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### Bibliotherapy in the Elementary Classroom: Using Literature to Navigate Trauma

The positive impacts of reading come together in a litany of benefits one cannot ignore: reduce stress levels, improve analytical thinking, enhance memory, expands intelligence, bolster vocabulary, strengthen writing skills, and many more. But what about the advantages on an individual's overall mental wellness that may come from reading? Officially defined by the American Library Association in 1966, bibliotherapy is the use of books in the purpose of healing, flowing in the vein of creative arts therapy. Bibliotherapy uses an individual's relationship or connection to the content of a book to help address trauma, hardships, or mental disorders. Using books in bibliotherapy can open up a Children are not immune to traumatic life events. From divorce to loss of a loved one, young individuals may have difficulty navigating the breadth of emotions saddled with such negative instances. Bibliotherapy is yet another benefit of reading that may set students up for success academically, socially, emotionally, and developmentally. This literary review outlines the history of bibliotherapy, scholarly articles delineating the implementation of bibliotherapy at an elementary level, as well as my conclusive thoughts on using literature to comprehend life events and their inevitable impact. By exploring these academic avenues, I hope to be able to create a better sense of understanding how I may use bibliotherapy in my own classroom to teach and help

students who have experienced hardships in their young lives, applying this information beyond my written work and in my professional career as an elementary educator.

Coined in 1916 by Samuel Crothers, the term “bibliotherapy” first appeared in an article discussing therapeutic practices in *Atlantic Monthly* (Pehrsson 2007). As the expression has garnered significance over the years, the definition and meaning for bibliotherapy has grown to encompass a wide variety of interpretations—using literature to cope with personal struggles, utilizing written works to provide a sense of understanding during traumatic events, reading children’s books to explain social emotional issues, and much more. Merriam-Webster defines the word as “the use of reading materials for help in solving personal problems or for psychiatric therapy (Bibliotherapy, n.d.) Although the modern notion of bibliotherapy is fairly recent, the influence of literature on development has been recorded throughout the years; Sigmund and Anna Freud frequently included the use of literary materials in their practices (2007). Currently, several mental health professionals incorporate bibliotherapy into patient treatments. Bibliotherapy has rooted itself in the environment of the inclusive classroom as an avenue towards understanding childhood trauma and navigating its aftermath.

In any given classroom, some students are faced with far more challenges than others. These collections of surmised dynamics in a cause-effect nature place children or adolescents in the throes of potential negative outcomes. In “Using Children’s Books at Bibliotherapy for At-Risk Students: A Teacher’s Guide,” educators can find a ten-step outline of the most effective methods to intertwine bibliotherapy into the life of an at-risk student (Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, and Johnstun 2010). This article explores the approaches to bridging the gap between the dangers of potentially negative outcomes in a

student's life and finding success academically, socially, and developmentally. Upon examining the educator's guide for instigating bibliotherapy in the classroom for at-risk youth, I found this article to provide an extensive amount of information and resources for bibliotherapy covering multiple topics and grade levels, as well as clearly written examples of how to structure bibliotherapy in the academic environment and identify clear goals for the given methods.

In "Practical Bibliotherapy Strategies for the Inclusive Elementary Classroom," authors Anita Iaquina and Shellie Hipsky aim to assist the general elementary educator in applying meaningful, practical strategies on bibliotherapy within their classroom environment. Bibliotherapy provides a way for students to discuss problems characters may face in a book and then apply similar concepts within their own lives (2006). This article explores the idea of using high-quality children's literature as a support for social emotional development, as well as interpreting personal differences and attributes, which leads to insight and growth. While this article offers a bevy of information regarding bibliotherapy usage in an elementary setting, it is specific only to a select few topics, namely disabilities. The appendices offered expansive bibliotherapy resources and educator narratives discussing the process of implementing bibliotherapy in the classroom through different techniques. This article would serve as an excellent resource for general elementary educators who seek to expand their classroom competency on disabilities and exceptionalities.

By using sensibly reviewed thematic books, educators can utilize literature to reach students facing difficult situations. Written by Michael Rozalski, Angela Stewart, and Jason Miller, "Bibliotherapy: Helping Children Cope with Life's Challenges" offers

insight on how educators may carefully select the best literary resources to help their students cope with arduous life issues. This article delineates the process for properly reviewing a potential bibliotherapeutic resource, as well as offering book suggestions on a multitude of topics. I found this article to be one of the most beneficial reads on the subject of bibliotherapy; it brought forth an extensive amount of knowledge on the before, during, and after of using bibliotherapy in the classroom. Bibliotherapy provides more opportunities to be effective in a child's life when applied in conjuncture with follow-up activities and continuous conversations on connections between the text and real life.

The evolution of education over the last several years has shifted a focus beyond academic successes, enlarging the responsibility an educator holds in a child's life. No longer are teachers seen as individuals limited to schooling students on basic math procedures or the scientific method; the role boundaries of an educator have fluctuated to include not only academic knowledge but also the positive development of social emotional abilities. Kimberly Maich and Sharon Kean share "practical strategies for dealing with social emotional problems in the inclusive classroom environment" in their study of the potential and sensible need for bibliotherapy at an elementary level (2004). By defining the practice of bibliotherapy, Maich and Kean outline inclusive and valuable approaches for partnering bibliotherapy with social emotional education. Students of any background or identity may benefit from learning skills to cope with inevitable social emotional hurdles. While this article was specific to bibliotherapy within the scope of social emotional topics, I found Maich and Kean's argument highly advantageous for the modern educator. I am not tasked with only teaching my students their ABC's and 123's

in the classroom; as a caring adult placed in their life, I take responsibility in a larger sense to build students' mental health and resiliency regarding their social emotional capabilities so they may become self-regulated, well-adjusted, responsible citizens.

Bibliotherapy provides opportunities to better understand, nurture, and educate my students in the classroom. As I have studied these academic resources and compiled my own observation notes of bibliotherapy in use during practicum experiences and classroom volunteer work, I see an abundant web of connected strategies on how to successfully implement such an impactful concept into my own classroom. First and foremost, individually building a relationship with my students is key in order to comprehend their personal challenges and how I may best help them overcome said challenges. A doctor would not diagnose an illness without careful attention to a patient and their symptoms—as an educator, I must take care in forging a connection with each student prior to assisting in overcoming their trials. Additionally, possessing a wide range of knowledge on literary resources it is without a doubt a key factor in successfully implementing bibliotherapeutic strategies within the classroom. By accessing online education-based databases for diverse texts, staying abreast of professional developmental opportunities emphasized in bibliotherapy techniques, and consulting with my respective school's librarian and guidance counselor, I will be able to strengthen my familiarity of potential books to use as bibliotherapy resources. With all of these thoughts in mind, it is important to note the following: I, as an elementary educator, am not a licensed therapist or psychologist trained in deciphering proper treatment or therapeutic practices for afflicted children. The information and understanding I have garnered on bibliotherapy makes me a more well-rounded, knowledgeable, and inclusive educator in a

rapidly changing world. I can use bibliotherapy in my classroom to assist a student as they embark traversing their personal Everest, but should not utilize such tactics as an official panacea to their personal problems. Children may face a vast range of negative topical events within their lifetimes, all carrying an undeniable impact that may be difficult for a young student to understand. As the future of bibliotherapy teems with possibilities for implementation and regeneration, I am certain bibliotherapy will continue to have a place in the inclusive educator's classroom.

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