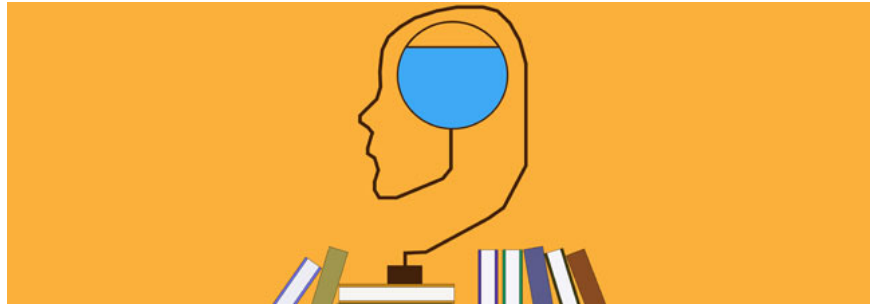


Full Voice. Using Bibliotherapy to Grow Readers

Article



by Anita M. Cellucci, April 2020

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in five children and adolescents has a diagnosable mental health condition, about 75% of mental illnesses first emerge during adolescence and suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10-34 (see <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers> for infographics and links to full studies). Over the past several years, these statistics have influenced all aspects of my vision for my high school library and the way I think about curriculum and collaboration. My research began in 2013 and focused on understanding the statistics and how they related to my school community. In 2015, I was awarded an IMLS/LSTA grant through the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. The grant focused on destigmatizing mental health, and it was the start of ensuring that the library was a space that focused on empowering students to gain knowledge to help themselves. Fast forward to today and there are embedded programs that are rooted in this foundation of mental wellness.

One such program focuses on bibliotherapy. This is a therapeutic approach to supporting mental health using literature. Librarians using bibliotherapy as a tool should be well versed in the aspects of mental health as well as acquire some training in relation to youth and mental health. The American Library Association makes this clarification: through resources offered on their web page they "address the directed reading aspect of bibliotherapy, which may be distinguished from the more general readers' advisory by the presence of the 'problem' to be resolved through reading" (<http://www.ala.org/tools/atoz/bibliotherapy>).

Before beginning a bibliotherapy program in your library, there are some things to consider. The first is that workshops, coursework, and/or training with a focus on mental health are imperative to understanding how to approach this complex strategy. The goal is to help youth understand how reading or a book can help them with their life issues or a personal problem. Building relationships with mental health professionals in the school and/or community will help provide support to the students and to you as the librarian. Understanding the boundary between these two positions helps to keep the participants grounded. Along with training in mental health, librarians will need to develop and strengthen an awareness of self to ensure that you will not be triggered by things that youth bring into the conversation. As working with youth and others who are working through challenges can be fatiguing, it's also important to develop personal self care in order to help others process effectively and to react through a trauma-informed lens.

I have developed three specific ways to use bibliotherapy within my school. These have been helpful for my students and my community. I am intentional in my reflection of assessment of bibliotherapy with teachers and students to allow for growth within the program.

Bibliotherapy programs at my library:

Program 1

Therapeutic Approach: Groups, in collaborations with clinicians

Topic: Student-themed groups, e.g., loss/grief

Setting: 6-week groups using short stories/books (fiction/non-fiction)

Key Components:

- Include elements of DBT (dialectical behavior therapy)
 - Common language for teachers and students
 - Distress tolerance strategies
- Incorporate elements of mindfulness and yoga

Program 2

Therapeutic Approach: Conferencing, in collaborations with ELA classes

Topic: Growth Mindset and Identity as a Reader

Setting: 1:1 Conferences with students, focused on reading identity

Key Components:

- With each student, conduct a 20-minute bibliotherapy meeting
- Build trust
- Reflect on the emotional aspect of reading
 - Consider challenges/obstacles/effort/criticism
- Discuss reading as a therapeutic intervention

Program 3

Therapeutic Approach: Conferencing, in collaborations with mental health clinicians

Topic: Varies

Setting: Students are identified by clinical staff; students have the option to meet directly with the librarian or to submit a request through clinician

Key Components:

- Incorporate elements of mindfulness and yoga
- Librarian creates a suggested book list
- Student has option to meet with librarian to discuss the book through the use of guided questions
- Student can use reflective writing in a journal with the librarian and/or content teacher and clinician

As student needs shift, I expect that aspects of the program will shift as well. This school year in ELA, there has been a strong focus on bibliotherapy and students' identities as readers. In my experience, students have been open to sharing their thoughts about their emotions and how they relate to reading. Many students who are self-proclaimed "non-readers" have seen the most growth. During our bibliotherapy sessions, students create a goal for the school year as it relates to growth and their identity as a reader. The outcomes so far have shown that students need to release their emotional challenges with reading and books before they are willing to proclaim themselves as readers. While bibliotherapy is a vehicle to address readers emotions, it is also a pathway to help all students see themselves as successful readers.

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