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Bibliotherapy in the School Setting: A Study of How and Why School Counselors Utilize Books with Students

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**Bibliotherapy in the School Setting: A Study of How and Why School Counselors Utilize
Books with Students**

by

Jackelyn De Bekius

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Science

in School Counseling

May, 2022

Thesis Committee:
Bill Lepkowski, Chairperson
Susan Dowds
Michelle Barron-Albers

Abstract

Bibliotherapy, or the theory that books can be used to heal the soul, has been around since ancient times. The history and effectiveness of bibliotherapy has been well documented and researchers have begun to explore what factors may contribute to a mental health practitioner's use of bibliotherapy. However, little research has been done specific to how school counselors utilize bibliotherapy and little is known about what personal characteristics may influence whether a school counselor will choose to use books in their work with students. This study will utilize a survey sent to school counselors via professional network listservs to explore what demographic factors, such as grade of students served, number of years as a counselor, training, and size of caseload, influence a school counselor's use of bibliotherapy. In addition, the study will investigate whether school counselors who enjoy reading in their personal time utilize bibliotherapy at a higher rate than those who do not.

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“Books, she has found, are a way to live a thousand lives—or to find strength in a very long one.”

-V.E. Schwab

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Chapter I: Introduction and Definitions

Introduction

From a young age I have often found myself lost within a novel. As I read each new book, or return to favorites time and time again, I find myself wondering what I would do if I was a character in the story. I try to understand the motives of the characters, even the villains, and question whether I would make different choices given their set of circumstances. I pause and reflect on quotes that echo the pain or joy I have felt in my life. In other words, while reading novels I am placing myself inside the novel and living in that world. Exploring the actions, emotions, and decisions of the characters as if they are my own.

In his book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, Gerrig (1993) describes this engagement in a text as transportation; the reader is transported into the world of the story and experiences the story alongside the characters. When I was introduced to the idea of bibliotherapy, I immediately realized that I had been using books as my own therapy for many years and believed there would be vast benefits to utilizing literature within my future as a school counselor. Using stories to provide students with opportunities to live different lives and connect with characters facing similar struggles would surely be beneficial and I could not believe that I had never been introduced to this in my own schooling. However, in order to achieve transportation, the reader must connect with the text and place themselves within the story and perhaps not every person has experienced the power of the right story finding you at just the right time.

As I began to do more searching, I discovered that little research has been done to explore how and why school counselors use books in their work with students. I was determined to better understand how bibliotherapy is utilized in the field of school counseling. This study will explore if student age, gender, or area of concern influence a counselor's use of

bibliotherapy. In addition, the survey will explore whether school counselors who enjoy reading in their personal lives-- therefore increasing the likelihood that they have experienced transportation and believe that stories can cause growth or healing-- utilize bibliotherapy at a higher rate, and whether formal or informal training increases the likelihood that a school counselor utilizes bibliotherapy in their practice.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the term bibliotherapy is defined as using books, whether that be poetry, picture books, graphic novels, non-fiction or chapter books, in individual, small group, or classroom counseling sessions or lessons. Gladding and Gladding (1991) suggest that there are three versions of bibliotherapy that could be utilized in the school setting. They use the terms bibliotherapy, bibliocounseling and biblioguidance to provide clarity between the three versions. Bibliotherapy is the use of books as a supplement to sessions with the counselor and is largely an individual exercise. The student will read and reflect on the selected book on their own and will not spend time with the school counselor debriefing what the student read. This use of bibliotherapy most closely aligns with how bibliotherapy is used outside the school setting.

Bibliocounseling is when literature is used in a one-on-one or small group setting and the materials are discussed as a part of the counseling. The counselor is an active facilitator who will pose questions and help the student(s) to explore the literature and applications to real life. For example, a small group of new students could read a book such as *New Kid* by Jerry Craft (2019) and discuss the similarities and differences between their experiences as the new kid in school. Students may be asked to respond to the story by drawing a comic book representation of their first day of school to further reflect on their experiences as a new student.

Finally, biblioguidance is when books are used as a part of a classroom lesson (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Once again, the school counselor will serve as a facilitator and may lead the classroom through full group as well as individual reflection on the literature used. For example, a school counselor may visit a classroom during the last few weeks of kindergarten and read *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* (Seuss, 1990) and then ask the students to think about their future and make predictions about where they may be as well as set goals for first grade. While keeping these three versions in mind, in this paper the term bibliotherapy will be used to encompass all forms of using literature in a therapeutic way.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Who Uses Bibliotherapy?

Several research studies have been done about who utilizes bibliotherapy and what influences a counselor's utilization of bibliotherapy. It should be noted that few studies have been done about using bibliotherapy with children or specifically in a school setting. In the late 1980s, Starker (1988) completed three studies exploring the usage of bibliotherapy first in the Pacific Northwest, then in San Diego and Boston and finally a small nationwide survey. Starker's studies specifically explored the use of self-help books prescribed by psychiatrists and psychologists to be read by adult patients outside of counseling sessions. In each study he found that bibliotherapy was popular no matter the geographic location, although psychologists in the Pacific Northwest prescribed self-help books at a higher rate than elsewhere in the country (Starker, 1988). Starker asked respondents to share the books that they use and rank the general helpfulness of popular titles. So, while these studies were some of the earliest to explore how often bibliotherapy is used, the results do not provide details on the efficacy of bibliotherapy and only include a small population of psychiatrists and psychologists who did not work with children.

Adams and Pitre (2000) surveyed counselors in Ontario, Canada, and found that 68% of the 55 counselors who participated in the survey recommended self-help books to their clients. While there did not appear to be a difference in the utilization rates of bibliotherapy based on the type of practitioner, the use of bibliotherapy increased based on years of experience. They suggest that perhaps this increase is due to practitioner experimentation. As practitioners begin to utilize bibliotherapy in their practice and determine that it is working for their clients they may

become more likely to continue to suggest books to their clients and perhaps even recommend it to their peers. As a result of their study, Adams and Pitre (2000) suggest that a lack of formal bibliotherapy training could be a hindrance to the use of bibliotherapy.

