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The Effects of Bibliotherapy on Students Experiencing Grief, Loss, and Trauma

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

The Effects of Bibliotherapy on Students Experiencing Grief, Loss, and Trauma

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Laura L. Jensen

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

This literature review seeks to discover the impact and effect that bibliotherapeutic interventions can have on students who are experiencing grief, loss, and trauma in various forms. A literature review was created to synthesize the information from multiple studies and articles exploring the effects of bibliotherapy on individuals who have experienced trauma in the forms of death and bereavement, abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, natural disasters, terrorism, and acts of societal violence. Though there seems to be a shortage of research on effectiveness of bibliotherapy, the research that was found supports the idea that bibliotherapeutic interventions are beneficial for children and adolescents who have experienced grief, loss, and trauma. There is also support for school counselors to utilize bibliotherapeutic work in their interventions with students as it may help them to more openly communicate their experiences, identify proper coping skills, and instill in them the sense that they are not alone in their struggles.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, students, grief, loss, trauma, school counseling

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The Effects of Bibliotherapy on Students Experiencing Grief, Loss, and Trauma

Many students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade will experience grief, loss, and trauma throughout their time in school and may not know how to effectively deal with these feelings or the situations that have caused them. It is especially important for the school counselors working with these students to be aware of effective interventions that will help the students to open up about their experiences, allow for them to feel less alone, and provide them with adequate coping skills to help them through these difficult times. Bibliotherapy is an intervention that has been around for a while, yet there is not a lot of research that describes its effectiveness. This paper sets out to delve into the existing research on effectiveness of bibliotherapy in the work of students experiencing grief, loss, and trauma to determine whether it is an effective intervention for school counselors to utilize with students.

Review of Literature

Grief, loss, and trauma are all too familiar topics to a majority of the population. Unfortunately, these topics are also familiar for some children and adolescents and have the ability to negatively affect their functioning. Loss and trauma can affect children's relationships with others and may become enmeshed with their own sense of self, connection, safety, and trust (Pehrsson, 2005; Robinson, 2012). Sadly, these life events cannot necessarily be prevented, and school-aged children and adolescents will experience them regardless. This is why finding ways to help students through these difficult times and fostering feelings of connection and support are crucial in helping students learn to cope with these traumas. It is also important for counselors to find helpful ways to interact with students and help them through these difficult times to improve their self-esteem, connections, and sense of security.

Grief, Loss, and Trauma

Loss of a loved one, experiencing domestic abuse, living through war, and growing up in poverty are just some examples of trauma and loss that students may face. According to Sevinc (2019), grief refers to the natural process of facing the loss of someone close whereas trauma denotes an event or chain of events which causes harm for the emotional or physical well-being of an individual. Traumatic events can negatively impact and even hurt children, affecting them cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, and physiologically (Pehrsson, 2005). It is not uncommon for students to feel angry, upset, fearful, or anxious, and for students to experience shock, withdrawal, anger, and even depression (Pehrsson, 2005). De Vries et al. (2017) mention that children and youth who have experienced a traumatic event are at greater risk for developing psychological disorders and often struggle to express feelings, which may affect their ability to cope with daily life. If children are unable to properly cope with their feelings associated with grief, trauma, or loss, they are more prone to having psychological disorders and greater issues later in life (De Vries et al., 2017). This is where a need for an effective intervention becomes crucial for students.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy, or the use of written materials to gain understanding and engage in problem solving relevant to a person's therapeutic needs, has been an emerging form of therapy used with children and adolescents who have experienced or are experiencing grief, loss, and trauma (Goddard, 2011). Bibliotherapy purposefully uses books in a creative and therapeutic way, often combining cognitive behavioral therapy and narrative therapy approaches to provide a safe medium for children, adolescents, and adults to explore different concepts, feelings, and attitudes while allowing them to better understand their environment, community, and societal

expectations (Goddard, 2011; Robinson, 2012). According to Ginns-Gruenberg and Zacks (2012), there are six objectives of bibliotherapy. These objectives are to (a) show the reader that they are not alone, (b) offer multiple solutions, (c) help the reader understand human motivation, (d) help the reader recognize the benefits of the experience, (e) provide facts, and (f) encourage the reader to approach the situation realistically. Using books as an avenue for exploration, counselors can help students recognize their feelings vicariously through the main characters in the books. This also may potentially aid students in discussion of emotions that may be harmful if otherwise bottled up and not discussed with other people.

