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Using Bibliotherapy to Teach Problem Solving

JAMES W. FORGAN

Students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, mild mental retardation) can benefit from using bibliotherapy by learning how to become proactive problem solvers. Often students with high-incidence disabilities are characterized as inefficient in recognizing and solving problems. By learning a problem-solving strategy and applying it to children's literature titles, students with disabilities can learn to become independent and effective problem solvers.

After lunch Mr. Jones was reading aloud to his third-grade resource room students from *The Meanest Thing to Say*, by Bill Cosby (1997), when suddenly Kenyan raised his hand. He enthusiastically exclaimed, "I am going to try that the next time my brother calls me a name. I think saying 'so' will get him to stop." Kenyan, a student with a specific learning disability, identified with the literary character and discovered a new solution to his challenging problem. The identification and insight Kenyan attained from the literary character is often termed *bibliotherapy*.

What Is Bibliotherapy?

Have you ever read a book for self-help or to find answers to your difficulties, such as how others dealt with a loss, learned to become self-assured, or overcame a hardship? If you responded "yes," then you have used bibliotherapy. *Bibliotherapy* is simply defined as "the use of books to help people solve problems" (Aix, 1993, p. 1). Most people have read books to determine how others have approached a delicate issue. Teachers can use children's literature to help students solve problems and generate alternative responses to their issues.

Using books to solve problems is not a new idea but one that has received increased attention recently. Aiex (1993) identified nine potential reasons a teacher may choose to use bibliotherapy with students:

- to show an individual that he or she is not the first or only person to encounter such a problem,
- to show an individual that there is more than one solution to a problem,
- to help a person discuss a problem more freely,
- to help an individual plan a constructive course of action to solve a problem,
- to develop an individual's self-concept,
- to relieve emotional or mental pressure,
- to foster an individual's honest self-appraisal,
- to provide a way for a person to find interests outside of self, and
- to increase an individual's understanding of human behavior or motivations.

This list highlights some of the many potential benefits of using the bibliotherapy approach to problem solving with students. Sridhar and Vaughn (2000) reported that additional benefits from bibliotherapy include improving students' self-concept and behavior.

Bibliotherapy is helpful for students with high-incidence disabilities who are experiencing difficulties or who may be likely to encounter problems similar to those discussed in the literature (McCarthy & Chalmers, 1997). In addition, all children can benefit from being taught a literature bibliotherapy lesson because students are likely to encounter similar issues during their school years. For example, a student may not be confronted by a bully or teased today but may experience similar problems later.

The situations most teachers are exploring with students when using bibliotherapy are types of everyday life problems such as anger, teasing, bullying, and issues of self-concept. These types of problem-solving issues are best accomplished through small-group or whole class readings and discussions of the topic. Doll and Doll (1997) described this approach as "developmental bibliotherapy" because it focuses on helping children cope with developmental needs rather than relying on a clinical or individualized approach to bibliotherapy. Through this developmental process, students will likely experience identification with the main character in the story, experience a catharsis and release of emotion, and develop insight to solve their problems. Developmental bibliotherapy includes the steps of selecting materials to use with students, presenting the materials, and building students' comprehension of the issue.

How Do I Teach Using Bibliotherapy?

The sample lesson plan presented in Appendix A is based on a teaching framework for bibliotherapy and problem solving and contains the four elements of

1. prereading,
2. guided reading,
3. postreading discussion, and
4. a problem-solving/reinforcement activity.

Prereading

The element of prereading contains two steps; the first is selection of materials. Careful selection of material is important so that students can identify and relate to the real or fictional literary character. The school or public library media specialist is an excellent resource to consult when selecting materials because he or she will have a comprehensive knowledge of children's literature titles. Table 1 contains a list of books appropriate for bibliotherapy.

Also, several books and Internet sites provide book summaries. Pardeck and Pardeck (1986) provided a list of criteria for selecting books for the preschool child and recommended early childhood books. In addition, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh has a detailed Web site that contains summaries of books to help young children cope in today's world (www.clpgh.org/clp/libctr/famctr/bibtherapy/). As noted earlier, when planning for a lesson, it is important to select books that will allow students to connect with the main character. Additional resources are located in Appendix B.

