Chapter 36
Using Children's Literature to Support Social–Emotional Growth in the Classroom:
A Bibliotherapeutic Approach to Education about Chronic Disease

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ABSTRACT

Within this chapter, bibliotherapy is presented as a tool to provide social-emotional support to children in school settings, including those who are experiencing chronic diseases. The history and process of bibliotherapy are both examined, as well as current and past research on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy. It also incorporates practical, everyday resources, such as examples of literature that is appropriate for varied age groups, and/or challenges that individuals may face, including suggested steps to using school-based bibliotherapy effectively in a classroom environment. The chapter concludes with considerations for future research in the field. By the end of this chapter, an understanding of bibliotherapy will be developed as well as the practical "how-to" of a bibliotherapeutic approach to discussing and coping with both everyday (e.g., making friends) and more serious issues (e.g., chronic illness) in the classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on what bibliotherapy is, how it relates in an educational context to the social and emotional (social-emotional) aspects of living within an educational community, its history through both literature and research, its use in classrooms, how it connects to children with a chronic illness through story, and finally, to its future possibilities. The role that story and picture books play in children with chronic illness and the daily life of children with chronic disease in childhood is a central focus.

Bibliotherapy, in the context of this chapter, is defined as the use of story for healing. In the social-emotional tasks of teaching, the support of the learning community affects the self-perception of children as they are accepted or rejected within the social group of the classroom. Socially, schools should provide children with a sense of place; an acceptance within the larger social interactions of the classroom. Emotionally, this acceptance assists the child in developing a sense of self and communal worth. Being accepted as a valuable person and sharing struggles so that others understand personal illness realistically enables a child to flourish. Bibliotherapy allows the larger community of school and family to support the social-emotional needs of a child who is sick, disabled, or who has chronic illness while in elementary school. The use of story as therapy, in turn, assists families and parents in working with the teacher to provide the best possible environment for the learning.

Significant social-emotional issues often arise in the day-to-day functioning within classroom communities. Since schooling supports an inclusive educational position, educators and students within inclusive classrooms consistently embrace children across all types of diversity. Such diversity includes students who are struggling academically, students with exceptionalities, students who are struggling with social, emotional, and behavioural issues, and students coping with health issues, which may be serious, unexpected, and/or chronic. In a close, inter-connected community like an inclusive classroom, students and educators have daily contact in an environment of ongoing teaching and learning. The 'whole child' in all domains of development, and indeed, the whole community of learners, remains an important area of focus. Creating a welcoming community that embraces difference is paramount to the success in an inclusive and diverse classroom. Therefore, social-emotional classroom issues need to be initiated, discussed, and understood in a developmentally appropriate manner that reflects solid pedagogical practices in teaching and learning, leading to the development of social skills such as empathy and understanding, as well as literacy skills (Hall, Maich, & Sider, 2014).

Story is such a vehicle for creating common ground. But for the purpose of this chapter, what does story do as therapy for a child? In more detail, bibliotherapy refers to a commonly-used process that is initiated by professionals working with both adults and children, and in the case of schools, to assist with everyday situations that inevitably occur as part of the complex social and emotional classroom environment. The use of story not only provides a comfortable, engaging, and well-known medium for many types of content learning but also provides a place of metaphorical safety to discuss difficult—yet important—topics of significance. Carlson tells us: "Children are naturally receptive to metaphor and story--symbols are an integral part of their world [in a] medium that is both comfortable and meaningful to the child--story is such a medium" (Carlson, 2001, p. 92). As aforementioned in this chapter, bibliotherapy is defined as, "the use of reading as a means of healing" (Levin & Gildea, 2013, p. 89). Bibliotherapy can also be defined as "the use of books to help people solve problems" (Alex, 1993, cited in Forgan, 2002, p. 75), or alternatively, as "a child reading about a character who successfully resolves a problem similar to the one the child is experiencing" (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003, cited in Maich & Kean, 2004, p. 4). Bibliotherapy, then, facilitates the purpose of supporting students with many social-emotional issues, including health issues such as chronic illnesses.

In the next section of this chapter, the research literature related to the use of books in the classroom setting to ensure understanding of chronic illness is discussed, focusing on how bibliotherapy can be effective for the emotional healing of the child and understanding of the child by others in a learning community. A selection of children's literature used by the authors of this chapter in the bibliotherapeu-

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