In a survey of professional counselors in America, Pehrsson and McMillen (2010) found that although there is no standardized program or nationwide certification for bibliotherapy, 79% of respondents utilized bibliotherapy in their practice. Half of those who utilized bibliotherapy reported that they taught themselves and only 6% indicated that they were certified in some way. The high rate of usage without formal education contradicts the suggestion that lack of training is a barrier to the use of bibliotherapy. As with the Adams and Pitre (2000) study, most respondents reported using non-fiction books and workbooks with their clients and only 33% reported using fiction (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010).

Unlike the previous studies, Pehrsson and McMillen included counselors who work with children, including school counselors in their study. Of the respondents working with children ages 2 to 7 only 33% reported using bibliotherapy with most of their clients; counselors were more likely to utilize bibliotherapy with children ages 8-12 but it was still less than half (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). Of particular interest for this study, just under 22% of the professional counselors who responded to Pehrsson and McMillen's survey worked in a K-12 setting. As this study was the first to include counselors who work with children, it was also the first study in which respondents reported using anything other than non-fiction self-help books.

The former studies provide helpful background information about the use of bibliotherapy; however, with few exceptions, the studies focused on the use of non-fiction books with adult clients. In her doctoral dissertation, Townsend (2009) surveyed school counselors in

Alabama to discover more about the use of bibliotherapy in schools and whether attitudes of school counselors towards bibliotherapy impacted their use of bibliotherapy. Townsend's study focused on the counselors' education level, years of experience and exposure to bibliotherapy as well as the age, socioeconomic status, reading level, race and gender of students served by the counselor. Participants were also asked to complete an Attitudes Towards Bibliotherapy Scale which utilized a Likert scale to assess if school counselors' attitudes about bibliotherapy correlated with the usage of bibliotherapy in their practices.

Townsend (2009) found that the age and gender of students served were the only factors tied to the utilization rates of bibliotherapy. School counselors working with elementary aged students were more likely to utilize bibliotherapy than those who work with middle and high school students. In addition, Townsend's research seemed to indicate that bibliotherapy was utilized at a higher rate with male students than female students. No statistically significant correlation was found between school counselors who held positive attitudes towards bibliotherapy and the use of bibliotherapy. This could be due to respondent bias as school counselors who did not utilize or believe in the efficacy of bibliotherapy may have chosen not to complete the survey.

Adams and Pitre's (2000) suggestion that a lack of formal training may be hindering the use of bibliotherapy was echoed in Townsend's study as she found that school counselors who attended continuing education sessions about bibliotherapy were more likely to utilize it in their practice. However, unlike Adams and Pitre, Townsend did not find that use of bibliotherapy increases with years of experience.

The lack of training may also lead to poor outcomes; it is important to note that practitioners who utilize bibliotherapy stress the importance of person-book fit or finding a book that the student will connect with. In their study on fiction and empathy, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that for high levels of empathy to be gained during reading, the reader must truly relate to the story. If counselors are selecting stories without a plan for effective use, students may not gain the skills targeted by the lesson. Kidd and Castano (2013) argue that this improvement in theory of mind is specific to high quality fiction and does not generalize to all works of fiction. Cook et al. (2006) stress the importance of facilitator preparation and choosing the correct book to meet the goal of the intervention. Therefore, it is important for books to be carefully selected and matched with students to ensure that the bibliotherapy will be effective.

While a lack of formal training may cause a school counselor to be hesitant to utilize bibliotherapy, I believe that school counselors who are not avid readers may lack the exposure to fiction and the skills needed to select the correct book for the student. If Adams and Pitre's (2000) hypothesis that practitioners with more experience utilize bibliotherapy at a higher rate due to trial and error is correct, it could also be projected that school counselors who do not enjoy reading may be less successful in selecting appropriate texts and therefore cease to use bibliotherapy due to poor results.

The previous studies provide insight into the use of bibliotherapy both in professional practice and within school counseling, but the question remains--why do some use bibliotherapy and others do not? In their pilot study, Bitar et al. (2007) surveyed counselors and determined that personal and professional context both influence a counselor's choice of theoretical background and selection of interventions. So, it follows that if school counselors do not find

value in reading in their personal time, they may be less likely to utilize bibliotherapy in their work.

According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, adults in the United States average less than 16 minutes of reading for interest each day (Bradburn & Townsend, 2019). And less than 50% of adults in the United States read at least one fiction book in 2017 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2018). These two statistics show that most American adults do not spend considerable time reading for pleasure. If school counselors fall into this category, their lack of pleasure reading and therefore lack of familiarity with books may lead to lower rates of bibliotherapy usage in their work.

Bibliotherapy and the American School Counseling Association Framework

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defines the role of school counselors as professionals who support all students to succeed in three domains: academic, social-emotional and career readiness (ASCA, 2019). In addition, school counselors are tasked to advocate for equity and inclusion of all students and to prepare students to be members of the global community (ASCA, 2019). While each school district, and individual school counselor, must determine how to achieve these lofty goals, I would argue that the therapeutic use of literature in the school setting would assist school counselors in all three domains as well as serving as an excellent diversity and inclusion resource.

Academic

In his book *Motivating Students to Learn*, Brophy (2004) suggests that students must find learning to be worthwhile and important. Often when a student is not engaged in learning it is not because they are unable to learn but are not interested in the task at hand. A question many

students have asked, and will continue to ask, is: “When will I ever use this in the real world?” School counselors utilizing bibliotherapy can connect reading to real world applications thus encouraging students to become more engaged in their learning. Bibliotherapy can be used to demonstrate the importance of reading as well as tie student reading to the “real world” in a variety of ways.