The next element of prereading involves activating students' background knowledge and helping them link their past experiences to the present book content. Often, teachers will display the cover of the book and ask students to predict what occurs in the story. Others provide a brief statement about the story and ask students questions such as, "The story we are going to read today is about teasing. Have you ever been teased?" Teachers may want to use a Venn Diagram to allow students to predict some of the similarities and differences between their lives and the characters in the book. The **KWL** chart is another prereading activity that enables students to identify what they **know** about the topic, what they **want** to learn about the topic, and then what they **learned** about the topic. These types of predicting activities help students activate their prior knowledge and identify with the book's content.

Guided Reading

Guided reading is the second element of the teaching framework and involves the teacher or adult reading the story aloud to students. Although some chapter books require multiple readings, generally children's literature books are of reasonable length to be read aloud in their entirety during one class period. To facilitate the continuity of the story, read the entire story uninterrupted before asking any questions. Once the story is completed, some teachers allow students a few minutes to reflect on the story by writing their reaction in a literature journal.

Table 1. Bibliotherapy Books

Topic	Title	Author	Grades	Publishing information
Arguing	<i>Arthur's April Fool</i>	Marc Brown	K-3	1985; NY: Little, Brown
	<i>The Ant Bully</i>	John Nickle	K-3	1999; NY: Scholastic
	<i>Louise Takes Charge</i>	Stephen Krensky	K-3	1998; NY: Penguin Putnam
	<i>Owen Foote, Frontiersman</i>	Stephanie Greene	3-5	1999; NY: Clarion
	<i>The Two Bullies</i>	Junko Marimoto	1-4	1999; NY: Crown
Diversity	<i>Uncle Jed's Barbershop</i>	Margaree King Mitchell	1-3	1993; NY: Simon & Schuster
	<i>Teammates</i>	Peter Golenbock	1-2	1992; NY: Simon & Schuster
	<i>The Hundred Dresses</i>	Eleanor Estes	2-3	1998; NY: Voyager
	<i>The Black Snowman</i>	Phil Mendez	1-4	1989; NY: Scholastic
	<i>Swimmy</i>	Leo Lionni	1-3	1992; NY: Knopf
Anger	<i>When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry</i>	Molly Bang	K-3	1999; NY: Scholastic
	<i>When I Feel Angry</i>	Cornelia Maude Spelman	K-3	2000; Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman
	<i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i>	Judith Vorist	K-3	1972; NY: Atheneum
	<i>Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild</i>	Mem Fox	K-3	2000; NY: Harcourt
	<i>When I'm Angry</i>	Jane Aaron	K-3	1998; NY: Golden Books
Self-concept	<i>Amazing Grace</i>	Mary Hoffman	2-5	1991; NY: Penguin Putnam
	<i>A Valentine for Norman Noggs</i>	Valiska Gregory	2-5	1999; NY: HarperCollins
	<i>I Love My Hair!</i>	Natasha Tarpley	K-3	1998; NY: Little, Brown
	<i>Shipwreck Saturday</i>	Bill Cosby	2-5	1998; NY: Scholastic
	<i>The Treasure Hunt</i>	Bill Cosby	2-5	1997; NY: Scholastic

Others simply allow a few seconds for individual reflection on the story before beginning the discussion. Two points to remember are (a) read the story at an appropriate pace and (b) use an appropriate volume so students are listening and paying attention.

Postreading Discussion

The third element of the bibliotherapy teaching framework is the postreading discussion. McCarty and Chalmers (1997) provided guidelines for the discussion and recommended the teacher first follow a sequence of having students retell the plot and then evaluate character feelings and any situations that occurred. It is important to ensure that students comprehend the story before moving forward. Next is a class discussion: "The students are asked probing questions, which helps them think about their feelings and better identify with the characters and events in the story" (p. 12). Appendix A contains 10 sample questions, based on *The Meanest Thing to Say*, that teachers can use to stimulate a meaningful class discussion. The questions vary in that some are knowledge and comprehension questions, whereas others require analysis and evaluation. Teachers can develop their own

questions prior to the lesson or as they reread the story with students. Many teachers prefer to use the example lesson as a template when beginning to teach using this problem-solving format and then develop personalized lessons using favorite books.

Through the process of using bibliotherapy, students with high-incidence disabilities pass through the stages of identification, catharsis, and resolution as they learn to problem solve. Doll and Doll (1997) thought this an important process and one in which "problem solving provided by literature will cause young people to change the ways in which they interact with or behave toward other people" (p. 8). By identifying with the literary character, students recognize that they are not alone in experiencing a problem. This is key, as young people often feel alone when experiencing a specific problem.

Through the guided class discussion of the character's problem, students can converse about the issue and come to understand that other people experience the same types of problems. This dialogue helps students as they develop insight into the character's difficulty and discuss the merits and shortcomings of any solutions. In addition, the class can generate possible solutions to their own problems by using their newly acquired insight.

