

Bibliotherapy: A Cross Discipline Course  
for Teachers and Counselors

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Introduction

Cross disciplinary training for teachers and counselors in the areas of reading and social skill development represents an important shift in educational training programs today. Teachers will be challenged by a wide range of social and emotional issues and needs of their students at all grade levels. Classroom management training alone does not provide educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to understand the psychological, social and cognitive developmental needs of children. A well integrated Bibliotherapy program, that improves reading skills and provides social and emotional guidance and instruction through reading content is presented as an optimal training model for teachers and counselors.

We will describe our attempts to create a model program for counselors and teachers in training, that has two major benefits within the field of Education and Educational Psychology. First, children's social and emotional developmental needs will be addressed by incorporating the "Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Program", a structured developmental guidance program within the classroom setting. This model program for counselors was developed by the Connecticut School Counselor Association (CSCA), with representation from the Connecticut Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (CACES) in cooperation with the Connecticut State Department of Education (2000). It provides goals and objectives that meet the personal needs of students to enhance their performance as learners.

Second, we have integrated the model for classroom guidance counseling into a reading literacy program, by teaching skills typically taught in English and Language Arts programs, while using the content material to discuss important personal and social topics. Reading novels has multiple uses. They can be read from the perspective of pure enjoyment , critical comment or for self reflection and a better understanding of everyday life. This latter area of concentration is considered bibliotherapy, or using picture books, chapter books, and novels to assist in discussing sensitive matters confronting today's students.

#### Cross Discipline Program Model

The current focus in reading instruction involves the use of open ended discussion questions that bring insights to a character's personality and problem solving techniques. This form of bibliotherapy in the classroom and/or guidance group is an effective learning strategy. Bibliotherapy enables teachers and counselors to teach the following comprehension strategies while addressing social and emotional concerns of the students:

- 1) Initial Understanding
- 2) Interpretation of the Material
- 3) Connections to Self, to Text, or to the World
- 4) Taking a Critical Stance.

Number three and four of the comprehension strategies link directly to guidance group discussions. They bring the book elements into play along with applications and insights from the student's own lives.

With an increasing need for guidance counselors, many secondary schools have utilized counseling homerooms to provide students with a structured setting for discussion of personal issues. Classroom teachers typically have fifteen minutes to half an hour daily to discuss common problems with their homeroom class. Most regular classroom teachers are not prepared to use this allotted time properly. They have not been provided with the theoretical knowledge or counseling skills needed to generate student interaction, problem solving and group discussions. They don't take this opportunity to involve literacy skills or written application either. Course training of teachers and counselors in the creation of social skills instruction that is developmentally appropriate, through Bibliotherapy, would be an effective method of addressing the social and emotional needs of students. Cross discipline instruction for teachers and counselors would provide a skill base to collaborate on merging and integrating social needs and issues with literacy skills. Teachers and counselors would be able to cooperate on social issues through the context of classroom instruction.

Myrick (1997) proposed a Developmental Guidance model of classroom instruction that addressed the social and emotional needs of children and promoted the development of problem solving and social reasoning skills. A developmental guidance curriculum includes lessons and instructional objectives that are developmentally appropriate, provides a scope and sequence and is delivered within a typical peer or classroom setting. Students today must contend with a wide range of family, economic and community changes in their lives. The classroom setting is ideal for providing students with the knowledge and skills to adapt and cope with the social and emotional changes that naturally occur in their lives and adjust to ecological changes in the wider social and cultural community as well. The psycho educational group process also enhances student potential to learn.

Many states and school districts throughout the nation have begun to incorporate social instruction, developmental guidance, peer mentoring, teacher advisement and

health classes to meet the psycho social needs of students. These are viewed as support or adjunct programs designed to address social needs in order to develop better learners. Often teachers don't have the time, opportunity or training to participate in these programs effectively. Teachers, however, are the cornerstone of students' social developmental needs. They provide interpersonal modeling, reinforcement and emotional attachment to children as well as authority figures. The support and collaborative efforts of counselors provides a co-teaching model of social skill training. Guidance can be provided within a normal or typical classroom setting.