Berns (2004) provides a helpful framework for practitioners preparing to utilize bibliotherapy in their practice which focuses on identifying the issue to be addressed, selecting the appropriate text, reading the text, and finishing with discussion and analysis. In utilizing this framework, school counselors are demonstrating to students that books have a place outside of learning to read. For example, when forming a grief group, a counselor may select a novel such as *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977/2017) to provide the backdrop for discussions about the loss of a loved one. The group would then read the novel and discuss the grief of the characters as a way to begin to explore their own grief.

Whenever possible, school counselors can integrate their lessons utilizing bibliotherapy into the classroom to further illustrate to students that social-emotional learning is not separate from academic learning. Cook et al. (2006) provided examples of how a social-emotional lesson could be integrated into the life of a classroom by first leaving a copy of the book in the classroom library for a few days prior to reading the book to the students. After students have had a chance to interact with the book, the school counselor can then read the book to the students and lead them in a variety of follow up activities including group discussion, individual reflection, and art. This can be done with any age group of students from using *The Rainbow Fish* (Pfister, 1992/2001) in a kindergarten classroom to talk about sharing to partnering with the

twelfth-grade English teacher to lead discussions on perseverance while reading *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939/2008).

In addition to helping to connect stories to the real world, bibliotherapy can introduce new vocabulary. It is estimated that students learn anywhere between 500 to 5000 new words each school year (Nagy et al., 1985). While not the sole predictor, vocabulary knowledge has been tied to later academic success (Dollinger et al., 2007). As school counselors work to teach students new vocabulary skills around feelings, conflict resolution, and other social-emotional issues, utilizing bibliotherapy can assist in the uptake of the new vocabulary words.

In their study on vocabulary acquisition, Nagy et al. (1985) found that children learned new vocabulary words in the context of the books they read—including both fiction and non-fiction texts. Multiple studies have demonstrated that students learned new vocabulary most effectively when the words were introduced in more than one way (Johns et al., 2015; Rosa et al., 2017). Furthermore, Duff et al. (2015) found that students gained new vocabulary from text no matter their reading level, which means that utilizing bibliotherapy to teach vocabulary will benefit all students in the classroom. As school counselors set out to teach students important social-emotional lessons, utilizing bibliotherapy to introduce new vocabulary will therefore not only deepen the students' learning for the lesson but also their overall vocabulary, thus increasing their academic success.

Social-Emotional

ASCA encourages school counselors to provide social-emotional education for students ranging from identifying their own emotions, perspective taking, effective coping skills and problem-solving and to learning to advocate for themselves (ASCA, 2019). The category of social-emotional learning is a broad category that contains many subjects that may be difficult

for students to discuss. Bibliotherapy can be used to provide context for students and help to ease them into discussions.

As Kramer and Smith (1998) point out, children's black-and-white thinking can cause them to feel that they are the only one in the world who has ever felt or experienced what they are living through. When life presents challenges, such as divorce, illness, bullying, or troubles with friendship, children can believe that no one understands them and that there is no solution to the problem. Connecting these children to book characters who have experienced similar challenges can alleviate their shame in thinking they are the only one to experience their overwhelming feelings.

Stories can also provide children with alternative solutions to their issues or allow them to explore the impact of a particular set of actions in a neutral setting (Bal & Velkamp, 2013). In addition, by talking about the characters in the story rather than themselves directly it can become less risky for the students to share their thoughts and feelings. Eppler et al. (2009) notes that using stories to talk about events or circumstances that are difficult for students to discuss may create a bridge or gateway to understanding emotions and creating effective solutions. Just as "asking for a friend" is easier than for oneself, discussing a character's issue can be easier than discussing one's own issue. For example, reading a story during a classroom lesson and then discussing how the characters in the story approach the problem to find a solution may be more successful than asking the students to problem-solve how to end bullying in their classroom. Once students have been able to discuss solutions for the characters in the story, they may begin to feel more comfortable discussing solutions to their own issues.

As mental health issues become more widespread, schools are struggling to find ways to support social-emotional learning. More thought is going into how to prevent mental illnesses in young children before they take root and therefore assist with the healthy growth and development of children. Heath et al. (2017) advocate for the use of bibliotherapy to guide social emotional learning. In their model, classroom teachers would utilize bibliotherapy to teach students important social-emotional learning from kindergarten onward. Their review of literature indicated that bibliotherapy was cheap and easy to implement and had moderately beneficial results.

Reading stories about people from different cultures and races can assist children in gaining important multicultural sensitivity (Kim et al., 2006). As racial injustice continues to grow as an important topic for school counselors, bibliotherapy can be used to help teach this important subject. Husband (2019) advocates for the use of multicultural picture books to teach about racism and social justice in preschool and early elementary settings. While Husband was advocating for the use of multicultural books specifically in urban settings, the benefits he attributes to multicultural picture books would be useful to students in any location. Husband points out that multicultural picture books can help children of the race or culture represented feel seen and understood, teach students of other cultures about the culture represented in the book, and increase empathy in children as they learn about injustices through stories (Husband, 2019).

Moulton et al. (2011) reviewed a selection of popular picture books representing bullying and provided recommendations on books that could be utilized to teach students about bullying. This article stresses the importance of reviewing the books chosen prior to implementation to

make sure that the images and stories shared will be beneficial and send the correct message.

They noted that some popular books on bullying should be avoided as students would not learn the intended message.

Fiction can provide opportunities to experience new thoughts and ideas in a way that is different from non-fiction books. In her book *Empathy and the Novel*, Keen (2010) describes the qualitative results of her study on empathy and novels. As she completed her research, readers reached out to share examples of how a fictional text influenced them or changed the way that they thought about the world. These characters did not need to be human to illicit an empathetic response and the study showed that reading novels does improve empathy (Keen, 2010).

