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Shakespeare & School Counseling

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Shakespeare and School Counseling

By Nick Abel

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In the ongoing search for therapeutic tools and techniques to use with students from kindergarten through the 12th grade (K-12), it is unlikely that many school counselors have considered the work of William Shakespeare. Generally confined to upper-level high school English classrooms, the work of “The Bard” is more likely to be considered an obstacle for students to overcome than a resource to enhance their academic, career, or personal/social development (Anderson & Anderson, 2003). While Shakespeare may not have a place in every school counseling program, below are some possibilities for using his work in contemporary K-12 settings.

Bibliotherapy, which is one way of drawing on literature to address problems, is used widely in both school and clinical mental health settings to assist clients in developing self-awareness, coping with short-term crises, and alleviating the symptoms of disorders such as depression and anxiety (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). In the schools, bibliotherapy is often used to help students confront and process common developmental challenges such as moving, parental divorce/separation, grief, and disability. While Shakespearean works are not frequently used in bibliotherapy, a number of educators have found benefits in using them – and the educators have reported success in reaching traditionally difficult groups of students. For example, Anderson and Anderson (2003) suggest that Shakespeare can be used to teach social skills to students with various disabilities. In their paper on the subject, Anderson and Anderson (2003) point out that themes that are highly relevant to adolescents abound in the work of Shakespeare (i.e., parental conflict and social standing in *Romeo and Juliet*), and that educators can use these themes as “hooks” to elicit student reflection on other aspects of the works, including the consequences of character actions and emotions; ways to deal with conflict; coping mechanisms; and relationships.

One specific disability being addressed by researchers through the use of Shakespearean works is autism. In a study being carried out at The Ohio State University (“Shakespeare and Autism,” 2014), specialists in adolescent development are teaming up with students and faculty from the department of theater to study the ameliorative effect of the Hunter Heartbeat Method (Hunter, 2013) on children with autism. The Hunter Method is centered on the use of iambic pentameter that, according to Hunter, mimics the comforting sound of a heartbeat (Hunter, 2013), and facilitates the playing of games that teach communication, recognition of emotion in facial expressions, and social skills. A pilot study on the method provided support for the decades of anecdotal evidence reported by Hunter (2013), and the study

is now being carried out in an extended, controlled manner (“Shakespeare and Autism,” 2014).

In addition to the socio-developmental benefits described above, at least one study has found evidence that reading challenging literary works, such as those of Shakespeare, also results in neurological benefits. Keidel, Davis, Gonzalez-Diaz, Martin, & Thierry (2013) used neuroimaging to study the brains of participants asked to read Shakespearean passages featuring functional shifts (a change in the expected grammatical use of a word, as in this example from *King Lear*: “He childed as I fathered.”). According to study co-author Philip Davis, study results indicated that reading such passages provides a “rocket-boost” to the brain by stimulating neural activity in ways that cannot be imitated by reading modern translations or less challenging contemporary texts (“How Reading Shakespeare,” 2013). In particular, the area of the brain associated with autobiographical memory was consistently stimulated in participants, leading the authors to conclude that after processing the meaning of the functional shift, participants attempted to relate the passage to events in their own lives (Keidel et al., 2013). Such findings are potentially useful for school counselors interested in neuroscience and brain-based counseling, as they suggest that simply reading Shakespeare can boost adolescent brain development and help students connect literary themes to their own lives.

In addition to the traditional study of Shakespearean texts in English classrooms, the examples above lend credence to the proposition that there is also a place for Shakespeare in the school counselor’s office. Studies such as those cited herein show that The Bard’s work is just as useful and relevant today as it was in centuries past, but it is up to the creative school counselor to figure out exactly how to utilize these important works in his or her practice.

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Links:

[1] <http://arttherapy.worldcongress.hu/admin/kepek/downloads/3aderso.doc>

[2] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2261636/Reading-Shakespeare-Wordsworth-offer-better-therapy-self-help-books.html>

[3] <http://www.kellyhunter.co.uk>

[4] <http://nisonger.osu.edu/shakespeare-autism>