The Connecticut School Counselor Association has developed a model for a comprehensive school counseling program that incorporates a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence of goals, objectives and sample lessons/activities for grades Kindergarten through 12. Goals, objectives and lessons were adapted from existing programs throughout the state of Connecticut.

Key benefits for students (adapted from the Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program, Missouri State Department of Education, Jefferson City, Mo; included the development of decision-making skills, increased knowledge of self and others, and broadened knowledge of our changing world. The Curriculum organized goals and objectives around three major domains; I) *Personal-Social Development (Learning to Live)*, II) *Educational Development (Learning to Learn)* and III) *Career Development (Learning to Earn a Living)*. By addressing these needs from year to year in a student's school career, children has a better chance of developing into well adjusted learners for life.

David Elkind (1981) has applied Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development to educational settings. In his research, he has argued that children often experience stress and poor motivation when academic demands exceed the child's developmental ability to accomplish tasks. Furthermore, he has linked cognitive developmental needs with Erik Erikson's theory of Psycho social Development (1979) to highlight how social,

emotional and cognitive needs are co-mingled and reached only at certain levels of maturational readiness. The mission of teachers, school counselors and all educators is the development of students as learners by first understanding the emotional issues of children created by educational and social challenges. Both Elkind's theories (1981) and the Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Program address the goal of developing the whole student and provides the format for cross discipline training in Bibliotherapy for teachers and counselors.

The Bibliotherapy Course was taught during the summer session (2002) by Dr. Darla Shaw of the Education Department and Dr. Aram Aslanian of the Educational Psychology Department at Western Connecticut State University. The course was designed to provide students with a working knowledge of the Connecticut Comprehensive School Counseling Curriculum and the opportunity to develop and implement lessons and study guides, through readings organized around the major developmental domains of Personal-Social Development, Educational Development and Career Development. Teachers and counselors used picture books, chapter books and novels of a therapeutic nature to teach both literacy and social and emotional skill development. Each class was based on the reading of specific books which linked to literacy strategies from the National Language Arts Framework and discussion sessions that were based on the Cognitive and Psycho social Developmental theories of Jean Piaget (1969), Erik Erikson (1979) and David Elkind (1981).

Examples of Integrating Developmental Guidance Domains and Objectives with Reading In the *Personal and Social Domain*, the Objective "Respect for Self and Others" included the following sub topics that were reviewed within required readings;

- 1) Identity and character building (Self concept)
- 2) Family and Culture (Understanding divorce and Blended Families)

- 3) The Socialization Process (Social reasoning and problem solving)
- 4) The Grieving process (Coping with death and loss)
- 5) Prejudice (Aggressions and violence)

Some of the issues that students often deal with in schools include physical or sexual abuse, divorce, homelessness, prejudice, alienation, drugs, grief, depression, unwanted pregnancy, poverty, health issues, and learning or physical disabilities. Many of these topics include a series of book titles, fiction and non fiction , that would serve as a catalyst to a meaningful discussion. Increasing numbers of bibliotherapeutic books are coming on the market. Numerous bibliotherapeutic bibliographies are also being published for teachers and guidance counselors. As teachers and counselors become increasingly involved in what used to be considered “family matters,” publishers realize the need for more self help and fiction books that help students see they are not alone in their problems.

In the Educational Development Domain, readings and stories were included that covered and taught about the acquisition of positive attitudes and knowledge and necessary skills to become an effective, successful learner and student. Within the Career Development Domain, readings included stories about understanding a student’s relationship between school and work and the requisite skills for possessing interpersonal skills, self knowledge and understanding.