De Vries et al. (2017), explain that the main purposes of bibliotherapy are to share information, provide insight, promote the discussion of feelings, demonstrate new attitudes and values, show that others have similar problems, and to show solutions to the problems. By creating a safe place for students, counselors can utilize bibliotherapy to help facilitate these insights for students (De Vries et al., 2017). Bibliotherapy can also benefit children and adolescents by helping them to understand their emotions, realize that they are not alone, and answer their questions (Morgan & Roberts, 2010). By helping children and adolescents through these processes, counselors can positively impact student coping skills and resilience in situations of grief, loss, and trauma (Ginns-Gruenberg & Zacks, 2012).

There are four main parts of the bibliotherapy process according to De Vries et al. (2017). These parts consist of assessment, planning/selection, implementing/sharing, and evaluation. In the assessment process, therapists identify the child's readiness to face the trauma and the type of traumatic experience the child has endured (De Vries et al, 2017). This is extremely important for selecting culturally and developmentally appropriate literature for the student. The second step, planning and selection, consists of planning out the therapeutic process by selecting

appropriate stories, activities, and questions to use with the student (De Vries et al., 2017). It is important that these stories are realistic, mirror the child's background and beliefs, and present positive coping skills for the child to learn through the bibliotherapy process (De Vries et al., 2017). Implementation is where the stories are shared with the student. This includes pre-reading discussions, guided reading, discussion questions, and closure (De Vries et al., 2017). Lastly, in the evaluation, the counselor determines whether the goals of the client were met during the bibliotherapy sessions (De Vries et al., 2017). Counselors can follow these steps for a structured plan of how to go about using bibliotherapy with students.

Bibliotherapeutic Interventions

With Natural Disasters

Children who experience natural disasters have unique challenges and fears. They often face feelings of displacement, anxiety, and uncertainty and are often diagnosed with generalized trauma (De Vries et al., 2017). Following natural disasters, it is important for counselors to help children work through their feelings of trauma, loss, and uncertainty, and develop helpful coping skills to utilize as the children focus on moving forward (De Vries et al., 2017). The use of bibliotherapy and related activities is strongly encouraged for children who have experienced disasters as it can be a good way of facilitating social support, self-expression, and coping, which in turn can help the child return to feeling secure and in control (De Vries et al., 2017).

A study conducted by Stewart and Ames (2014) created a reading circle with 20 children in second through fifth grade in New Orleans who had been affected by Hurricane Katrina. In this two-year program, a total of 15 books were read that focused on changes in the family or challenging life situations, as well as themes such as friendship and confidence. Stewart and Ames (2014) state that bibliotherapy assisted the children in facing the issues related to their

traumatic experiences, promoted the development of relationships, improved academic performance, reduced feelings of hopelessness, and increased self-esteem. The conclusion for the above is that bibliotherapy as an intervention for students who have had major life changes or experienced trauma due to natural disasters may help them improve their feelings of efficacy and control, ultimately allowing them to feel more safe and secure in their environments.

With Terrorism and Acts of Societal Violence

Trauma and loss experienced by children and adolescents may also stem from acts of terrorism or societal violence. De Vries et al. (2017) discuss how children and youth all over the world have experienced trauma attributed to war, genocide, and terrorism. Children and adolescents can even be exposed to police brutality, murders, and other acts of violence in their communities or through news and media outlets (De Vries et al., 2017). With these occurrences leading to experiences of trauma and grief, bibliotherapy may be a helpful tool for counselors to use when working with students who are struggling with the effects of terrorism or societal violence (De Vries et al., 2017). Bibliotherapy provides an opportunity for children to share their experiences and feelings related to the world or societal violence and terrorist attacks (De Vries et al., 2017). Bibliotherapy also provides a tool for children and adolescents experiencing violence to learn coping skills and alternative responses to problems through books and stories (Sevinc, 2019). They may even gain respite from feelings of isolation by learning that others share their experience and can find hope in learning how other people have dealt with similar situations (Pehrsson, 2005).

