



# **Interactive Bibliotherapy as an Innovative Inservice Practice: A Focus on the Inclusive Setting**

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## **Abstract**

Interactive bibliotherapy (IB) warrants greater attention in the pursuit of innovative inservice education. This paper presents the findings of a study that explored IB as an inservice practice to help prepare educators for the roles and responsibilities associated with inclusion. Data collection concentrated on a questionnaire (open-ended) regarding IB's impact on participants' professional and personal development. Discussion of findings, which involved a content analysis of participants' responses, concludes with considerations for practice and research.

Interactive bibliotherapy (IB) is a practice that warrants greater attention in the pursuit of innovative inservice education. IB refers to the interactive and critical reading of written materials for fostering professional and/or personal growth. In particular, IB can play an important role in inservice preparation for today's inclusive setting, where students with disabilities learn in the regular classroom. According to Ellis and Larkin (1995), the variety of academic, physical, social, and emotional needs that students bring each year results in new roles and responsibilities for teachers. Such complex demands require educators who possess a critical understanding of their own educational beliefs and behaviors. Although valuable initiatives that help educators achieve more effective participation in inclusive settings have emerged (Carey, 1997; Hasbrouck & Christen, 1997; Quigney, 1997), Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) emphasize

that there is still a critical need for inservice innovations that nurture professional and personal development.

This paper presents the findings of a study that explores IB as an inservice practice to help prepare educators for the roles and responsibilities of the inclusive setting. The focus of the methodology's implementation was *Somebody Else's Kids* (Hayden, 1981), which participants independently read and collaboratively examined as part of a graduate course on "learner in difficulty." Data collection and analysis concentrated on participants' responses to an open-ended questionnaire regarding the impact that IB had on their related professional and personal development.

### **Background**

In its simplest form, "Bibliotherapy refers to the guided reading of written materials in gaining understanding or solving problems relevant to a person's therapeutic needs" (Riordan & Wilson, 1989, p. 506). Although references to the healing power of books appear throughout time and across cultures, the term "bibliotherapy" first surfaced in an *Atlantic Monthly* article in 1916 (Lehr, 1981). Lenkowsky (1987) noted that bibliotherapy has been a formal part of the literature of the social sciences for well over a half century. For example it has played an important role in a variety of educational areas such as family counseling (Sheridan, Baker, & de Lissovoy, 1984) social skills development (Nickolai-Mays, 1987) and curriculum planning for the gifted (Hérbert, 1991).

Interactive bibliotherapy refers to the specific type of bibliotherapy used in this study. More specifically, IB emphasizes the interactive process in which at least one other individual, usually a teacher or other professional, facilitates a participant's involvement through written materials and related activities such as group discussions or journal writing. Interactions with bibliotherapy can contribute to overall cognitive and affective growth (Jalongo, 1983).

The application of IB for facilitating such growth in educators for the inclusive setting finds support in the research literature. Hunsburger (1985) and Hildreth (1992) advocated the use of books, including juvenile literature and biographies, to help teachers experience reading development and learning difficulties from the perspectives of credible characters. According to Hunsburger, "the question of what it is like to be a student in...class is one that

[educators] need to take seriously. Reflection upon experience...of others we know or find in literature, is of utmost importance" (p. 12).

After presenting a case for the humanities in medical and preservice teacher education, Wear (1989) claimed that novels can act as springboards for inquiry and self-examination regarding teacher-student encounters. She emphasized that the literary text can complement, enlarge, and personalize the issues contained in the professional textbook. Tiedt (1992) recommended the use of literature with preservice teachers as a way of understanding the behavior of children. He stated that "literary gems describe human behavior overlaid by a web of feelings, a reality that the reader readily understands" (p. 803).