Counseling students were paired with education students to develop student based bibliotherapeutic study guides. In the area of literacy, many critical skills can be developed through this team teaching model. This model would involve specific skill based mini lessons with direct application to the book. Four reading approaches (Initial, Interpretation, Connections, Critical Stance)and strategies for each approach were presented throughout the course. For example, when focusing on *Initial* reading

approaches the following strategies could be developed with similar examples of how to address the area of *Divorce and Blended Families*:

### **Initial Response**

*The Anticipation Guide:* Students would be given a quiz on the topic of the book before it is read. This quiz gives both the teacher and the student a knowledge of how much information the student actually has on the subject and how much learning needs to take place. The quiz is not for a grade, it is for focusing on what the student now needs to learn.

*Class example:* When reviewing the book “It’s Not the End of the World” by Judy Bloom(1972), our students realized the impact an *Anticipation Guide* would have with many students in their classrooms who have or currently are experiencing transitions in their family as the result of a divorce. With the collaboration of a counselor in the classroom setting, this could lead to a powerful discussion that was instructive and therapeutic.

*The Quick Write:* Students are asked to write everything that comes to mind on a particular topic during a timed one minute session. These ideas are then categorized and discussed and focus questions are developed.

*Class Example:* The ability to write about divorce provides many students with an outlet that would not otherwise be available. Some children would have difficulty verbalizing their thoughts about divorce. In this way, they are learning a literacy skill and receiving social and emotional benefit through the content of the reading.

*The Focus Questions:* Before students begin to read they should develop focus questions for the topic or story. This will help center their reading and make it more meaningful.

*Class Example:* Many children have questions about divorce and families. By developing focus questions for the story by Judy Blume for example, they receive the

therapeutic benefit of organizing their thoughts and questions as well by identifying with the characters and story of a young girl who's family experiences the transition of a divorce. Students confused or preoccupied by sudden or long standing family changes often have difficulty concentrating in school. By combining literacy skill training with reading content that addresses the psychological and social needs of children, we create a normalized system of enhancing the whole child as a successful learner.

Predictogram: In the predictogram, students are given 10-12 key randomly chosen words from the story. Before reading the story they arrange these words into the following categories: setting, characters, possible problem. This thinking helps the students to formulate questions for focused reading.

Word Splash: The teacher or counselor splashes 8-10 key words on the board and asks students to use these words, one by one, as they might relate to the story. This helps students read for context clues and focus on the story.

*Class Example:* Key words, terms and phrases related to divorce are often emotional triggers for students who could begin to formulate their ideas and questions. "It's Not the End of the World", was the required reading for this section of the course titled (Understanding Divorced Families and Blended Families) which was within the Personal -Social Domain and addressed the objective of "Respect for Self and Others". These literacy skills are appropriate for grades 6-8, where students attained, according to Elkind (1992), Concrete Operational Stage of Cognitive Development and are on the verge of entering formal operational thinking. At these stages, 6th through 8th grade students have the ability to think symbolically and work things out mentally. Some students will begin to worry about how others see them and question whether people have the same thoughts that they do. With the emergence of adolescence, by age 11-12, students begin to question themselves more which can hamper their sense of industriousness, lead to feelings of inferiority and a low sense of identity (Erikson, 1978 ).

By providing a venue for students to learn about literacy skills and express questions they may have about their role or place in a divorced family, we enhance their ability to think, comprehend, and reason while bolstering their psycho social needs for identity building and feeling successful. Through literature children can heal and learn. Bruno Bettelheim (1978) expressed the belief that reading development in children was closely related to the subject matter, content, and emotional connections made by learners. He proposed that reading instruction incorporates social and emotional issues embedded in the content and address these areas with the psycho social needs of children.

Given the same area of family and divorce, other books were reviewed that are developmentally appropriate for grades K-2 (My Family's changing, Thomas, P.) 3-5 (Dinosaurs Divorce, Brown, L&M) and 9-12 (They Cage the Animals at Night, Jennings, M.)