Problem Solving

Often students with high-incidence disabilities feel dependent on the teacher to solve their problems because they have not learned to become independent problem solvers. Hence the fourth component of the teaching framework, problem solving, can help students learn how to become independent problem solvers. As students identify with characters in the various literature stories and discuss solutions to problems, they can apply the I SOLVE interpersonal problem-solving strategy to develop additional alternatives. Once students become efficient problem solvers, they begin to develop feelings of self-control that become helpful in creating a positive classroom environment (Dreikurs & Cassel, 1972). The postreading problem-solving section in the instructional framework includes application of the I SOLVE mnemonic strategy (see Figure 1).

Let's examine each one of the steps independently, although each step is interrelated. Figure 1 outlines the I SOLVE steps. The first step is to *identify* the problem presented in the book. You may find several problems that are relevant to your students. In addition, it may be necessary to guide students to the primary issue for your discussion and then address secondary problems during another lesson.

The "S" stands for *solutions*, and students will need to list all solutions the book's characters considered to solve the problem as well as generate their own original solutions to the problem. Explain to students that although each potential solution may not solve the problem, all should be generated. It is usually helpful to write the potential solutions on the chalkboard or overhead projector. This will facilitate discussion and enable students to make a corresponding list of obstacles that can be written next to each solution.

The third step involves examining each solution and determining if there are any *obstacles* to that solution. For example, in the sample lesson plan, one potential solution to the problem is for the character of Little Bill to say mean things back to the other student. An obstacle to this solution is that saying mean things to the other student would lead to additional troubles, and therefore, students would reject this solution. After completing this step of identifying each obstacle, reassure students that it is typical for many of the solutions to have obstacles but that they must locate a solution with few or no obstacles.

Once students are finished examining the obstacles for each potential solution, they should move to the next step of *looking* at the solutions again and *choosing* one. Emphasize to students that they need to select solutions that solve their problem in the long term, not just for the moment. This may mean eliminating some attractive solutions that simply fix the problem in the short term but would not prevent it from reoccurring. For instance, in the sample lesson plan Little Bill could tell the teacher

- I Identify the problem.
- S Solutions to the Problem?
- O Obstacles to the Solutions?
- L Look at the Solutions Again—*Choose One.*
- V Very Good; Try it!
- E Evaluate the Outcome.

Figure 1. I SOLVE strategy.

From *Teaching Problem Solving Through Children's Literature* by James Forgan.
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about the name calling, but this solution would only be short term. Remind students not to simply choose the solution with the least obstacles, as it may not be the most beneficial for solving the problem.

In the next-to-last step of the I SOLVE strategy, the student would say to him or herself, "*Very good!* I chose a solution; now I need to try it." The next time students are presented with the problem or situation, they would try their solution. If students may not encounter a situation to apply the solution in the near future, the teacher can create a practice role-play. This simulation would allow students to receive teacher feedback as well as try their solution in advance of the problem occurring again. In the natural environment, students may need prompting from the teacher in order to remember to try the new solution until they reach mastery.

Finally, after trying the solution, students complete the last step and *evaluate* the outcome to determine if the solution was effective for solving the problem. Initially, students may need guidance from the teacher in order to determine if their response to the problem was effective. In this phase, the use of a scaffolding procedure is often helpful. The teacher may need to lead a group or individual discussion about the problem in order to examine the outcome. This type of teacher scaffolding allows the teacher to "think aloud" and lead students through a meaningful discussion; it also allows students to gain insight into the teacher's thought process. Gradually, students can take responsibility for evaluating their actions. If the solution was ineffective, the student would need to return to the "S" step and reconsider the remaining solutions. Thus, if the teacher saved the transparency with the solutions and obstacles, the class could revisit it to determine what so-

lution to try next. This would be another opportunity for the teacher to scaffold the instruction and think aloud while considering the remaining solutions.

Strategy Instruction

Teaching students the I SOLVE strategy is an important component of bibliotherapy because many students with high-incidence disabilities do not learn from holistic teaching approaches, such as story time, and need directed teaching. The typical framework for strategy instruction includes providing a rationale for using the strategy, modeling the strategy steps, providing guided practice, and promoting generalization and maintenance. Instruction of the I SOLVE strategy is likely to require many lessons involving guided practice and student independent practice. Students need to master the strategy so that it is recalled automatically and effortlessly when they encounter a problem. Mastery is defined as 100% accuracy in using the strategy and occurs after students have internalized and assimilated the steps (Strichart, Mangrum, & Iannuzzi, 1998).