Bibliotherapy has also concentrated on the important reality of multiculturalism. Chevalier and Houser (1997) studied preservice teachers' multicultural understanding, which grew by the reading of adolescent fiction. They found that the process of using bibliotherapy with multicultural novels "facilitated cognitive and emotional dissonance, heightened awareness and the modification of sociocultural perspectives, and a willingness to contemplate alternative plans for future action" (p. 434). The researchers concluded that the preservice teachers would be in a better position to create genuine cross-cultural understanding and appreciation within their classroom communities that would support the unique talents and gifts of culturally diverse students.

The teaching narrative, a complement to the student story portrayed in literature, also emerged as an important vehicle for teacher preparation associated with inclusion. Isenberg (1994) emphasized the value of narrative for personal and professional development when she examined her own growth continuum in relation to five well-known novels about teaching. She stated that "it is now more crucial than ever to actively engage aspiring and developing teachers in productive thinking about the nature of their own teaching, and that of the schools" (p.130). Narratives, which contain a wealth of material for learning, can contribute to the voices and experiences of teachers in many ways. In particular, narratives provide educators with mentors that can sustain them as they critically inquire into their current beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to the complexities of the instructional process (Isenberg, 1994).

Employing three different school-based novels, Griffith and Laframboise (1998) also focused on teacher narratives for activating affective and cognitive growth. They concluded that the characters' vicarious experiences provided preservice students with valuable knowledge for making real-life connections to course content. As a result, the students were able to examine various issues such as retention, self-esteem, and motivation within meaningful contexts.

The present study explored IB as an innovative method to help prepare educators for the demanding roles and responsibilities of the inclusive setting. The implementation of this method consisted of participants' independent reading and collaborative examination of the teaching narrative entitled *Somebody Else's Kids* (Hayden, 1981). The part that IB plays in the development of educators' practical and theoretical knowledge as well as the critical examination of their related beliefs and behaviors received special emphasis.

### **Method**

**Participants.** Thirty-one educators, enrolled in a course on "learner in difficulty" as part of their Master's program at a Canadian Faculty of Education, participated in this study. The group produced twenty-three usable questionnaires. Five of the students were not present in class at the time of the questionnaire's administration while three other students chose not to complete the questionnaire. The majority of the twenty-three educators were teachers or school counselors working at the elementary, secondary or post-secondary levels while one was a speech-language pathologist and another a child therapist in private practice.

### **Procedure**

**Book and related activities.** Participants independently read the novel *Somebody Else's Kids* (Hayden, 1981) for the course. This book centers on the true story of a special education teacher (Hayden) and the numerous challenges that she faces in meeting the complex needs of her students. In particular, it offers authentic situations and characters that could help to facilitate personal and professional growth. The voice of the special education teacher is of particular importance. Throughout the novel she generously shares the affective and cognitive details of her teaching story filled with various issues such as student violence, collegial disagreement, and parental concerns. Participants received a list of questions (Appendix A) to guide their reading and supply a common focal point for small-group

and whole class discussions (Morawski, 1997). These discussions acted as catalysts to provide an ongoing interchange of thoughts and emotions that would motivate participants to examine their current views as well as modify their related behaviors in connection with the study of the book.

First, the course instructor reorganized participants into smaller groups in which they responded to the questions. Next, the instructor provided each group with the opportunity of sharing their answers with the whole class. Participants initially addressed the questions in sequence. As the whole-class session progressed, however, a more constructivist approach emerged. This change encouraged the discussion of other topics related to personal and professional growth. For example, a number of participants questioned the teacher's (Hayden's) high level of involvement with her students throughout the book. Realizing the value of these questions for personal and professional development, the course instructor initiated a discussion of the motivating factors behind an educator's behavior. The discussion first focused on examining Hayden's behavior in specific situations in the novel. Questions and comments arising from the discussion centered on issues such as the fulfillment of Hayden's own emotional needs through her work and Hayden's inner strength and perseverance to uncover the hidden talents of a discouraged student. Next, the course instructor redirected the discussion by asking participants to voluntarily share relevant situations at work that they wanted to explore with the class. Possible reasons for their actions as well as alternative behaviors received consideration in relation to these situations.