With Sexual Abuse

Bibliotherapy can also be a helpful tool for working with students who have experienced sexual abuse. Ginns-Gruenberg and Zacks (2012) mention how sexual abuse victims often feel

unsafe and powerless and that books selected by the therapist contribute to restoring the person's sense of safety and power so that they will be able to move from feelings of victimhood to feelings of survivorship. Researchers also mention that bibliotherapy can be beneficial to victims of sexual abuse as the use of metaphor in literature can provide sexual abuse victims with a shield to discuss their trauma without having to directly address their trauma (Ginns-Gruenberg & Zacks, 2012). The stories used in bibliotherapy can also serve as a creative tool to help students experience emotional ties to the character, absorb coping strategies modeled, receive a message of hope or healing, and ultimately apply the meanings they draw from the stories to their own lives (Ginns-Gruenberg & Zacks, 2012).

With Parental Abuse/Neglect

Parental abuse or neglect of children is another issue that can be addressed through bibliotherapy with children and adolescents. Betzalel and Shechtman (2010) conducted a study with children (ages 7-15) in a group home who had been removed from their original homes due to abuse and/or neglect. These children had demonstrated anxiety, adjustment problems, social impairments, and behavioral difficulties, and were randomly assigned to one of three groups: control group, affective bibliotherapy group, or cognitive bibliotherapy group. They conducted pre- and post- intervention anxiety and adjustment tests and conducted another post-intervention anxiety and adjustment test three months after the intervention to see the effects bibliotherapy had on the children (Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010). The results showed a statistically significant reduction in social anxiety for children in both bibliotherapy groups compared to the control group (Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010).

Pardeck (1990) also found several positive outcomes when using bibliotherapy with children who have experienced abuse. These outcomes include feeling connected with the book's

character, learning positive-thinking techniques, expressing emotions about having been abused, learning to analyze others' behaviors and attitudes, creating solutions to a problem, seeing similarities between themselves and others, and accepting problems and cognitively restructuring them (Pardeck, 1990). Bibliotherapy has the ability to offer children who have experienced abuse and neglect with helpful coping skills, emotional issues, and behavioral challenges (De Vries et al., 2017). Bibliotherapy is also an effective way to stimulate difficult conversations about abuse and neglect, topics which children may not be comfortable discussing openly (Morgan & Roberts 2010).

With Death and Bereavement

The death of a loved one can be a dramatic life event for adolescents, especially as the grieving process interacts with adolescent concerns of gaining control and mastery over their environment, having a sense of belonging, seeking fairness and justice, and maintaining self-image (Slyter, 2012). Broadway (2008) discusses that because of its diversity, using literature to assist children and teens in understanding death and their own unique grieving processes can be very valuable. Berns (2014) mentions that children may be more inclined to share feelings directly through a third person such as a storybook character, cartoon, or animal to help make sense of their feelings of grief, loss, and pain.

The Children's Bereavement Center (CBC) noted positive effects of using bibliotherapy with children who have experienced the death of a loved one (De Vries et al., 2017). The CBC conducted semi-structured, open-ended groups lasting about 90 minutes on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and used bibliotherapy as one of their interventions. Through using bibliotherapy, specifically books on death, the children were allowed to share memories, continue bonds with the person they lost, and work through their feelings of fear and grief (De Vries et al., 2017).

Bibliotherapy can be a great way to help children and adolescents better understand death and clear a path for open conversation about it (Morgan & Roberts, 2010). In a study mentioned by Muselman & Wiggins (2012), a client named Cora was able to share and reflect on passages of the Bible that she once found comforting and the passages that angered her after her mother's death. Through the process of exploring personal meaning in these passages, she was able to more fully express her grieving, questioning, and faith as she began to work toward creating meaning in her mother's death (Muselman & Wiggins, 2012). Because of the work Cora's counselor had her do, she was able to discuss her mother's death and begin to make meaning and create peace from it (Muselman & Wiggins, 2012) more fully.