The first time you introduce the I SOLVE strategy, provide a rationale for why students need to become good problem solvers. Ask students if they ever experience problems with their friends or classmates, and ask for a volunteer to share or contribute one of your experiences. After sharing, emphasize to students that you are going to teach them a strategy to help them solve these types of prob-



lems. Tell them the strategy is called I SOLVE because it emphasizes helping each of them work together to learn how to solve problems. Let the students know you are going to begin the strategy today and continue practicing it until they have reached mastery.

Next, introduce the steps of the I SOLVE interpersonal problem-solving strategy to the students. Inform students that I SOLVE is an acronym and that each letter in I SOLVE stands for a different step in the problem-solving strategy. Read each letter and the statement it represents. Using a personal example of a problem or one that a student will share, model the second strategy instructional component of applying the steps of I SOLVE. Write the steps on the chalkboard or overhead projector. Fill in the blanks with students as you think aloud about the problem. Next, discuss any solutions that might help to permanently solve the problem as well as any obstacles. If this is one of your personal examples, discuss how you selected the solution as well as any details about the results of your problem.

Reinforcement Activity

In addition to the aforementioned instructional framework, teachers may want to include a reinforcement activity that provides practice and application of the solutions students learned. In order to promote skill generalization and maintenance, Gresham, Sugai, and Horner (2001) recommended that teachers instruct social skills within the natural setting by using real-life examples and incidental learning, such as the teachable moment, in order to capitalize on naturally occurring events. Students with high-incidence disabilities require reinforcement practice to ensure that they have successfully learned the skill. McGinnis and Goldstein (1997) also suggested homework assignments as a strategy to promote maintenance. For example, students could self-record the number of times they use the strategy outside of school.

The application example in Appendix A includes a role-play for students to complete, which allows the teacher to give constructive feedback on their performance. The role-play is based on a natural situation that students are likely to encounter in their everyday events. Additional reinforcement activities students could complete for homework may include writing a poem or in a journal, engaging in a structured debate, or practicing the skill with their parents. The application activity reinforces the student's ability to use the strategy for generating an appropriate solution when confronted with a problem.

Concluding Remarks

The use of bibliotherapy can help improve the problem-solving abilities of students with high-incidence disabilities. One note for teachers is to carefully select topics for

bibliotherapy that are developmental in nature, rather than topics of a clinical nature, such as abuse. For consistency in subject areas, enlist the support of the school guidance counselor to correlate topics of discussion. Finally, inform the school administrator if you have any concerns about inappropriate comments students voice during group discussions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James W. Forgan, PhD, is an assistant professor of special education at Florida Atlantic University. His interests are in software evaluation as well as social skills instruction for students with high-incidence disabilities. Address: James W. Forgan, Florida Atlantic University, 5353 Parkside Dr., Jupiter, FL 33458; e-mail: jforgan@fau.edu

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- Strichart, S. S., Mangrum, C. T., & Iannuzzi, P. (1998). *Teaching study skills and strategies to students with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, or special needs* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Appendix A:

The Meanest Thing to Say

Author: Bill Cosby
Illustrator: Varnette P. Honeywood
Copyright Date: 1997
Publisher: NY, Scholastic
ISBN #: 0-590-13754-9
Topic: Teasing
Approximate Grade Levels: K–3

Summary of the Book

A new student joins Little Bill's class and challenges him to a name-calling game where the person who says the meanest thing wins. Little Bill has to choose between saying mean things and coming up with another solution. With help, Little Bill thinks of another solution and says, "so." The new student feels insecure and lonely, but Little Bill befriends him and invites him to play.

Lesson Goal(s)

To help students select strategies to effectively deal with name-calling.

Prereading Activities

Ask students if they have ever been called names. Follow up by asking them to share how they felt when

called names. Summarize by saying that we do not feel good when we are called names. Tell the students you will read them a book about Little Bill and his problem when a new student in his class called him names. Show students the book cover, and ask students to predict the story content.

During Reading

Read the story aloud and at the end allow students to reflect individually.

Postreading/Guided Questions

After reading the story, go through it again with students and ask questions, such as

1. What could Little Bill have said when Michael wanted to start "playing the dozens?"
2. Why do kids like to say mean things to other kids?
3. How did Little Bill feel when Michael left the playground and said, "Tomorrow!"
4. Why couldn't Little Bill think of any mean things to say to Michael?
5. What do you think would have happened to Little Bill if he went to school and said mean things to Michael? How would Michael have responded?