At the completion of the whole-class activity such as the above example, participants returned to their smaller groups and debriefed on the details of the session. They also identified new avenues for reflection and investigation. For instance, participants formulated discussion questions for the last class that involved revisiting the issues raised throughout the course. In addition to professional interests, participants included personal concerns such as the development of their own self-efficacy in the questions for this upcoming class.

**Administration of questionnaire.** Toward the end of the term, participants voluntarily and anonymously completed an open-ended questionnaire regarding the use of IB in the course (Appendix B). A trained research assistant administered the questionnaire, which took

approximately thirty minutes to complete. The course instructor was not present at this time.

**Data Analysis.** A content analysis involved the meaning units that related to the product or outcome of the IB process. Initially, the authors grouped the list of product meaning units (N=80) into emergent categories. To consolidate the emergent categories, the authors then grouped them into higher order categories adapted from Riordan, Mullis and Nuchow's (1966) study of bibliotherapy in the counseling environment. Both authors reviewed this list and then made minor changes. The authors then conducted an intercoder reliability test with 25% of the meaning units (N=20). Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that most researchers' first attempt at this test usually result in a score not greater than 70%. The authors' first intercoder reliability test yielded a score of 60%. They attributed this low score to the fact that several meaning units could fit into more than one theme as currently defined. As a result, the authors further clarified their thematic definitions and did another intercoder reliability test. The authors then achieved a score of 90%. The following section includes an examination of the five identified thematic categories related to the outcomes of the participants' participation in IB. The main focus involved participants' educational beliefs and behaviors concerning the inclusive setting where students with various disabilities learn in the regular classroom.

## Results and Discussion

**Enlighten by reading materials and/or reflecting upon experiences that increase awareness about self and others.** A total of 53.8% of the meaning units qualified for the enlightenment category. This outcome revealed that the process of IB provided participants with opportunities to enlighten themselves concerning teaching and learning in an inclusive setting. According to Wildman and Niles (1987), educators need to be more reflective and in control of their own professional lives rather than recipients of technical details. In this study, reading the book and engaging in related activities allowed participants to critically reflect on their current educational beliefs and practices with respect to inclusive education. For example, one participant reported that "It brought my own feelings and opinions on learner in difficulty to the forefront." Another participant remarked that, "It allowed me to reflect on the work I do with autistic children." A different participant commented that the book raised several issues of which teachers of special needs children need to be aware. These include the self-contained special education setting, and staff views on

special needs children, specifically the belief that, "As long as you keep them under control and we don't see them in the office, you're doing a fine job." There seemed to be an underlying element of risk-taking for one participant as she or he remarked that "it was confirmed for me that it is appropriate as a teacher to take an unconventional approach and to make mistakes." In Wear's (1989) view, the complexities of instructional choices that we make are often unexpressed because of guilt or shame. The narrative, unlike the professional text bound by form and intent, can help educators review and justify their beliefs and behaviors in the classroom setting. This also seemed to be the case for the participants in this study.

Some participants found that they recalled earlier experiences in their lives as they reviewed their current beliefs and practices. One participant noted that IB "challenged me to look at my own experiences as a learner." Another participant reported that "Examining my answers to the questions made me reflect on my own education experiences." Research supports the position that the exploration of early life events such as elementary school, can supply individuals with valuable insights about their present perceptions and actions (Colton & Sparks-Langer 1993; Morawski, 1995). Rosenblatt (1978) and White (1995) emphasized the important role that literary texts can play in contemplating prior feelings and experiences to construct current responses. The narrative, unlike the professional text bound by form and intent, can help educators review and justify their beliefs and behaviors in the classroom setting. In her study on narratives for teacher education, Weber (1993) observed that teacher stories "made me ponder my own actions in a different light" (p. 73) and put into perspective the current instructional models and jargon. This also seemed to be the case for the participants involved in this study.