Career Readiness

ASCA (2019) advocates for career exploration to start at a young age and continue throughout school. Early exploration of careers may include introducing children to a wide variety of occupations which could be done using picture books—for example, *Ada Twist, Scientist* (Beaty & Roberts, 2016) or *Mary Had a Little Lab* (Fliess, 2018) could introduce children to science careers, *What Shoes Will You Wear?* (Cook & DuFalla, 2021) introduces a wide variety of careers and classics such as *Oh the Places You'll Go* (Seuss, 1990) encourage children to think about the various paths life can take. The books selected need not be focused on career education in order to open the discussion; Stein (1991) suggests that using a book about different types of trucks could open up an exploration of what sorts of careers are available in transportation and the benefits and downfalls of each option. Teaching children from a young age to consider careers in this way will encourage them to think critically about the career

options they see represented in their communities and in their books, movies and television shows.

For many years, high school students were pushed to focus on attending a four-year college after graduation. In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on showing students a more well-rounded picture of the workforce to include careers with no post-secondary education, apprenticeships, two-year degrees as well as though requiring four or more years of schooling. School counselors have personal experience with studying for a bachelor's degree followed by a master's degree. Therefore, using bibliotherapy to introduce careers and paths that they are less familiar with would benefit the students that they serve.

While this paper has advocated for the use of fiction in bibliotherapy, career readiness is a domain where non-fiction texts may be useful. One can hardly walk through a bookstore without finding shelf after shelf of books to improve productivity, become a better leader, understand your passion, become a better insert-job-title-here, and on and on. Many of these books are meant to enact small behavior changes to improve skills. As noted above, Riordan and Wilson (1989) found that bibliotherapy was effective when used to create behavioral changes. Much of the career readiness work undertaken by school counselors is aimed at creating behaviors that will serve the students well in their futures—behaviors such as effective communication, organization, the ability to appropriately prioritize work, and teamwork—and would therefore be a good fit for bibliotherapy.

Efficacy of Bibliotherapy

Articles abound on the use of bibliotherapy for the treatment of a wide range of mental health issues including grief and loss (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008), divorce (Kramer & Smith, 1998; Pehrsson et al., 2007), blended families (Coleman & Ganong, 1990), foster care and

parental absence (Betzael & Shechtman, 2017), trauma (De Vries et al., 2017), aggression (Shechtman, 1999), parental mental illness (Tussing & Valentine, 2001) and depression (Jacob & De Guzman, 2015). Each of these articles advocate for using books to assist children, adults, or families as they examine an issue and move forward with their lives.

However, the articles do not provide proof of the efficacy of bibliotherapy. As Jack and Ronan (2008) point out, most of the published articles about bibliotherapy do not provide evidence of the efficacy of bibliotherapy and research on the results of bibliotherapy have been limited. The studies that have been completed generally focus on the use of non-fiction texts so more research is needed on how fiction can be used in a therapeutic way (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). In their review of research on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy, Riordan and Wilson (1989) found that when bibliotherapy was used to create behavioral changes it was generally found to be effective but overall, the studies they reviewed had mixed results. Taking this into account, more research is needed to advocate for the efficacy of bibliotherapy most effectively. However, as Booth (1988) states, "In one sense, everyone who has read much narrative with intense engagement 'knows' that narratives do influence behavior" (pg. 227). Whether or not research has conclusively shown that bibliotherapy is effective, many readers will be able to share about a book or character who impacted their lives.

Outside of bibliotherapy, research has been done on the impact that reading fiction can have on an individual. In their study on the differences between readers of fiction and non-fiction, Mar et al. (2006) discovered that fiction readers gain social perspectives and empathy that is similar to skills gained in real world experiences. "Fiction provides readers with a safe space to explore their ideas, beliefs and experiences as the characters do not follow them into the

real world” (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, pg. 2-3). When students are unable to express their emotions or experiences, providing them with the opportunity to explore their experiences through the lens of a story may allow them a chance to reflect on and better understand their own experiences. As school counselors often focus on social-emotional issues, fiction texts may provide more space for social learning.

In addition to increased empathy, reading literary fiction has been tied to improvement in theory of mind (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Theory of mind is a term used to describe the critical ability to understand the mental states of other people. We attempt to teach children this skill from a young age by asking them to reflect on how others are feeling (Kidd & Castano, 2013). When we teach children “The Golden Rule” we are expecting that they are able to think about the mental state of others and act accordingly. In their review of five studies, Kidd and Castano (2013) suggest that reading fiction provides a boost in theory of mind functioning when compared to not reading at all.

However, it should be noted that Kidd and Castano compared what they called literary fiction to popular fiction and found that only literary fiction saw the improvement in theory of mind. This ties back, once again, to the need for school counselors to be familiar with the literature they are choosing and to be able to choose high quality texts. As that is the case, using high quality picture books and novels to prompt students to examine the mental states of characters can therefore be a powerful tool in the school setting. Using bibliotherapy can allow students to gain a better understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others than through a discussion or lesson that did not involve literature.

Professors working in counselor education have advocated for the use of fiction during counselor training to assist with building empathy, providing space for students to explore their beliefs, and to give students a chance to gain a better understanding of how families operate (Gladding, 1994; Gibson, 2007). Gibson (2007) suggests that examining fictional characters allow students to assess their own reactions to the characters as well as explore new perspectives through the eyes of the characters they are reading about. Gladding (1994) encourages the use of fiction to assist student counselors in gaining a better understanding of how families function. Therefore, whether or not bibliotherapy has conclusively been proven to be beneficial, it is apparent that reading fictional stories has vast benefits for students.

Summary

Current research suggests that bibliotherapy is being widely used by counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists outside of the school setting. Many practitioners recommend the use of bibliotherapy for a wide variety of mental health concerns and within the field of school counseling, bibliotherapy has been recommended for social-emotional education as well. However, it appears that there are mixed results when looking at the efficacy of bibliotherapy and most of the research that has been completed has looked at the use of self-help books rather than the use of fiction. Outside of the mental health field, researchers have studied the impact of literature and have shown that reading fictional texts increases empathy.