*The Grieving Process (Coping with death and loss)*

### **Interpretation**

The *Interpretation* reading strategy was also introduced. Its application to readings related to the grieving process was also presented in the course. The Grieving Process is often confusing for children of all ages, but especially during Early Childhood ages 2-7. Parents, teachers and counselor are often afraid or perplexed about how to address the death of a relative, friend, neighbor or even pet. Erikson (1958) hypothesized that young children must reach a healthy psycho social balance between feelings of autonomy or a sense of shame and doubt. As children enter preschool and kindergarten they become more capable and develop a sense of initiative, curiosity and exploration by questioning (Elkind 1981). Story and picture books such as Freddie the Leaf (Biscalia, 1982) have been helpful in helping young children develop some sense of understanding about losses they experience in their young lives.

Elkind also believed that children could also lose their sense of initiative and develop a sense of guilt at this school entry stage. Sometimes, children feel a sense of guilt with the loss of a parent because they are both intellectually and emotionally delayed in their ability to comprehend such a loss. Children who lose a parent or family member at this age require assistance in interpretation of the event.

By ages 7-11 Children acquire a new set of mental abilities to distinguish between fantasy and reality and apply social rules. They also attain a balance between feeling industrious or inferior. Reading materials skills involving interpretation can be useful in educating children about the grieving process while enhancing their ability to feel successful and industrious in school.

During our cross discipline training, in the area of grief, we utilized the book, "Tuesdays with Morrie" by Mitch Albom. For the interpretation phase of the reading, students should be actively involved in reading for specifics and utilizing specific strategies. Some of the reading strategies are:

Think A Loud: As students read a story for the first time, they think a loud to a partner or the class. They read orally but stop from time to time to insert insights, make possible predictions, question what they are reading, etc. This shows students that comprehending material does not come naturally, but is concentrated work.

Literacy Circles: This cooperative learning activity divides each group into: discussion leader, vocabulary/quote person, illustrato r, application person, summarizer, etc. As each student reads they focus on their role and then share their findings, first in a small and then in a large group discussion.

Socratic Seminar: For this exercise the teacher or counselor poses only one important open ended question. Students read to find their "take" on this question and share it orally with the group, always supporting their point of view.

Mind Mapping: To get into the mind of the characters in the story, students make a mind map for the character. This map shows what the characters might be thinking as they move through various portions of the story.

Eight Key Questions: Any good book discussion involves addressing eight key questions. The eight key questions on which to focus are: story title, theme, characters and how they address conflict, were the characters correct in their actions, and comparison of characters, application of story to self or other events, important quotes or vocabulary words from the story, and was the story good literature.

Character Sketch: When students discuss characters in a story they need to look at the outside or appearance of the character and his/her surroundings. However, they must also examine the inner self of a character to get a true understanding of that character. They might also do a comparison of themselves to the character.

T Chart: A T chart can help to organize ideas from the story into two segments: problem and solution, causes and effects, characters and characteristics, facts and opinions, vocabulary and definitions, chapter title and summary, etc.

Sketch to Sketch: For students who like to draw they can sketch the high points of each chapter, label their pictures and retell. This is a form of journal writing.

Impact Chart: As the students read the story, they note high and low points of the story and map them on a bar graph type sheet. They want to show how various incidents impacted on major characters and why. The graphing is usually done on a ten point scale with the 1 being the lowest impact and the 10 being the highest.

Class Examples: Think aloud is an important skill to help students ask questions and clarify questions they may relate to personally in the reading. Other Interpretation skills give students the ability to relate to the loss of others, understand the impact of death, develop empathy skills and receive support and understanding from others in the classroom. In Tuesdays with Morrie, the main character chronicles his visits with a

mentor and former teacher prior to his death. Many students can begin to understand and respect the loss and grief of others and well as themselves.

*Prejudice (Aggressions and violence)*

### **Connections**

The third reading phase is the *Connections* to various events in the story. The connections don't have to be personal but can involve connections to the following: historical events, current events, other books, movies, or TV programs, etc. In other words, we connect text to self, text to text (other books or reading materials), or text to world.

Some of the most commonly used connections strategies are:

Venn Diagram: this strategy uses a graphic organizer where the student compares and contrasts himself and another person in a story. The mid portion of the Venn Diagram where the circles intersect addresses what the two elements have in common. The outer portions of the diagram look at differences.