Reading the novel reinforced and extended the learning that occurred in the related small-group and whole-class activities. Participants stated that the experience of sharing produced by IB allowed them to consider alternative positions on inclusive education. As stated by one participant, "It was nice to hear others' experiences not being a teacher in the traditional sense, it was a good learning experience." Another participant found IB to be an effective tool because "as educators it is very helpful--therapeutic--perhaps, to listen to other educators' perceptions, views, solutions. Exposure to educators, parents, counselors and specialists is particularly rewarding. Everyone brings in unique experiences." As observed by still another

participant, IB "allowed us to share and learn [about inclusive learning and teaching] from one another."

According to Tiedt (1992), cases found in literary works offered teachers "an opportunity to engage in life with other human beings, to emphasize, to understand, and to share responses with others (p. 805). This kind of productive sharing, generated by IB in the current study, also emerged in the related literature. For example, Negin (1979) concluded that group activities as a part of IB allow individuals to learn from each other, since a successful group openly shares feelings and insights. When support groups for battered women used IB, collaborative discussion helped them identify deterrents to their growth and make recommendations for accepting personal responsibility (Hynes, 1987). In another case, a major benefit of using IB with mental health patients was their sharing of experiences and memories with staff and other patients. In particular, some of the least verbal patients opened up and explored issues that they had previously avoided in other therapies (Rossiter & Brown, 1988).

**Enhance by reinforcing specific points and life-style changes being addressed in inservice education.** The second largest category, which accounted for 16.3% of the product meaning units, related to enhancement. This enhancement occurred by reinforcing life-style changes, particularly with respect to the reading process. According to pertinent research, teachers as a group don't seem to read very much (Dillingofski, 1993; Otto, 1992/1993). In particular, Williamson's (1991) study on teachers' reading attitudes and habits, revealed a low amount of fiction reading undertaken by Master of Education students who may have devoted all the time available for reading to the pursuance of their studies. The current study, however, provided the participants with an opportunity to read a novel, which for many reinforced an enjoyment of reading and a personal connection to text. As noted by one educator, "This book initially satisfied my frustration at not usually having the time to just read a good book." Another participant commented that "On a personal level it was refreshing to read something that was not all theory." Another participant commented that he or she could clearly recall very specific details of the book even though several months had elapsed since reading it. She attributed this outcome to the fact that the book had "a profound effect on me both personally and professionally." Only one participant expressed dissatisfaction with the enjoyment level of the book. This comment originated from an adult educator who could not relate to a book about special education children. According to the research literature, incompatibility between a reader and a text can be



influenced by a variety of factors such as resistance to required readings (Zaccaaria & Moses, 1968), feelings of inadequacy in comparison to a highly competent character (Negin, 1979) and difficulty in confronting issues present in readings (Cornett & Cornett, 1980).

One participant made an additional comment on personal learning style relating to reader response. In particular, the participant discovered that "I process my learning through writing". This statement reinforces the notion that an inservice course requires the application of various kinds of learning activities that accommodate and expand teachers' reader response repertoires. The growth as readers that participants experienced in IB supports Frager's (1987) conclusion that teacher education programs can help teachers grow as readers by including the use of at least one trade book in every class.

**Educate by filling in basic knowledge and gaps.** This third category contained 12.5% of the meaning units. Participants in the current study claimed that they had gained valuable knowledge and insight regarding working with special population children. One participant stated that, "The book itself helped to 'gel' the information [about special needs children] we were receiving through classroom discussion and readings. It provided a framework for my work in this course." Another participant shared that he or she "gained new perceptions of what a learning disability is." Another explained his or her newfound knowledge this way:

The book has provided me with very concrete examples of learners in difficulty. I knew little about autistic children as well as about what goes on in a special education class and this book has helped me understand those better than any manual could.

As noted by still another educator, "As someone who has not yet taught in a classroom, the book was effective in portraying what really can go on in a special education classroom. It was practical rather than theoretical, which we don't get enough of." According to Stroud (1981), "teachers have at their disposal an excellent way of instilling understanding and acceptance of others--literature" (p. 49). In the specific area of disabilities, Richardson and Boyle (1998) concurred with Stroud's assertion that read-alouds can enhance educators' awareness and acknowledgment of disabilities. In another study, when future teachers read novels about teenagers with disabilities as part of

their course work, they began to comprehend both the special concerns of these students as well as the ways in which they were just typical adolescents (Stover, 1988).

