

BIBLIOTHERAPY- A TOOL TO FACILITATE EFFECTIVE LEARNING**Rupa S. Deshmukhya**

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Students' approach to reading and learning has undergone a paradigmatic change. Students face several dilemmas which remain unresolved due to paucity of effective guidance. To keep pace with their concerns, innovations in teaching and learning are extremely crucial. Teachers play a key role in mentoring the students, resolving the complex issues affecting them and fostering a habit of reading. Innovations in teaching-learning methods can transform the educational sphere. Reading books and reflecting on different themes bring therapeutic benefits. Books allow individuals to delve deeper into the challenges, experience catharsis and subtly provide solutions to resolve them. One of the vital strategies in facilitating this type of learning is Bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is one of the innovative methods to unearth meaningful solutions to problems. It can enhance learning and bring meaningful changes to shape students' personality as they identify with the characters in the text. This paper will examine the manner in which Bibliotherapy serves as an essential learning tool. It will also elucidate the way storytelling method can be integrated in the spectrum of classroom teaching to make Bibliotherapy effective.

Keywords: *Bibliotherapy, books, catharsis, stories, storytelling*

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The domain of educational sphere has undergone a paradigmatic shift as students yearn to acquire distinct theoretical knowledge along with practical orientation. This yearning is however, interrupted when issues at the personal front stifle students' emotional growth. This scenario demands critical re-examination of some of the approaches to learning in order to develop the potential for emotional awareness and personal growth. Some of the techniques which cater to these growing demands are critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Along with these skills one has to be adept at managing one's self. One of the techniques which is remarkable in facilitating emotional intelligence, dealing with challenges of life, developing discernment, sensitivity and fostering well-being is Bibliotherapy. This paper is an attempt to draw attention to the significance of Bibliotherapy in facilitating holistic learning.

The term Bibliotherapy comes from the Greek words 'Biblion' which means books and 'Therapeia' which denotes healing. This term has such inimitable power that in Greece the inscription over the library of Thebes was 'The healing place for the soul'. Bibliotherapy is thus, a very broad term for the ancient practice of encouraging reading for therapeutic effect. A comprehensive definition of Bibliotherapy is included in Barker's dictionary of Social Work:

The use of literature and poetry in the treatment of people with emotional problems or mental illness. Bibliotherapy is often used in social group work and group therapy and is reported to be effective with people of all ages, with people in institutions as well as outpatients, and with healthy people who wish to share literature as a means of personal growth and development. (35)

This quality of literature to offer pleasure along with didacticism comes forth effectively in the practice of Bibliotherapy. Russell and Shrodes defined Bibliotherapy as 'a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature – an interaction which may be used for personality assessment, adjustment and growth'. (335).

These definitions drive home a vital lesson that Bibliotherapy is an innovative methodology which leads to emotional awareness thereby generating solutions to behavioural issues. It draws special attention to the role of books and reading in the paraphernalia of transformation. Reading equips students with powerful tools and assists them in dealing with various trials and tribulations. There are inevitabilities which interfere with students' academic progress and these precarious situations can be resolved by seeking refuge in books. Books also

help us confront with that part of our personality which remains concealed due to cultural and psychological reasons. As Virginia Woolf, the most fervent of readers, wrote, ‘A book “splits us into two parts as we read,” for “the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the ego,” while promising “perpetual union” with another mind’.

Books have the empowering effect as ‘Children are able to see reflections of themselves, their times, their country, their concerns [in literature] and whatever the nature of the story, well-written realistic fiction will always help readers gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others’ (qtd in Maich and Kean 6).

To experience this transformation it is significant to select reading material that is in tandem with the issues irking the student. Books with which the student identifies can serve the objective of mitigating emotional afflictions. Therefore, there must be a viable connection between the travails depicted in the books and students’ experiences. Moreover, a plan must be chalked out to include discussions and follow-up activities. This activity will thus contribute to a student’s cognitive and affective growth. Bibliotherapy also proves effective as it helps students to develop and nurturing empathy without being directly affected by the problem. Caroline Shrodes says

Literature, being at once fantasy and reality, permits the reader an illusion of standing apart and of being involved. Thus he is able to be both spectator and participant. Under the impact of emotion he may move about in a symbolic world which is inaccessible to him in life. He will bring to bear on a fictional situation, his predispositions, the circumstances of his life, his unique perspective, and in adding them up in relation to what is given, he may be compelled to re-evaluate his own experience. (25)

This approach can then facilitate a positive change as books have the potential to give voice to inhibitions and bottled-up suppressed emotions. Maich and Kean have suggested some strategies to facilitate this process. They suggest:

