras do testas" (Rosário, 2004) and for higher education students the projects are "Cartas do Gervásio ao seu umbigo" (Rosário, Pérez, & González-Pienda, 2007) and "Eu e os outros" (Melo et al., 2006). Also there are some written books to address emotional questions that could be helpful, used mostly in the therapeutic context (e.g., "Pôr o medo a fugir" de Gonçalves, 2000b).

Almost all Portuguese school have libraries. Therefore, we seem to have the tools but we need to know how to better use them in order to develop children's skills. We need to promote guidelines to implement bibliotherapy and form new partnerships among psychologists, teachers, librarians, and even parents. It is important to create a bridge between micro and macro social contexts, which aims to improve children's resilience, emotional competence, and the skills to cope with daily life problems.

To promote bibliotherapy among teachers and other school personnel, education is needed, guided by trained psychologists. Bibliotherapy facilitators should have two main goals. The first aim should be to attend the particular needs/worries of teachers regarding their profession, thus preparing them to better promote students' resilience, critical thinking, and other skills. The second aim for bibliotherapy education should be to provide teachers with theoretical and operational concepts of bibliotherapy. Psychologists should coach how to select books adequately, plan

bibliotherapy sessions, refine the problem into measurable and observable goals, design adequate activities to address those goals, and evaluate the process. Rosário (2004) noted that "a happy ending is a well planning start, a middle well executed and also a final that is well evaluated" (p. 2).

Educating bibliotherapy facilitators is deemed necessary, as it must be handled with great sensitivity, especially if the risk of emotional catharsis is involved (Foss, 2010). Practitioners should have the personal quality of mental stability, good listening skills, and a genuine interest in working with others. Also therapists should be able to make accurate, empathic interpretations of the participant responses through literature and dialog and be able to make questions that generate reflection. If a facilitator does not have sufficient knowledge of children and their normal development, it can be ineffective and could cause further harm (Foss, 2010). For instance, it is necessary to ensure that the personal values of the practitioner are not imposed and that sensitive topics like death, sex, and so on, are dealt with care. Most important of all, care should be taken to avoid a moralizing or preaching approach.

Also it is important to work with parents/caregivers and others associated with the child, not only school personnel. They are important elements when collecting information. This could enhance the relationship between school, family, and the community.

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