**Encourage and empower through the reading of inspirational and motivational materials.** The fourth category, which represented 11.3% of the meaning units, pertained to the encouragement and empowerment that the book provided for gaining and applying relevant knowledge and skills. According to Weimer (1988), "teaching narratives positively effect instructional quality because they inspire" (p. 49). The results of this study support this notion as many participants made points about the inspirational value of the book. In particular they expressed that the book helped to further their knowledge about special needs students as well as apply their knowledge in their own work situations. For example, one participant commented that the book "provided inspiration" while another observed that it "served as an inspirational source for many class members." A different participant stated that "I have also noted the titles of the other books T. Hayden has written...I will try to find these books and I am excited to learn more about learners in difficulty." This is consistent with Cohen's (1994b) study on self-guided reading. Results showed that reading increased the participants' confidence to acquire further information about health care as well as make decisions about their well-being.

In addition to acquiring knowledge about special needs students, the reading of the novel encouraged and empowered participants to consider and/or try learned techniques in their own classrooms. As noted by one participant, "A few of the techniques in the book prompted me to try them out in my own classroom." A second participant noted that he or she felt empowered to "consider untried strategies with learners in my classroom" and pondered the importance of "life-changing events and how they affect the learner." The same participant wondered how emotions and feelings brought to the classroom affect the teacher and other learners." In her study on self-directed bibliotherapy, Cohen (1994a) discovered that reading about others who had found solutions to problems gave participants the self-confidence to confront their own life challenges. Boorstein's (1983) case study, which involved a severely depressed unemployed male who grew up in a culture that discouraged self-introspection, revealed a similar theme of empowerment. By reading psychological and spiritual materials combined with meditation, this individual gained in self-esteem, expanded his own spectrum of thinking and

feeling, and found positive ways to use his pains to grow spiritually (Boorstein, 1983).

**Engage the student with the social world through fiction and other social mentoring materials, techniques and methodologies.** A total of 6.3% of the meaning units comprised this category, which focused on the role models that vicarious experiences related to the novel provided for the participants. As noted by one participant, "Reading the book provided me with a role model--we as teachers often operate in isolation (your own classroom) and do not get enough opportunity to observe other professionals." Another participant stated that, "It addressed the practical issues that educators have to deal with--so I felt I could relate to many of the incidents, emotions and people involved." The literature supports this notion. In a study that concentrated on the social and moral implications of teaching, Tama and Peterson (1991) found that teachers cultivated richer insights about the meaning of teaching when they read and viewed fictional and authentic teachers' stories.

### **Summary and Considerations for Practice and Research**

Wear (1989) affirmed that "With the content provided by literary texts, readers might acknowledge their beliefs and behaviors with greater reflection than before and with a full range of responses" (p. 54). The responses of the participants in the current study contained numerous indications of personal and professional development, which they attributed to the interactive reading of *Somebody Else's Kids* (1981). Some specific signs of such growth were an increased knowledge of special needs students, a deeper self-awareness relative to inclusive education, and a desire to implement new instructional strategies. Various issues ranging from teacher self-efficacy to literacy habits supplied the working material for these outcomes. Participants cited vicarious experiences such as critical reflection, and collegial collaboration in the form of small-group and whole-class discussions as key factors in the processing of this working material.