Other considerations for appropriate story choice include answering favorably to such questions as: Is the story simple, clear, brief, non-repetitious, and believable? Is it at an appropriate reading level and developmental level? Does the story fit with relevant feelings, needs, interests, and goals? Does it demonstrate cultural diversity, gender inclusivity, and sensitivity to aggression? Do characters show coping skills and does the problem situation show resolution? (7)

This brings us to the important task of selecting appropriate books suited to the developmental age of the students. It must also take into consideration the manner in which the characters are portrayed and the issue must be handled in an honest manner. Activities like role-playing, dramatizing, painting and sketching may prove to be effective in the subsequent sessions. Sometimes reading the same book again may bring renewed solutions to the fore.

As Amer says 'A good book can be read and reread by the same child to address pertinent issues affecting their life.' (10).

As the students read stories, they go through four stages of bibliotherapy. These stages as theorized by Shrodes are: identification, catharsis, insight and universality. The student should be able to identify with the main character and the events in the story. If the characters have similar traits and responses, identification is very easy. Further as Caroline Shrodes remarks 'if the character's adjustment to life seems maladjustive, then the recognition of himself in the character may provide a powerful deterrent to his continuation of his own life pattern' (26). Thus, this well-ordered and safe environment is a beneficial territory to engage with varied emotional responses. It gives an opportunity to help the student understand how an emotion is connected to behaviour. Weeping for instance is a behavioural response to an underlying emotion. Helping students understand the intricacies of their emotions will empower them to recognize and resolve their dilemmas and inner conflicts.

Keith Oatley, a novelist and emeritus professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto wrote in his book, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, 'Fiction is a kind of simulation, one that runs not on computers but on minds: a simulation of selves in their interactions with others in the social world'. (17). This idea resonates with the healing nature of books without the added feature of knowledge that the set of events happen only in the character's life. Having identified with the characters and situations the next step is directed towards Catharsis which means purging out of emotions. It is extremely therapeutic as students can relate to the situation and the characters in the story. They may see a reflection of their own situation and release pent-up emotions. At this stage, the role of a teacher is crucial and his/her communication skills will determine the progress. Occasionally, the teacher has to pause and listen to students. This will gradually take the student to the third stage that is, Insight. Colville a children's author, gives a description of insight: The right story at the right moment is an arrow to the heart. It can find and catch what is hiding inside the reader (or the listener), the secret hurt or anger or need that lies waiting, aching to be brought to the surface (35).

There may be varied responses to different situations but with this bibliotherapeutic process, students may be able to discover responses to different problems. When students and teachers engage with literature it helps them to engage with holistic learning. It boosts their ability to resolve inner conflicts and cultivate problem-solving skills. Sometimes the way a character approaches a problem may be an apt response to replace mundane behavioural responses. This self-awareness is a key to success. It helps a person to grow as a person and creates appropriate responses. Students could be asked questions like 'how would they react in a given situation?' Some models of bibliotherapy add a fourth element or phase known as universality. The notion underlying universality is the realization that the problems experienced by the character in the literature and by the reader himself are not unique. People experience problems and solutions can be generated. Readings should be accompanied with faithful and authentic discussion. As the student successfully passes through these stages he should be able to

cope with the problems and discuss the issues with the mentor in an uninhibited manner. The bibliotherapeutic session can offer renewed alternatives to old problems. It may also cater to those students who are not able to articulate feelings and thoughts.

Bibliotherapy not only works well at the individual level but also functions effectively at the group level and leads to socio-psychological growth of students as students identify with the characters. When this activity is extended to the groups students they not only gain insights and confidence but invariably develop empathy. Group setting will develop interpersonal skills and resolve internal conflicts. Kozel (1996) found that bibliotherapy also helped in modifying attitudes, promoting behaviour changes, and fostering self-development amongst all its participants (3). The effectiveness of this tool is conditional upon the skill of the facilitator and the process of interaction. Hobbs in the Re-ED fashion said, “Trust between child and adult is essential, the foundation on which all other principles rest, the glue that holds teaching and learning together, and the beginning point for reeducation” (245).

This paper has thus, examined the significance of bibliotherapy in light of the growing emotional and behavioural problems surfacing in the classroom. Embracing this technique will aid in reappraising emotions and fostering healthy reading habits. It is a learning tool which will help students to gain insights. Apart from being a panacea to emotional crisis, it is an empowering tool which helps to develop empathy influences behaviour positively and facilitates effective learning.

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