

Bibliotherapy: Using Books and Stories for Growth and Healing

Zarah C. Gagatiga
The Beacon Academy
Cecilia Araneta Parkway, Binan, Laguna
Philippines 4024
zarah.gagatiga@gmail.com / librarian@beaconacademy.ph

Abstract: *Bibliotherapy, akin to reading guidance, is one library service that can foster and enhance life skills. This workshop paper is designed to introduce the basic techniques of developmental bibliotherapy to school librarians servicing children and young adults. Sample bibliotherapy activities are included in the workshop paper as well as bibliotherapy programs and services being implemented in libraries in the Philippines and other countries like the UK.*

Keywords: bibliotherapy, reading guidance, library programs and services, children's library services, young adult library services

Introduction

In the IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto of 2002, one would find there this statement: *The school library is integral to the educational process.*

School libraries not only support instruction and strengthen the content and concepts of the curriculum, but through its services and programs, can foster the enhancement of life skills. Librarians are capable of designing and implementing programs and services that support the acquisition of literacy skills; the growth of cultural knowledge; and the development of social skills, particularly those of the students and generally those of the learning community. With enough administrative support, libraries are part of a person's and a community's journey to lifelong learning.

Life skills, as defined by the WHO, pertain to the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (WHO, 1999). A person endowed with a set of life skills is flexible and able to survive challenging situations in life. Moreover, UNESCO and UNICEF list ten life skills that are best applied in health and social contexts. These life skills are: problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication skills, decision making, creative thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, self awareness building skills, empathy, and coping with stress and emotions. (UNICEF, 2003). Life skills enable a person to think clearly leading to a healthy life style and well-being.

As school libraries provide the fundamental function of access to books and literature appropriate for children and young adults, this contributes to the development of their life skills. By structuring a reading guidance program and services geared to this objective, children and young adults are given a support system as they grow and learn through life. Librarians become partners of parents, teachers and the school staff in raising children and

young adults as healthy citizens of their country and the global nation.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy as a service under a library's reading program is not new at all. The American Hospital and Institution Libraries, defined bibliotherapy as guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading (ALA, 2013). Brain research has something to say about this response of the brain when reading a book. During reading, the brain simulates what happens in the story, using the same circuits used when the actual event is taking place. On a neurological level, since the brain is active when reading, the reader becomes part of the action (Sautter, 2010). When literature is read, the brain is stimulated to imagine, to visualize and act out the words in the pages of the mind.

Brewster (2007) in her study of book prescription shops in the UK identified bibliotherapy as the therapeutic use of the written word to help people in any situation in life; and the provision of health information through books. The Kirkless Council in the UK that runs a bibliotherapy service makes use of books, stories, and poems to make people feel better about themselves and about others. These are recent definitions and applications of bibliotherapy. Nonetheless, it has been around since the ancient time. Two Greek words, *biblion* and *therapeia* make for bibliotherapy. *Biblion* means books. *Therapeia* means healing. In Thebes, a library held the sign, "the healing place for the soul" (Afolayan, 1992).

Libraries then and now function as places where a person's knowledge, mental health and personal well-being are nourished and nurtured all together. School libraries are ideal venues of bibliotherapy service since education is aimed at the development of the whole person. To quote Aristotle, "educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all".

Techniques in Bibliotherapy Services

There are two ways to conduct bibliotherapy: clinical bibliotherapy and developmental bibliotherapy (CMU, 2013). The former may be called as medical bibliotherapy and the latter as social bibliotherapy.

Clinical bibliotherapy is prescriptive. Used by doctors and mental health practitioners, the technique is aimed at solving a particular emotional and behavioral problem of a patient. On the other hand, developmental bibliotherapy focuses on personal growth and self knowledge. This is a bibliotherapy technique that teachers and guidance counselors can employ with their students in their classes and in the school. Guidance counselors and caregivers of children have the academic and professional preparation in counseling and the understanding of developmental stages of children. This does not mean that developmental bibliotherapy is exclusive to them. They have an edge since they are equipped with counseling techniques. Teachers can perform well as developmental bibliotherapists because they have learned a set skill in crafting questions and inquiry based discussion strategies geared to the understanding and mirroring of literature to a reader.