Although the limited number of educators who participated in the current study precludes us from reaching firm conclusions, the content analysis of the data revealed important findings for future application and investigation of IB for inservice preparation related to inclusive education. When incorporated into existing inservice programs or individual courses concerning inclusive education, IB can help to enrich educators' understanding of their related beliefs and

behaviors. For example, during small-group discussions that focus on the instructional expressions of the educators in the novel, teachers can explore their ambivalence toward welcoming students with special needs into their classrooms. Regular classroom teachers, who feel a sense of isolation stemming from their commitment to students with special needs, can find personal strength and professional confirmation for their actions from IB. In particular, the voice of the teacher in the novel as well as other class members' own responses in whole-class discussions can provide the necessary encouragement. In both of the above cases, various practices such as reflective dialogue journals, literature response methods, and teacher support networks and study groups would help to facilitate the processing of the teachers' emerging personal and professional awareness.

Further studies that involve other research methodologies and data collection procedures would play an important part in the development of IB as an inservice practice. For example, focus group sessions, interviews and participants' use of reflective journals to record the application of IB to their work settings would provide opportunities to investigate the longer-term effects of educators' participation in IB. Narrative inquiry would supply information on the course instructor's experience and perceptions regarding the application of IB to the inservice area, particularly regarding inclusive education. Future studies would also want to consider extending the application of IB to other related areas such as math education and student counseling as well as preservice education, where teacher candidates are already being challenged to make informed decisions in the classroom regarding inclusion.

### **Concluding Comments**

Personal and professional growth is essential for inservice preparation related to the diverse nature of the inclusive setting, where theoretical and practical challenges occur daily. More specifically, educators need to feel empowered, inspired, informed, and motivated in their roles. Their beliefs and behaviors need examination, expression, and validation. Literary texts like *Somebody Else's Kids* (Hayden, 1981) that "articulate with clarity and poignancy what the teaching-learning enterprise is all about and why it matters" (Weimer, 1988, p. 49) can provide opportunities for such balanced growth. The findings of this study have illuminated the innovative potential of IB for inservice education that addresses the inclusive setting. In sum, IB can provide the vehicle by which educators' intrapersonal growth becomes an integral part of the construction of their knowledge and practice.

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## Appendix A

### Guiding Questions

1. Identify at least three critical incidents (positive or negative) that occurred in this book and explain the importance of each one.
2. What emotions, images, etc., did you associate with each incident? Explain.
3. Within the context of each incident, address your current perceptions and practices related to learning and teaching. Did they change? Did they remain the same?
4. If you could change one incident in this book, what would it be? Explain how this change would have affected the characters and events in the book.
5. Many significant issues related to different kinds of learning and teaching practices are addressed throughout the book. Examine one of these issues in relation to different contexts (e.g., the cases in this book, your own professional situation, your own learning experiences, etc.). Consider class discussion, presentations, and recommended readings.
6. What was your general reaction to reading this book?



## Appendix B

### The Questionnaire - The Use of Bibliotherapy in the Course

In order to explore the appropriateness and effectiveness of bibliotherapy for the professional and personal growth of educators, your comments on the use of bibliotherapy in this course would be greatly appreciated. Here, bibliotherapy refers to the interactive and critical reading of written materials for professional and personal growth

1. Gender F\_\_\_ M\_\_\_

2. What is your current position (e.g., teacher, full-time parent, counselor)? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Into which division or divisions do your primary responsibilities fall? Circle your answer below.

Grades K, 1-3

Grades 4-6

Grades 7-10

Grades 11 and above

Post-Secondary

(Specify)\_\_\_\_\_

Other\_\_\_\_\_

4. Teaching subject major (e.g., Special Education, History, English, Mathematics, Computer Science, etc.), if applicable. Specify the one that you consider to be your primary responsibility. \_\_\_\_\_

5. As part of your work for this course, you were asked to read the book entitled *Somebody Else's Kids* by T. Hayden. A set of guiding questions for reading this book

were given to you as well. Your feedback would be very helpful for obtaining information about the appropriateness and effectiveness of (i) the book, (ii) guiding questions, and (iii) the whole-class and small-group discussions for facilitating your own personal and professional growth in this course. Please provide your comments on each one of the above items (i, ii, iii) as it pertains to your own personal and professional development in relation to this course. Please be as specific as possible.

(i) the book

(ii) the guiding questions

(iii) the whole-class and small-group discussions