6. How do you think Little Bill's friends were feeling when he was saying "so" to Michael?
7. How was Michael feeling when he ran inside the classroom? Why?
8. What would you have said to Michael when you saw him sitting at his desk?
9. Who else could you talk to about this type of problem?
10. Do you think Little Bill made the right decision? Why or why not?

I SOLVE Strategy

- I:** Identify the problem presented in the book.
- Little Bill is challenged to play a game to call people mean names.
- S:** Solutions to the problem.
- Book suggestion: Little Bill's dad tells him to say "so" when someone calls him a name.
 - Ignore him and walk away
 - Tell the teacher
 - Call him a mean name
- O:** Obstacles to the solution?
- Michael may continue to call you names.
 - Ignoring him may not be effective.
 - The teacher may help.
 - Calling him mean names may lead to more troubles.
- L:** Look again at the solutions and choose one.
- Select the "so" strategy first.
- V:** Very good! Try it.
- Use the reinforcement activity and try the role-play.
- E:** Evaluate the outcome.
- Was it successful? If not, return to "S" for additional solutions.

Reinforcement Activity: Role Play

1. The teacher should ask for a volunteer to participate in a role-playing activity using the "so" strategy. The teacher can say mean things to the volunteer, just like those in the book: "You shoot like a girl" or "You hop with frogs in the lab." The student should be asked to respond with "so." Discuss how the student felt when practicing this solution.
2. Divide the class into pairs and explain that students are to take turns playing the roles of Little Bill and Michael. When they play the role of Michael, their job is to say mean (but not offensive) things to the other person. When the student plays the role of Little Bill, he or she should respond by saying "so." Tell students to discuss how the other student responded when they said "so."
3. As a group, discuss common situations where students could apply this strategy.
4. During school, use the "teachable moment" to point out and discuss any instances where students could try this strategy.



Appendix B

The following publications and Internet sites provide detailed information on strategy instruction for students with high-incidence disabilities.

Print Publications

- Boudah, D. J., Lenz, B. K., Bulgren, J. A., Schumaker, J. B., & Deshler, D. D. (2000). Don't water down! Enhance content learning through the unit organizer routine. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 32*(3), 48–56.
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- Lenz, B. K., Ellis, E. S., & Scanlon, D. (1996). *Teaching learning strategies to adolescents and adults with learning disabilities*. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, T. E. (1998). Constructing more meaningful relationships in the classroom: Mnemonic research into practice. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 13*(3), 138–145.

(appendix continues)

Internet Resources

- Learning Disabilities Online:
www.ldonline.org
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities:
www.nichcy.org
- University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (Strategic Instruction Model):
<http://www.ku-crl.org/htmlfiles/core.html>
- ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education:
<http://ericec.org/>
- Swanson, H. L. (1999). Intervention research for students with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis of treatment outcomes [On-line]. Available:
http://www.nclld.org/research/osep_swanson.cfm

NOTICE

The College Board and Disabilities Rights Advocates Announce Agreement to Drop Flagging From Standardized Tests

The College Board and Disabilities Rights Advocates (DRA) announced that as of October 1, 2003, the College Board would discontinue the practice of identifying score reports on standardized tests taken by students who require extended test-taking time because of documented disabilities. Such special testing accommodations have been identified on the score report by the words nonstandard administration, a practice commonly referred to as flagging.

The decision to discontinue flagging stems from a 1999 lawsuit against the Educational Testing Service (ETS) that resulted in ETS's agreement to remove all flags from the score reports of ETS-administered tests that are not owned by the College Board. ETS develops the

test times and administers and scores the SAT and several other tests owned by the College Board.

With respect to College Board tests, DRA and the College Board had agreed to convene a Blue Ribbon Panel of jointly selected experts to consider issues related to the flagging of score reports. That panel recommended, by a vote of four to two, that the College Board discontinue flagging the score reports of tests taken with extended time.

DRA's clients were extremely pleased with the settlement. Chris Elms, President of Californians for Disability Rights (CDR) stated, "This settlement is a victory for all persons with disabilities seeking to attend college or graduate school because it makes higher education much more accessible to persons with disabilities." International Dyslexia Association (IDA) President Harley A. Tomey III added, "While IDA wishes the agreement could have been reached sooner and without litigation, we congratulate ETS and the College Board for coming to the understanding that this is the right thing to do."