Where do librarians fit in the delivery of developmental bibliotherapy?

The Kirkless Council is encouraging. There are two requirements that bibliotherapists must have. These are the passion for reading and the ability to communicate with others.

Librarians can help guidance counselors and teachers by providing a bibliography of books with summaries, classified according to age and theme. Such a list would be helpful for bibliotherapy purposes because this counseling technique depends highly on the book used (Pelias, 2010). If the librarian has a passion for reading and is able to communicate well with others then there is reason to take on the role of bibliotherapist.

Pelias, a trained guidance counselor and bibliotherapist, offers these tips for librarians and non-counselors interested to wear the bibliotherapist's hat:

- 1) Read so that you know a variety of materials that can be used - nothing beats personal knowledge of a story especially a personal connection to a story;
- 2) Identify significant points of the story that touches on the theme. Make sure not to miss asking questions that dwell on these;
- 3) Be keen to connections you know the student can make with the selection at hand.

Looking at these practical tips, it seems that the librarian bibliotherapist can administer bibliotherapy service in the library. After all, library guru RS Ranganathan taught many librarians in his day and in this age this fundamental tenet: to every book a reader; to every reader a book. It will be beneficial though, if the education of some librarians should also include courses in psychology and literature (Jackson, 1962).

The Bibliotherapy Process

When conducting bibliotherapy, the librarian bibliotherapist needs to be aware of the three stages happening in the reader. These stages are identification, catharsis, and insight.

In the first stage, the reader identifies the existence of a personal problem; an anxiety; a dilemma; the presence of a challenge and difficulty currently happening in his or her life. The second stage is catharsis or "mirroring". The reader sees the character in the story having the same problem or going through similar challenges. It may also be that the theme and subject of the story or the situation the character is in presents the same quandary the reader is in. This is important since a reader needs to realize that certain challenges, difficulties, and problems encountered are not isolated to his or her own sphere of experience. In this stage, the reader is made aware that he or she is not alone in facing up to a problem or a difficulty. The last stage is insight that leads the reader to a resolution or a course of action that will solve his or her problem.

In preparing for a bibliotherapy session, the librarian bibliotherapist follows a process of identifying the needs and profile of his or her readers. Partnering with teachers and collaborating with the guidance counselors is an integral part of this process. Next is the matching of books, literature, even media, to the needs of the readers. There should be a specific time and place to conduct the bibliotherapy session. The bibliotherapy session must follow a design that primes and motivates the reader, engages the reader in the text, and the conduct of follow up activities. Lastly, closure on the session should take place by helping the reader articulate his or her insight and resolution.

Bibliotherapy Programs and Services

In the Philippines, bibliotherapy services in school libraries and academic libraries are just starting to be explored by librarians and school personnel. The high school library of Miriam College and the grade school library of San Beda College have a bibliotherapy collection. Both libraries have not gone to conduct bibliotherapy sessions, nor have they collaborated with the guidance counselors. When guidance counselors and teachers ask for book titles and list of books for developmental reading, then, librarians turn them to the bibliotherapy

collection. Similarly, the Adamson University library has a collection for college students. Servicing older readers, books in the university's bibliotherapy collection include worksheets for readers to fill out and aid them in reflection. The librarian gathers the answers of readers from the worksheet, and then, identifies books that match reflections and insights of regular readers who troop to the bibliotherapy collection. These books are then placed on specific display shelves in the collection.

In the Beacon Academy, a startup bibliotherapy collection is in place. This is a growing collection as the librarian and guidance counselor have begun identifying issues, problems, concerns, and challenges that the Academy's high school students face. Once the bibliotherapy collection is sturdy and sufficiently answers the needs of the students, the conduct of a one-on-one bibliotherapy session shall take place. This is a program, a work in progress, between the library and the guidance office in light of strengthening services for students.

