Of Special Interest

Bibliotherapy in School Libraries: An Israeli Experiment

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The concept of bibliotherapy has been known since ancient times. Despite the concept's direct connection to books and libraries and despite its potential as a means of support and aid, it has not attained a clear status in library science. The therapeutic nature of bibliotherapy does not allow its full application in libraries, but the author suggests focusing on the developmental aspect of bibliotherapy and defining it with a new term: supportive knowledge. An experiment to implement these ideas was carried out in two schools in Israel by building a special self-help section in the libraries. There was an increase in reading, mainly among boys. The pupils were interested in books that represented their own personal problems, such as teenage dilemmas, drugs, sex, death, and violence. They began to discuss these issues openly among themselves and with the librarians. In addition, a close collaboration was created between the school administration, the teachers, and the librarians.

Introduction

The concept of using literature for therapeutic and supportive purposes has been known since ancient times. The Ancient Greeks called their libraries "The Healing Place for the Soul"; Muslim physicians encouraged patients in hospitals to read the Koran; Christians drew strength and comfort from the Holy Scriptures; and Jews never separated from their Prayer Book and the Book of Psalms. However, *bibliotherapy* did not become established as a concept until the 20th century. The idea of bibliotherapy received great appreciation in the libraries of the army hospitals during World War I, but it was not until the 1930s that the concept of bibliotherapy really began to flourish. By 1939, the hospital division of the American Library Association (ALA) had established a Bibliotherapy Committee for the purpose of studying bibliotherapy. This was the turning point that gave bibliotherapy official status in the field of librarianship.

To date, several hundred articles have been published in this field, the best-known being those of Brown (1975), Rubin (1978a, 1978b), Pradeck and Pradeck (1984, 1993), Hynes McCarty and Hynes Berry (1986), Adeney (1990), Choen (1990), and Doll and Doll (1997). These, among many others, deal broadly with the definition, goal, and practical results of bibliotherapy. In the framework of the present article, I do not elaborate on these questions, but rather focus on one important and interesting question: Is there a future

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for bibliotherapy in the framework of school libraries? I was inspired to write this article by reading an article by Alice Gulen Smith (1991) entitled "Whatever Happened to Library Education for Bibliotherapy?" Her article clearly shows that the concept of bibliotherapy has not been very successful in the field of librarianship. Bibliotherapy can play an important humanitarian role in our society because of its potential for support and enlightenment; librarians are aware of the social potential of books and libraries. Why, then, did this concept not succeed in public and school libraries?

The school library is a place where children and teenagers absorb cultural values and knowledge, but in addition to the educational aspect of the school and library, there is another function, and that is to educate pupils to take an active part in a healthy and constructive society. During the years that children are in school, they cope with personal and social problems, some of which are ordinary and natural, such as learning difficulties, parent-child relations, growing up, and sexuality. However, sometimes they must also cope with more unusual problems, such as the divorce of parents, a death in the family, or a serious health problem.

The social functions of schools are fulfilled by teachers, educational advisers, and psychologists. However, I maintain that the school library can also become a focal point for social assistance and support through the implementation of the methods of bibliotherapy in the library. There are some problems in librarians using bibliotherapy, as I explain, but despite these problems, it is important to use the positive and supportive potential of bibliotherapy in school libraries. This is especially important in this age of massive technological use, which some believe promotes a growing sense of alienation and loneliness in society. The growing need for support and assistance for young people demands that we reconsider the use of bibliotherapy.

The Dilemma of Bibliotherapy and the School Librarian

The concept of bibliotherapy is problematic by nature (Rubin, 1978a); the concept is broad and the word *therapy* suggests medical treatment and a healing process. When linked to librarianship, it immediately raises questions: Is the school librarian qualified to practice therapy? Should he or she be involved in an area that can have an emotional impact on another person? In order to tackle the problem and to clarify the limited role of the librarian in the framework of bibliotherapy, it is essential to define three categories of bibliotherapy: (a) institutional, (b) clinical, and (c) developmental. It is also critical to emphasize that the role of the school librarian can be connected only to the third category, developmental bibliotherapy. This category deals with normal developmental problems such as family conflicts, changes in function as a result of aging, career changes, and so on (Rubin, 1978b). The function of the librarian in developmental bibliotherapy would be to recommend suitable books that shed light on those problems and sometimes to

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participate in joint sessions with teachers, psychologists, and educational counselors. However, this would not address the problem that most pupils are not aware that they can go to the library in order to get supportive literature that will help them with their problems and lead them to new knowledge, support, insight, and possible solutions. It is not likely that young people would see the librarian as an appropriate person to go to for this kind of help; in addition, librarians hesitate to take on anything of a therapeutic nature, and rightly so. As Rubin (1978b) explained, "The definition of *therapy* as *cure*, the interpersonal power structure of therapy and the exalted position of medical doctors in our society, cause many librarians to fear any activity called therapy" (p. 10). In order to try to address this dilemma, Rubin suggested that "Librarians should approach bibliotherapy much as a recreational and occupational therapist view their work, as an activity that will encourage a possible path toward self-actualization" (p. 10). However, most school librarians have not followed Rubin's proposal.

Today, most libraries do not perform bibliotherapy activities, with the exception of some hospital libraries such as the University Hospital in Munich, which has the *Das Fröliche Krankenzimmer* project (Mundt, 1996). Research done on bibliotherapy in the last decade has dealt mostly with the psychological aspect of the subject; only a few researchers have dealt with its application in librarianship (Doll & Doll, 1997; Hynes McCarty & Hynes Berry, 1986). It seems that in the world of librarians, the concept of bibliotherapy is no longer of interest; a great deal of effort would be needed to get it considered as part of the functions of school librarianship.