What the current research does not definitively answer is why school counselors choose bibliotherapy. Adams and Pietre (2000) felt that perhaps experimentation and years of experience led to the use of bibliotherapy. Townsend (2009) tied the use of bibliotherapy to the age of the student and Pehrsson and McMillen (2010) advocated for future studies to consider

the use of fiction rather than non-fiction. None of the studies included above delved into why counselors chose bibliotherapy or whether their personal reading habits influenced their use of bibliotherapy.

Chapter III: Methods

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What variables influence a school counselors use of bibliotherapy?

Research Question 2: How do school counselors utilize bibliotherapy in their work?

Measurement Tool

A 30-question survey was created to answer the two research questions (see Appendix C). In order to determine if respondents enjoyed reading, a subscale of the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale was utilized (Schutte & Malouff, 2007). This subscale, called Reading as a Part of Self, was strongly correlated to enjoyment of reading as well as time spent reading for pleasure which made it an appropriate fit for assessing whether school counselors who enjoy reading utilize bibliotherapy at a higher rate.

The demographic questions of the survey were created by considering the factors assessed in previous studies as well as new factors that relate specially to school counseling such as percent of time in direct student contact, student age, and format for bibliotherapy use. Qualitative questions about use of bibliotherapy were included to explore how school counselors approach using bibliotherapy with students.

Prior to sending the survey, a small group of current school counselors were asked to take the survey and provide feedback on question wording and content; twelve responses were received.

Participants

Members of the Minnesota School Counseling Association (MSCA), Central Minnesota School Counselor Association (CMSCA), and American School Counseling Association (ASCA) were sent a link to the survey through an online survey website, SurveyMonkey.

Members of MSCA and CMSCA received a direct email request through a member listserv. Members of ASCA could access a post with a request on a member message board. Participants were offered a bibliotherapy resource packet and were entered into a drawing for one of seven \$50 gift cards in return for completing the survey.

There were 91 survey responses. However, 11 responses were removed due to incomplete data leaving 80 surveys that were utilized in the data analysis. Of these responses, 89% were females, 11% males. The majority of respondents live in Minnesota (79%). Most of the respondents (46%) work in a high school setting, 28% in an elementary school setting, 16% in a middle school and 10% work with students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The average years of experience was nine with less than one full year as the lowest and 29 years of experience as the highest.

Statistical Analyses

Research question 1 was answered by examining the correlation between use of bibliotherapy (question 9), the demographic variables (questions 1-7), as well as variables in questions 8, 10, and 11. The demographic and other variable questions were first correlated to question 9 to determine whether any variables were related to the use of bibliotherapy at any point in their career. Then the same questions were correlated to questions 13 and 14 to explore whether age of student was related to use of bibliotherapy. Frequency of bibliotherapy usage (question 12) was also correlated to age of student and size of caseload.

Questions 21-30, which related to reading enjoyment, were summed to get a mean measure of reading enjoyment which was then correlated to use of bibliotherapy (questions 9) to determine if reading enjoyment is a factor that predicts use of bibliotherapy. In addition,

questions 12 and 14 were assigned numerical values for a combined use of bibliotherapy score and correlated to the mean reading for pleasure score.

Research question 2 was answered utilizing the data from questions 13-20 which explored what topics, age ranges, settings, and genre of books school counselors choose to utilize bibliotherapy with. The quantitative data was combined to find means while the qualitative data was utilized to compile a list of resources.

Chapter IV: Results

Of the survey respondents, 69% had heard of bibliotherapy prior to receiving the survey but only 48.8% had ever used bibliotherapy in their work with students. When asked why they did not utilize bibliotherapy, most (84%) indicated that a lack of training was a contributing factor to their not utilizing bibliotherapy. Others indicated that access to books (34%), low student literacy levels (13%), no time to implement (22%), and the belief that bibliotherapy does not work in the high school setting (9%) as reasons they do not use bibliotherapy. Only one respondent indicated that they do not use bibliotherapy because they do not enjoy reading and one respondent felt that bibliotherapy was not beneficial.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	High	Low
Years of Experience	9.1	7.8	29	1
Size of Caseload	410.6	210.2	1300	23
% of Student Contact	66.6	18.2	100	5
Reading for Pleasure	3.7	0.7	4.9	1.6

Only 2.5% of respondents (two total) had received any formal bibliotherapy training. An additional 21.3% had received informal training and 75% had received no training. Of those who had not received any training, 61.2% said they would be more likely to utilize bibliotherapy if they did receive training which was echoed by the responses to why respondents did not use bibliotherapy in which the majority cited lack of training as the reason they do not utilize bibliotherapy. Only one respondent said that they would not utilize bibliotherapy even with more training and 63.7% said they would “maybe” utilize bibliotherapy if they received training.

Of those who utilize bibliotherapy, 83% reported using fictional texts with their students. While some school counselors did comment that they use workbooks to teach coping skills, the majority of them shared picture books that they read with their students. As expected, based on previous studies, bibliotherapy was most often used with elementary students (77.8%) compared with 14.8% in middle school settings and 9.8% in high school settings. Four respondents indicated that they had used bibliotherapy during their training in elementary settings but once they began working in a high school setting, they did not believe that bibliotherapy would work. An additional two respondents indicated that they did not believe bibliotherapy could be utilized in a high school setting.

Two measures of the ASCA Model, percentage of time spent on direct student contact and size of student caseload, were included in the survey (ASCA, 2019). The responses indicate that while ASCA's ideal caseload size is 250 students or less, only 13 of the counselors met that standard; 35 counselors had caseload of more than 400 students. More counselors did meet ASCA's benchmark for at least 60% of their time being in direct service to students with 63 counselors meeting that number. However, two counselors indicated that they spend only 5% of their time directly working with students. Correlations were run utilizing and omitting these respondents due to their low student contact, but no meaningful differences were found. The ASCA Model measures were included to assess if counselors who closely aligned with the ASCA Model would have more capacity to provide classroom lessons or to design groups to include bibliotherapy. However, after separating the data into two groups—ASCA model compliant and not compliant—there was not a difference in the utilization of bibliotherapy between the two groups.

