

Utilizing Bibliotherapy Within Language Arts Instruction Can Increase and Contribute to Students' Mental Health and Overall Well-Being

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Abstract: Research has shown that there is a rise in mental health issues amongst young children, causing concern to educators. In order to help students, teachers have engaged in the therapeutic technique, bibliotherapy, which revealed positive effects on overall student mental health. Likewise, the combination of bibliotherapy and Language Arts has not only helped children with mental disorders, but it has also allowed other students to empathize and understand what peers are experiencing. There are several techniques educators can use to incorporate bibliotherapy into the curriculum such as the interactive read-aloud during whole-group instruction. With open communication and collaboration with colleagues, teachers have been able to successfully implement bibliotherapy into Language Arts instruction and significantly support the mental health of students.

Introduction

Imagine the first day of school. Students are running into your classroom, talking and greeting one another. They give you hugs, tell you about themselves and bring you gifts. However, there is one student that avoids walking into the classroom. You notice her eyes are red and her head is hanging low. She does not make eye contact with you and heads straight for her locker. Because it is the beginning of the school year, you decide to give the child time to adjust in a new classroom. As days go by, you notice the student continuously staying isolated, opting out to play at recess, and eating lunch alone. Likewise, the student consistently complains of feeling ill. Due to years of teaching, you realize the child is struggling. You decide to take action and set up a conference with the student's parents.

During this conference, the parents admit that their child was recently diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. They share that their child's behavior began to change a week before school began and each day has been a battle to get the student on the bus. She often has meltdowns about going to school for she worries about her looks and what her classmates will think of her. In addition, the parents share that their child has not been sleeping at night. With hopes of the disorder healing on its own, the parents stated they thought it would be best not to involve the school. However, you inform the parents that you are there to help and reassure them that you will make their child love school and feel as if they belong in the classroom. Immediately, you ask yourself, "How can I make sure this child's mental health is supported within my classroom?" As you begin researching, articles discussing the incorporation of bibliotherapy within language arts instruction have begun to surface. You question, "What is bibliotherapy and how can I utilize it in my own classroom to help out this struggling student?"

As educators, it is our job to ensure that we are supporting the mental health of students within the field of early childhood education. Over the years, mental health has shifted from a topic to avoid to one that is openly discussed. Because of this shift, the prevalence of mental health disorders in younger children has risen. It is evident that almost twenty percent of children will experience a mental health disorder during their first years of schooling (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). Likewise, the CDC states that 1 in 6 children meet the qualifications to be diagnosed with a childhood mental illness (Danielson et. al, 2020). This means that there is at least one child in each classroom struggling with a mental illness like the scenario described above. In order to stop the negative consequences of mental health illnesses, researchers have begun to take a closer look into an emerging therapy: bibliotherapy. By utilizing bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction, teachers can increase and contribute to students' mental health and overall well-being.

What is Bibliotherapy?

Bibliotherapy is defined as "...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" (Lucas, 2003, p.139). The term was first coined in 1916 by Rev. Samuel McChord Crothers, who first saw bibliotherapy as a therapeutic process (Jack & Ronan, 2008). At first, bibliotherapy consisted of adults reading prescribed materials, discussing the content with therapists and understanding the impact of the material on their well-being. As doctors continued prescribing the use of non-fiction, fiction, poetry or self-help manuals, it became evident that there was a positive effect on the mental health of patients. Bibliotherapy quickly transitioned from hospitals to libraries, group settings and classrooms (Jack & Ronan, 2008). The main focus of this paper will be the utilization of bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction.

Maich (2004) expresses that bibliotherapy is an emerging process within schools that is non-invasive and an alternative way to help children externalize and understand their emotions. The utilization of bibliotherapy consists of students experiencing three crucial stages: identification, catharsis and insight. Identification takes place as students make connections with an identified character to discover that they are not alone. Likewise, researchers state that educators should encourage students to make connections with incidents from their own experiences (Morawski, 1997). Students will then experience the next step: catharsis. This is known as the process of students releasing emotions concurrent of the character within the story. In the last stage, insight, students are able to utilize discussions to expand knowledge about themselves (Friess, n.d). As educators guide students through these stages, students will experience the therapeutic effects bibliotherapy.

The overall goal of bibliotherapy is noted in an article written by researcher Al Khalik. Khalik (2017) informs readers that the aim is to educate children about their psychological problem and deepen their understanding of their feelings (p. 31). Bibliotherapy has the capability of helping children develop social skills and experience validation about themselves. Overall, bibliotherapy is seen as "...a projective indirect tool that employs literature for growth of children that can be used to teach children on life's challenges by encouraging the to connect with book characters..."

(Khalik, 2017, p. 13). When bibliotherapy is utilized within Language Arts instruction, it is evident that there are positive outcomes regarding the social-emotional development of students.

The Benefit of Teachers Utilizing Bibliotherapy in Language Arts Instruction

Students today are facing several mental health issues such as panic attacks, anxiety disorders and depression which can potentially cause both behavioral and learning challenges. According to Yuan et. al (2018), "...depression and anxiety disorders are the two most common psychological disorders in children and adolescents..." (p. 354). It has been found that these disorders can lead to poor academic performance, lack of motivation and difficulties with interpersonal relationships (Yuan et. al., 2018). As these disorders continue to become more prevalent, teachers begin to take on additional roles. One significant role within a teacher's relationship with students is providing a safe and inviting environment where children are provided with engaging materials, positive social interactions and the tools needed to promote well-being (Chappell & Szente, 2019). In order to achieve this role, educators have engaged in the utilization of bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction.