Letter Writing and Diaries: These two formats offer students a way to take their insights about a story and connect them to themselves or others.

Mock Interviews: With this technique the student takes on the role of a character in a story and is interviewed as if he/she were the character. This can be done with or without video taping.

Autobiographic Poem: After reading and doing an autobiographic poem for the character in a story, students tend to gain insights into their own lives. This insight helps them write autobiographic poems about themselves.

*Class Examples*: In our constantly changing world of culture and beliefs, prejudice, aggression and violence appear daily on news shows. Reading strategies that enhance a student's ability to make connections to current events, news shows, movies etc. are beneficial in a personal way. The reading, Give a boy a Gun, by Todd Strasser, was used to generate study guides and discussion about violence in our

schools, the sense of alienation some teenagers may feel who may have been the victims of prejudice or been prejudicial in return.

While all reading phases are instrumental at all age groups, the Connection reading phase appears developmentally and cognitively appropriate for adolescents age 12 and older who are entering a formal operational stage of cognitive development. Students in this age group can reason abstractly, and conceptualize about themselves in relation to others. David Elkind (1988) theorized that adolescents also construct an “imaginary audience” . Because they are mentally able to think about what others are thinking they often believe that others are thinking about what they are thinking. It is a powerful cognitive force that can create misunderstanding and misconnections with others. As adolescents develop a sense of identity, social roles, values, and beliefs understanding of self and others can create confusion, turmoil, anger mistrust and or identity diffusion. Connection strategies and reading content can be incorporated into a well designed developmental guidance curriculum at the high school level to address topics of prejudice, aggression and violence. If a curriculum that involved connections in reading relevant materials had been developed for all students, perhaps the violence we experience in school today could be lessened.

*The Socialization Process (Social reasoning and problem solving)*

### **Critical Stance**

This last aspect of a standards based reading program is the *Critical Stance*. Each student must react to some aspect of the story and take a stand. The stand must be accompanied with support and elaboration from the story. The children's books Paper Bag Princess by Robert Muncy & The Hundred Dresses, by E. Esther were reviewed to develop study guides and lessons in the Social Reasoning and Problem Solving. Some aspects of critical stance activities are:

Discussion Webs: In this strategy students pose a key question from the story and then lists pros and cons of the topic. Then after coming up with as many pros and cons as possible, they develop a critical stance essay based on the question.

Reader Response Journals: As the students keep a journal, they note key issues in each chapter and respond with backup evidence. These journal responses can be turned into position pieces.

Readers' Theater: Students, usually in groups, retell the story and make a script out of each chapter with the narrator being the key character. The script writers embed their point of view about the story in the writing of the script.

Poetry and Music: Allow students to write poetry and lyrics to poems. The literacy pieces will encourage them to take a critical stance in a most creative fashion.

### **Summary**

All four Reading strategies, *Initial Response, Interpretation, Connections and Critical Stance* are universal skills that can be incorporated into a typical classroom setting at all ages. Comprehensive Developmentally Appropriate Counseling Programs can be developed with reading materials and literature that covers topics in the three major domain areas, Personal Social, Educational, and Career and utilizes reading strategies to insure student success academically and personal and social growth and well-being. Reading strategies and counseling curriculum can be developed in almost every content area class so that they become internalized.

When the above mentioned literacy strategies are understood and used in connection with counselor training, they have added value. Nationally, school counselors are trained in a variety of roles including those of consultant and teacher. By training teachers and counselors to develop both reading literacy skills and critical thinking with comprehensive guidance counseling programs that incorporates relevant and meaningful literature, students' developmental needs are met. Today few aspects of life stand alone. The world is interactive and functions through networking and

collaboration. The same is true for literacy and counseling. Literacy works better when it relates to the real world and counseling is about the realities of life.

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#### Grades 3-5

The Bear's House, Marilyn Sachs

#### Grades 6-8

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#### Grades 9-12

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Grades 9-12

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