Research Question 1

The demographic information considered for this question included: years of experience, grade level setting, state, gender, percent of time spent on direct student contact, size of caseload, training, and reading for pleasure utilizing the scale. There was no correlation between years of experience, state, gender, time spent on direct contact, size of caseload, and reading pleasure with the use of bibliotherapy. In order to explore any possible relationship between reading for pleasure and use of bibliotherapy a use of bibliotherapy sub score was created by combining the answers from questions 12 and 14. This was done by assigning a value of 0= I do not use bibliotherapy in my current practice, 1=once a year, 2= once a quarter, 3= one or more times a month and 4=one or more times a week; then adding 1 or 0 using item 14 (1=used bibliotherapy in the past; 0= did not use bibliotherapy in the past). When this sub score number was correlated to the reading for pleasure sub score no relationship was found $r(78) = .15, p > .05$.

A statistically significant correlation was found $r(79) = .33, p > .01$ between those who had heard of bibliotherapy prior to taking the survey and those who utilized bibliotherapy. Another positive correlation was identified between those who received training and those who utilized bibliotherapy $r(79) = .39, p > .001$. Having received training was also positively correlated to use in grades 3-5 ($r(79) = .32, p > .03$) and grades 9-12 ($r(79) = .30, p > .02$). Thus, showing that training in bibliotherapy leads to counselors who are more likely to utilize bibliotherapy in both the late elementary grades and high school. There were negative correlations found between those who answered that they do not utilize bibliotherapy and those who had received training that appeared in question 9 ($r(79) = -.40, p > .001$) and question 12 (r

(79) = $-.46$, $p > .002$). This further illustrates that those who receive training are more likely to utilize bibliotherapy.

Research Question 2

Of the respondents who utilized bibliotherapy, 83% utilized fiction with their students. If respondents do utilize bibliotherapy, it appears that they then use it frequently with 38.5% reporting using it one or more times a week and 35.9% turning to bibliotherapy one or more times a month. Comparatively, of those who utilize bibliotherapy only 25% reported using bibliotherapy once a quarter or less frequently.

Table 2

Frequency of Bibliotherapy Use Compared to Age of Student

	K to 2 (n=31)		3 to 5 (n=32)	
	<u>Correlation</u>	<u>p-value</u>	<u>Correlation</u>	<u>p-value</u>
Weekly	$r=.58$	$P=.003$	$r=0.50$	$P=.002$
Monthly	$r=.41$	$P=.005$	$r=0.39$	$P=.003$
Do Not Use	$r=-.71$	$P=.11$	$r=-.74$	$P=.16$

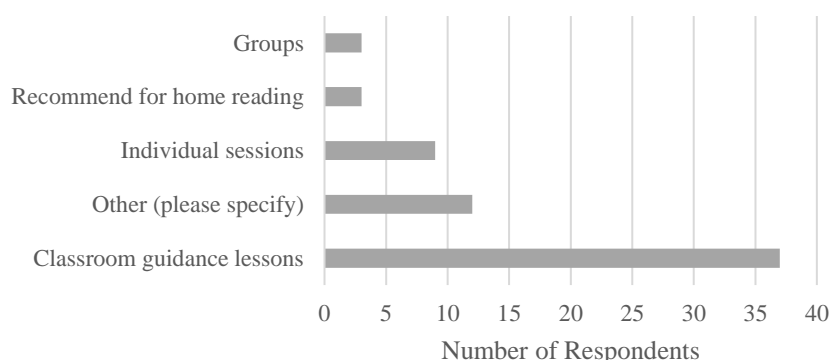
Of those who utilize bibliotherapy, 77.8% do so with students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Bibliotherapy usage drops off sharply after grade five with only 25% utilizing bibliotherapy with students in sixth through twelfth grades (14.8% with grades six to eight and 9.8% with grades ninth through twelfth). As Table 2 shows, there are positive correlations between the frequency of bibliotherapy usage and age of students, with higher frequencies of use reported for the youngest students.

Those who reported using bibliotherapy identified friendship as the topic they most utilized books to teach (n=39) followed by anxiety (n=33), bullying (n=30), grief and loss (n=24) and depression (n=16). Other topics included: academics, suicidal ideation, new students, divorce, tattling, problem solving, self-concept, leadership, feelings, self-control, positive thinking/growth mindset, career exploration, diversity, and safety.

As illustrated in Figure 1, bibliotherapy is used most often in classroom guidance lessons followed by individual sessions. Very few counselors reported utilizing bibliotherapy in small groups or as assigned home reading.

Figure 1

Use of Bibliotherapy by Setting

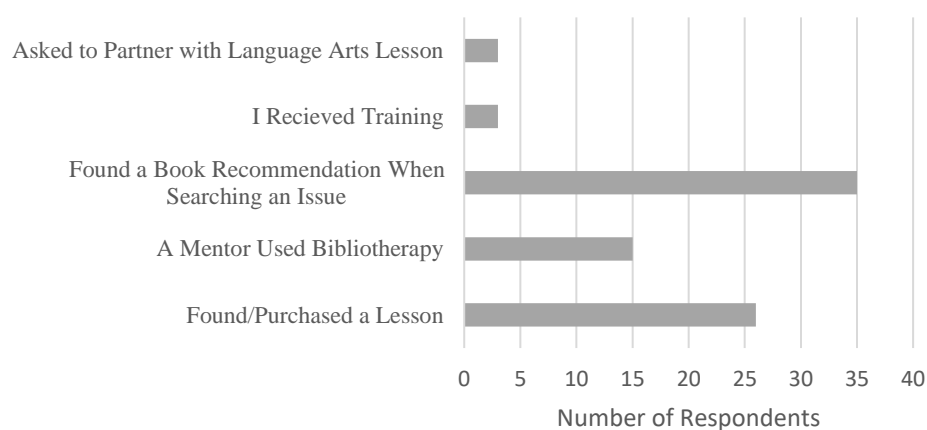


When asked to select the reasons why they use bibliotherapy, most respondents indicated that they decided to use a book based on an online recommendation after googling a particular student issue (n=35), the second most common reason cited was that they found or purchased a lesson (n=26) that utilized a book (see Figure 2). In the “other, please explain” box respondents provided reasons such as student engagement, depersonalized or third-party conversations, using poems as inspiration for students, conversation starting, skill building, and vocabulary building.