Heath et. al (2017) discusses a study conducted focusing on the effects of bibliotherapy on a group of students struggling with depression. The immediate results and 6-month follow-up showed that students placed within a bibliotherapy group experienced decreased major depression (p. 552). We also see the use of bibliotherapy having positive effects on aggressive behavior in children with emotional and behavioral disorders (Khalik, 2017). In a study conducted by Kari Newman (2015), results showed a decrease in emotional and behavioral problems for boys aged 9 to 11 when bibliotherapy was intertwined within the Language Arts curriculum. Not only can bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction help struggling students, but it can also be used as a prevention measure. Catalono (2008) makes it known that teachers can use bibliotherapy to increase awareness as well as initiative critical thinking skills (p. 18). Incorporating bibliotherapy into Language Arts has the capability of allowing students to empathize and understand peers going through childhood trauma (Catalono, 2018). Likewise, Newman's study revealed bibliotherapy was found to be an intervention strategy that participants in the study found to be enjoyable. The teachers within this study also noted the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in supporting reading comprehension, analysis of text, communication skills and listening skills (Newman, 2015). In order to experience these benefits of bibliotherapy, researcher have recommended taking advantage of children's books.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, teachers have found success when utilizing children's books to target current emotions or struggles happening within the classroom (Ho & Funk, 2018). These books allow students to relate to a character's experiences and realize they are not alone in their struggles. Parker (2005) states that "Children's literature provides an effective vehicle for interweaving character education into existing curricula to address problems in everyday life" (p. 3). Researchers share that "Bibliotherapy can be an effective intervention when perhaps no other intervention is available for a child

with a social emotional problem, in or beyond the school environment” (Maich & Kean, 2004, p. 5). As one can see, studies have proven that utilizing bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction can be beneficial for currently struggling students and a preventative measure for others. After all, “The spoken word (e.g. parables, myths, fables and legends) and the written word have been used and are believed to be two of the most influential tools to heal and change the human condition” (Jack & Ronan, 2008, p. 161).

How to Incorporate Bibliotherapy in Language Arts Instruction

There is strong evidence that factors within a school’s environment can significantly play a role in children’s mental health (Harding, et. al, 2019). Students spend over six hours a day in school and over half of those hours are spent with a homeroom teacher. This means that educators have the ability to implement strategies such as bibliotherapy into Language Arts instruction to support the mental health of students. However, before incorporating bibliotherapy into the Language Arts curriculum, teachers need to be aware of the processes and steps to take.

According to Catalono (2008), before one begins bibliotherapy instruction, teachers need to ensure there is a sense of trust and good rapport within the classroom. When a child feels safe within the classroom context, they are more likely to experience a sense of calmness and security, which will allow for greater discussion during the bibliotherapeutic process (Chappell & Szente, 2019). Likewise, teachers must focus on one specific problem a student or several students are experiencing. This step is critical, for it drives the selected reading materials. Friess (n.d.) informs educators that they must also take into consideration the child’s age. It is crucial that the students will be able to make connections and similarities with the character in the reading. Once materials are chosen, the teacher should generate goals, tasks and activities. After engaging in these steps, an educator will be ready to implement bibliotherapy; however, one must ensure that after instruction is complete, time is taken to assess the effectiveness of bibliotherapy within their Language Arts instruction. After becoming familiar with the steps and stages of implementing bibliotherapy, educators must choose a specific strategy. Three options educators can choose from are an interactive read-aloud, collaborative inquiry and silent independent reading. The strategy most often used in early childhood education is the first strategy, an interactive read-aloud.

An interactive read-aloud is defined as “...a whole-group instructional context in which you read aloud a chosen book to the whole class, occasionally and selectively pausing for conversation” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2021, p. 1). During an interactive read-aloud, students are able to view images and hear stories that are beyond their reading level. However, during this time, students have the ability to make connections between themselves and the story. An interactive read-aloud should be implemented by introducing the text, reading the text and discussing the text. It is important to note that the discussion and reflection process during an interactive read-aloud are critical in order to experience the benefits. Likewise, research indicates that dialogue is crucial characteristic of implementing bibliotherapy, for the reflection process of the reading is considered the backbone of treatment.

Although there are several components to bibliotherapy, it is important to note that the use of theoretical and practical knowledge during the implementation of bibliotherapy is important; therefore, teachers should utilize assistance within the school (Morawski, 1997). For example, teachers can consult librarians or school counselors on the specific reading materials in order to achieve their objectives or intended outcomes. Likewise, teachers should use open communication with parents to identify additional needs their child may have. Bibliotherapy requires a team effort and emphasizes the use of planning. However, when teachers, counselors, and librarians work together, bibliotherapy has the capability of transforming student mental health for the better.

Conclusion

With an increase in mental health, it has become more important for teachers to support the mental health of young children in early childhood education. One method educators can use is bibliotherapy, the process of using books to heal the mind. Research indicates that utilizing bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction can significantly support the mental health of students. There are several strategies teachers can use to implement bibliotherapy within Language Arts instruction; however, a common strategy used in early childhood settings is an interactive read-aloud. Throughout the utilization of bibliotherapy, it is important to remember to take advantage of additional support systems within the school district. Perhaps with the use of bibliotherapy, there will continue to be a decrease in mental health amongst youth, for “We lose ourselves in books. We find ourselves there too” (Anonymous).

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About the Author

Bailie Brock received her B.A. in psychology from The Ohio State University and her Master of Education from the University of Toledo. She is currently licensed to teach PreK-5. Bailie is excited to have her own classroom in the fall where she can utilize student-centered teaching strategies.