Briggs and Pehrsson (2008) also suggest that bibliotherapy is advantageous when working with people who are experiencing grief. They mention that when comparing bibliotherapy to grief therapy, multiple links can be drawn that suggest bibliotherapy can be effective in meeting the needs of grieving clients (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). Bibliotherapy assists with making meaning from life experiences, draws upon characters or information to expand worldviews and to assimilate new knowledge, while grief therapy asserts that the primary task of grief is for clients to relearn the world and themselves as they come to accept loss (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). Utilizing bibliotherapy as a form of grief therapy could be just as helpful to students who are experiencing death and bereavement.

Discussion

Advantages of Bibliotherapy

There has been a wealth of anecdotal evidence that bibliotherapy is an effective intervention for children and adults, for problems both large and small (Ginns-Gruenberg & Zacks, 2012). It assists young children and adolescents in releasing emotional pressures,

providing multiple solutions, promoting smoother dialogue about concerns, modeling capable decision-making strategies, and exposing children to divergent cultural views (Pehrsson, 2005). Yet another advantage to bibliotherapy is that when done correctly, books are selected to meet the developmental and emotional levels of the clients reading them. When bibliotherapy is matched with the needs of children, it helps children relate to situations that match their emotional, social, cultural, and cognitive frame of reference (Pehrsson, 2005). Sevinc (2019) cites a study that clinical bibliotherapy yields positive outcomes for treating grief and trauma. Sevinc (2019) also discusses how bibliotherapy helps the client to make meaningful inferences from experiences, rediscover the world around them, and rediscover themselves as well.

Limitations of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy does come with some limitations as well. One difficulty with bibliotherapeutic research is that bibliotherapy is not a therapy, which makes standardization and evaluation difficult to implement, and there are limited quality assessment tools (Ginns-Gruenberg & Zacks, 2010; Pehrsson, 2005). There is also the concern that bibliotherapy is not necessarily applicable for everyone (Sevinc, 2019). The client's backgrounds, needs, reading-writing skills, intelligence, readiness, motivation, and more are all variables which are determinants of successful application of a method. So, the extent to which one can benefit from bibliotherapy varies from one individual to another (Sevinc, 2019). Another limitation found while conducting this literature review is that there are not many studies conducted on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy, and even fewer experimental studies to prove bibliotherapy's effectiveness in comparison to control groups and to other therapeutic methods.

Applications to School Counseling

School counselors can utilize bibliotherapy in multiple aspects of their work with students. Students experiencing grief, loss, and trauma from various sources can benefit from bibliotherapeutic interventions by their counselor. As bibliotherapy can be used to help children and adolescents feel as if they are not alone in their experiences, allows them to openly discuss their experiences with grief, loss, and trauma, and provides them with helpful coping skills, it can be a wonderful intervention for school counselors to implement with students.

Bibliotherapy can also be a time-effective intervention for school counselors as they can either read a short story to the students or can assign reading to students for outside the sessions and can discuss the content during the sessions. It is also a fairly low-cost intervention for school counselors to implement. Books on any of these subjects can easily be found in libraries, bookstores, or online.

Students may also get excited to read books with the school counselor and may find it easier to discuss their own issues through the lens of a storybook character. This may make it easier for the school counselor to understand the student's perspective of the issue. Students may also derive their own solutions and coping skills from the reading of the story, which may improve the student's sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Future Research

Future research should be conducted on the long-term effectiveness of bibliotherapy with students and whether the coping skills and sense of universality that occurs in the bibliotherapy process continues to stick with the students throughout their lives. More research should also be done utilizing controlled, randomized samples of children and adolescents experiencing grief, trauma, and loss to determine the validity and predictability of bibliotherapy as an intervention.

More direct research utilizing pre- and post- assessments and qualitative interviews from students should be conducted to analyze the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of bibliotherapy as an intervention.

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