A group of respondents (n=15) indicated that they utilize bibliotherapy due to learning about it from a mentor. Of those, three indicated that they learned about bibliotherapy from their mentors during their elementary internships but did not feel that it would be useful in their current roles.

Figure 2

Most Common Reasons School Counselors Use Bibliotherapy



Chapter V: Discussion

As with previous studies, this survey found that a lack of training programs impacted the use of bibliotherapy with a statistically significant positive correlation between training and use of bibliotherapy, which showed that those who had received training on bibliotherapy were more likely to utilize it in their work with students. It was especially interesting to see that there was a correlation between training and the use of bibliotherapy at the older elementary and high school levels. This is important as survey respondents indicated that they believed that bibliotherapy would not work with older students. It appears to be widely accepted that picture books can be used in an elementary setting. Perhaps providing more training on the ways that bibliotherapy can be used in middle and high school settings would lead to higher usage. A future study could focus on teaching high school counselors how to effectively introduce bibliotherapy into their programs and then measure post-training usage.

The high fiction usage rate (83%) was a finding unique to this study. The use of fiction, and the very different role that can play in learning is an important factor that warrants further study. As explored earlier in the paper, reading fiction can improve empathy and theory of mind. However, outside of the school setting very few counselors reported utilizing fictional text. A future study could compare the impact of bibliotherapy utilizing non-fiction texts as well as using fictional texts to determine which genre illicit better learning for the participants.

Training continues to be a critical factor in the use of bibliotherapy. The results of studies done by Adams and Pitre (2000) and Townsend (2009) both indicated that there is a need for expanded bibliotherapy training programs. This survey, while a small survey with a low correlation, echoes those results and the respondents indicated that they would be more likely to

use bibliotherapy with proper training. However, it does not appear that counselor preparation programs are adding bibliotherapy and there are no popular or widely accessible training courses on the subject outside of academia. As counselors continue to utilize bibliotherapy, many training themselves which therefore does not ensure they are taught proper person-book fit strategies or how to prepare a quality bibliotherapy lesson, it would behoove counselor education programs to begin adding courses on bibliotherapy to their program offerings.

Jack and Ronan (2008) urged caution when implementing bibliotherapy. After reviewing existing studies, they suggested that there is not enough evidence of the efficacy of bibliotherapy. However, as studies continue to show that a lack of training is hindering the use of bibliotherapy, I also wonder if a lack of training may contribute to the mixed efficacy data. If counselors are not methodical in how they implement bibliotherapy they may very well not be creating conditions for success. This warrants a closer look and future studies should review the bibliotherapy training and procedures followed when bibliotherapy efficacy studies have been completed in the past.

While the study provided more details about what topics and settings school counselors choose to cover utilizing bibliotherapy, we still do not know much about why they choose books in the first place. The lack of correlation between reading for pleasure and use of bibliotherapy may rule out reading for pleasure as a factor, but other factors such as educational background, ease of learning to read as a child, relationship with the media specialist or language arts teachers, and parental status should be explored in the future.

As training appears to be correlated to use in multiple studies, perhaps it would be beneficial to look at a school counselor's background prior to becoming a counselor. Unlike in

clinical mental health settings, it is not uncommon for a school counselor to have first been a teacher. A study exploring whether a background in teaching, perhaps specifically those who taught reading or language arts classes, impacts the use of bibliotherapy could provide more information on what bibliotherapy training should look like.

Respondents provided some information when answering why they choose bibliotherapy, but as the most cited reason was that they found a book suggested by an online resource more information is needed about who is recommending the books and why they choose to recommend a book. The second most cited reason was that the school counselor had found or purchased a lesson that utilizes bibliotherapy which leads to the same questions as above.

Taken at face value, both of the most popularly selected reasons for utilizing bibliotherapy are because someone else has used bibliotherapy and recommended it. It is interesting, then, that very few respondents indicated that their mentors' use of bibliotherapy impacted their own usage. A follow up question could examine mentor and mentee relationships and the similarities and differences between their practices and choices of interventions.

Aside from bibliotherapy, more research should be done on how and why school counselors choose the interventions they use with students. As school counseling is a different format than most mental health counseling, many school counselors do not consider themselves aligned with any particular theory so interventions are chosen from a variety of theoretical frameworks. Research into what factors drive these choices could help to inform school counselor education programs as well as future school counselors.

This study was very small, with only 81 usable survey responses. As a result, it is hard to generalize based on the data. A closer partnership with ASCA to recruit more survey respondents, or perhaps recruiting at the ASCA national conference could lead to better participation and results. Another limitation of the study is that there were only 9 male respondents, and the majority of the respondents live in Minnesota which means that the survey data does not adequately represent the entire population of school counselors in the United States.