In the UK, the Kirkless Council and the School of Life carry bibliotherapy programs and services for individuals, families, and married couples (The School of Life, 2013). The former conducts group discussions on books read focusing on reader responses to literature. In Australia, the welfare system set up a bibliotherapy service for adolescents with chronic illness in secondary colleges there (Harvey, 2010). Although this is a study that looks at bibliotherapy in a clinical method, books and reading are used to assist adolescents towards well-being.

Sample Activity Worksheets

Sample1- Book/Story: The Giving Tree

Reader's Response: The Giving Tree

A. Describe the two characters of the story The Giving Tree.

The Boy	The Tree

B. Reflection on these questions. Answer them as spontaneously as possible :-)

1. Which character can you relate more to?

2. What similar experiences do you have with the Boy or the Tree?

3. Think of a time in your life when you gave so generously like the tree. How did you feel?

4. Think of a time in your life when you have been generously given like the boy. How did you feel?

5. Can you measure generosity? Is there an end to giving and receiving?

C. Action: Something to do

Thank a person in your life, a family member, a friend or a colleague, who has greatly helped you. Write that person a letter or make a small card to express your gratitude. What acts of love can you show to others?

Sample 2- Pied Beauty by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Reader response to the poem

A. Personal Timeline

	Grade school	High School	College & Adult Life
Highlights			
Lowlights			

Can you see patterns and cycles? What are these patterns and cycles? How often did these pattern and cycle appear? What does the highlights and lowlights of your life tell you?

B. Reflection points

What did you see in the poem?

What did you feel or hear in the poem?

What aspect in your life you consider as strange, fickle, dim, sour and sweet?

What do you make of the colors and flavors in your life?

C. Action: Something to do

Listen to Katy Perry's song, Fireworks.

What unique beauty do you have? How can you let your inner beauty shine?

Bibliography

Afolayan, J. A. (1992). Documentary Perspective of Bibliotherapy in Education. *Reading Horizons*, 33(1), 137-148.

American Library Association. (n.d.). Bibliotherapy. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/tools/bibliotherapy>

Brewster, E. (2007). *Medicine for the Soul*. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Sheffield.

Central Michigan University. (n.d.). Bibliotherapy Education Project. Retrieved from <http://bibliotherapy.ehs.cmich.edu/>

Harvey, P. (2010). Bibliotherapy Use By Welfare Teams in Secondary Colleges. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(5), 29.

International Federation of Library Associations. (n.d.). IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto 1999. Retrieved from <http://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-school-library-manifesto-1999>

Jackson, E. (1962). Bibliotherapy and Reading Guidance: A Tentative Approach. *Library Trends* 11, 118-126.

The Kirkless Council. (n.d.) Bibliotherapy and the Reading and You Scheme (RAYs). Retrieved from <http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/community/libraries/bibliotherapy/bibliotherapy.shtml>

Pelias, T., personal communication. June 17, 2010.

Sautter, U. (2010). Reading, writing and revelation: How the written word refresh body, mind and soul. Odewire: News for Intelligent Optimists. <http://odewire/2446/reading-writing-revelation.html>.

The School of Life <http://www.theschooloflife.com/shop/couch/bibliotherapy/>

UNICEF Life Skills http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_7308.html

WHO Mental Health Promotion: Partners in Life Skills Education http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/30.pdf

Biographical Note

Zarah C. Gagatiga is teacher librarian at the Beacon Academy, an IB World School offering the Middle Years Program and Diploma Program, in Binan, Laguna. She is the president of the Philippine Board on Books for Young People (PBBY 2009-2013). Her first book, *Tales From the 7,000 Isles: Filipino Folk Stories* is co-authored with international storyteller, Dianne de las Casas and was published by ABC-CLIO in the US in 2011. She has two books for children, *A Tale of Two Dreams* and *My Daddy! My One and Only!* to be launched in August 2013 through Lampara Publishing House. She blogs at <http://lovealibrarian.blogspot.com>