Finally, the qualitative data obtained from this study on the books school counselors use as well as the details on topics they utilize bibliotherapy to cover provided useful information to share with interested school counselors. Overall, this study further illuminates the need for more widespread bibliotherapy training and indicates that training middle and high school counselors could lead to an increase in the use of bibliotherapy.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

Name: Jackelyn Bekius
Email: jbekius@go.stcloudstate.edu

IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Exempt Review

Project Title Master's Thesis

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

IRB Chair:

Dr. Mili Mathew
Chair and Graduate Director
Assistant Professor
Communication Sciences and Disorders

IRB Institutional Official:

Dr. Claudia Tomany
Associate Provost for Research
Dean of Graduate Studies

OFFICE USE ONLY

SCSU IRB#: 2061 - 2686	Type: Exempt Review	Today's Date: 1/18/2022
1st Year Approval Date: 1/18/2022	2nd Year Approval Date:	3rd Year Approval Date:
1st Year Expiration Date:	2nd Year Expiration Date:	3rd Year Expiration Date:

Appendix B: Recruitment and Consent Letter

Hello school counselors,

My name is Jackelyn Bekius and I am a graduate student at St. Cloud State University, pursuing my MS in School Counseling. I am currently completing a thesis under the supervision of Dr. Bill Lepkowski and am seeking school counselors to complete a short research survey.

Specifically, I am examining how and when school counselors use books and stories when working with students. I have created a short survey (30 questions, approximately 9 minutes to complete) to learn more about how school counselors use bibliotherapy (the term for using books in therapy).

I know that you are very busy so, as a thank you, I have created a guide to utilizing bibliotherapy that I would be happy to share with all participants, including a list of favorite books shared in the survey. In addition, everyone who completes the survey will be entered to win one of **seven** \$50 Target gift cards.

Participation is voluntary and responses will be kept anonymous. The survey platform will collect your IP address and, if you choose to enter to win a gift card you will need to provide your email address. Your email address will be kept confidential. Responses will be de-identified prior to analysis and IP address and email addresses will be stored in a password protected and encrypted file. All data will be destroyed following the completion of my thesis.

This research project has received IRB approval through the SCSU IRB process. Participating in this study may not benefit you directly but will help us to learn more about how and why bibliotherapy is used in schools. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study. Participating or not participating in the study will not influence your current or future relationship with the researcher, SCSU or your place of work.

If you have any questions about the research and the results of the study, please contact me via email at jbekius@go.stcloudstate.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Bill Lepkowski, at wjlepkowski@stcloudstate.edu.

Please note you must be 18 or older and a school counselor to participate in this survey.

By clicking the link below you are certifying that you have read the above information and agree to participate in this research project.

[CLICK HERE TO COMPLETE THE SURVEY](#)

Please print or save a copy of this form for your records.

Thank you!

Jackelyn Bekius

Appendix C: Survey Questions

Demographic information:

1. How many years have you been a school counselor? _____
2. What grade levels do you currently work with? _____
3. What state do you work in? _____
4. What gender do you identify as: Male, Female, Non-Binary, Prefer Not to Answer
5. Have you heard of bibliotherapy prior to receiving this survey? (Y, N)
6. Approximately what percentage of your time do you spend on school counseling related student contact? _____
7. What is the approximate number of students on your overall case load? _____

Bibliotherapy Usage and Training Questions:

8. Have you received any training on bibliotherapy? (Yes, Formal Training Program; Yes, Informal or Peer Training; No)
9. Have you ever used bibliotherapy in your practice? (Yes, No)
10. If you answered no, why don't you use bibliotherapy? Check all that apply (I have not received training, I do not have access to books, the students that I work with do not have access to books, the students that I work with have low literacy rates, I do not enjoy reading, I do not feel that bibliotherapy is beneficial, other, please explain: _____)
11. If you answered no, would you be more likely to utilize bibliotherapy in your practice if you received training on the use and benefits? (Y, N, Maybe)
12. On average, how often do you use bibliotherapy in your current practice? (One or more times a week; One or more times a month; Once a quarter; Once a year, I do not use bibliotherapy in my current practice)

13. What grade levels have you utilized bibliotherapy with? Check all that apply (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12, none, I do not use bibliotherapy)

Bibliotherapy Usage

Please answer the following questions considering your use of bibliotherapy in ANY school counseling position you have held.

14. Have you used bibliotherapy in a previous position? (Yes, with elementary students; Yes, with middle school students; Yes, with high school students; No)

15. What are the reasons that you use bibliotherapy? Check all that apply. (Found or bought a lesson that utilized bibliotherapy; Asked to provide a lesson to compliment a book used in language arts class; Received training on bibliotherapy; Found book suggestions when searching for an intervention for a particular student/issue; A mentor utilized bibliotherapy;

Other: _____)

16. For what issues do you use bibliotherapy? Check all that apply. (Divorce, Bullying, Friendship, Academic Issues, Grief and Loss, Depression, Anxiety, Suicidal Ideation, New School, Substance Abuse, Other: _____)

17. In what setting do you use bibliotherapy most often? (Classroom guidance lessons, groups, individual sessions, recommend for home reading)

18. What genre of books do you most often use when working with students? (Fiction (SEL Books, picture books, novels); non-fiction (self-help, workbooks, biographies); none, I don't use bibliotherapy)

19. What are your favorite books to use with students? _____

20. If you have used bibliotherapy, please provide some examples of how you have used it. Please provide age and gender of child, the issue and what book you used.

Reading Habits and Attitudes

21. In general, I enjoy reading. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
22. Without reading, my life would not be the same. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
23. My friends are sometimes surprise at how much I read. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
24. My friends and I like to exchange books or articles we particularly enjoy. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
25. It is very important to me to spend time reading. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
26. I set a good model for others through reading. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
27. I read rapidly. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
28. Reading helps make my life meaningful. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
29. In comparison to other activities, reading is important to me. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
30. I read for pleasure. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)
31. If you would like to receive a bibliotherapy users guide including a list of books submitted in this survey please enter your email below. (Your email will be kept confidential and your answers deidentified prior to analysis.)
32. If you would like to be included in the drawing for a Target gift card please include your email below. (Your email will be kept confidential and your answers deidentified prior to analysis.)