A Possible Approach: "Supportive Knowledge" and the Self-Help Section

I therefore propose a compromise solution, based on the premise that bibliotherapy could offer something in the framework of school librarianship. There are certain aspects of bibliotherapy that psychologists and social workers will never address. For example, they will not select, classify, and catalogue books according to needs; they will not set up self-help services in school libraries; they will not recommend literature to youngsters with ordinary developmental problems who are not their patients. The idea of bibliotherapy is important in school libraries. But because the word suggests healing or therapy, I suggest that the librarian adopt another name, *supportive knowledge*, for the developmental aspect of bibliotherapy. This name would avoid the problem associated with the term *therapy*, but also expand the concept beyond literature to include both self-help books and information materials, such as addresses of aid organizations and support groups, as well as reliable advertisements and films. The librarian would need to make it clear that he or she does not intend to be a therapist, but rather a provider of supportive knowledge to teenagers. This additional role of the school librarian, to become a source of support and guidance, is a worthy task in our

society with its many social problems and with an overload of information that makes it hard for young people to find their way in life. Supportive knowledge puts the emphasis not on the therapy, but rather on the support, aid, and information one can get by reading suitable poetry, novels, self-help books, or by watching a relevant film. Using the term *supportive knowledge* helps us avoid most of the problems associated with the term *bibliotherapy* (Baruchson-Arbib, 1996).

The school library is one of the main institutions where developmental bibliotherapy is needed. The main question is how can it be implemented in a way that will most benefit the pupils? One idea is to establish a special self-help section in the school library (Baruchson-Arbib, 1997, 1998). This section would include information on problems of interest to youths, such as aid organizations and self-help groups, along with "supportive knowledge" such as that found in literature, movies, and poetry, which can provide the readers new insight and alternative solutions to their problems. Such a section would turn the school library into a center for social information. The presentation of literature focused on social problems would provide the pupils with new knowledge that they can select according to their personal needs. The librarian's main task would be to create and manage self-help sections, classifying and cataloguing the literature according to social needs and displaying it in an attractive manner for the pupils (Baruchson-Arbib, 1996). In addition to the benefits that individual pupils could gain by using this section, there would be benefits to the school as students develop aware-ness of the many channels for self-help. This awareness is most important in the new Information Society. One of the main problems nowadays is not the finding of information, but rather the development of skills for choosing appropriate information. A teenager who knows that he or she can find information and knowledge that could help him or her to cope with emotion-al and social matters would develop greater emotional independence.

Research Project: Self-Help Sections in Two Israeli School Libraries

An experiment to develop a self-help section was conducted in the libraries of two Israeli schools, Arazim and Pardess, both located in the city of Or Yehuda (Baruchson-Arbib, 1998). This project was developed under my supervision with the help of a student, Viki Atar Hornstein. Before describ-ing the project, it is important to explain the issues that were discussed during its planning, the purpose of the project, and the criteria by which it was developed.

The main issues that were discussed were:
1. Where to apply the project—in classes with young children or classes with teenagers?

2. In which geographical area to concentrate—in a wealthy, organized area or a poor area with many social problems and minimal family support?
3. Which school would give us full support and would understand the importance of the project?
4. Should we inform the families of the pupils, or should we conduct the project without their involvement in order to observe the spontaneous reactions of the pupils?
5. What criteria should we use to choose the books, and how should we display them?

In order to shed light on these questions, we held a number of meetings with a psychologist and educational counselor, and we reached the conclusion that at this initial stage, the project should be focused on students in grades 7, 8, and 9. These students would be teenagers at the beginning of adolescence—an age with emotional problems, when the teenage boys and girls search for ways to build their own identity and cope with issues concerning sexual identity, parent-child relationships, relationships with friends, safe sex, drugs, and violence. This is an age when the pupils must take their first steps in the world as independent persons, and therefore they need sources of aid and support that will help them build their lives in the best way possible. It is worth noting that this is an especially critical age in Israel, as boys and girls are obliged to join the army at the age of 18, and they quickly change from adolescents into men and women with huge responsibilities.

We decided to set up this initial project in a poor area. We knew that in the rich areas there was no lack of problems, but we assumed that the benefit that might emerge would be greater in a low socioeconomic area. After making a few telephone inquiries, we found two suitable schools that had an administration and teaching staff with broad horizons who were interested in giving any kind of help that would prepare their pupils to deal with the challenges of life. These schools were located in the small city of Or Yehuda, in the center of Israel. Most of the pupils came from homes with a low socioeconomic status. We started with a joint meeting with the librarians, the educational counselor, representatives of school management, and teachers. A positive atmosphere was created, along with a commitment for future cooperation. It was decided not to include the families in the initial trial period because we were not sure of the reaction of the pupils and we did not wish to cause problems in homes where the parents were illiterate.

We then approached the main questions: defining the main purpose of the project. One option was to try to address known problems of a limited number of children. Another was to turn toward a broader group with the purpose of supplying most of the pupils with knowledge and support for dealing with social problems, teaching them how to prevent problems, and how to understand that social issues are an integral part of the life process.

We chose the broader group, with the purpose of increasing awareness and promoting prevention, especially for problems related to sex, drugs, and violence. We assumed that the concerns of a small group of children known by the administration to have specific problems would be addressed through the usual channels with the help of the psychologist and the educational counselor.

Afterward, we developed a policy for book selection. We decided in advance to choose a small quantity of books—about 50—so that the pupils could share the experience of discussing the same books both in the library and in class. The books included prose, poetry, and self-help books, and we added some brochures of aid organizations and support groups. As mentioned above, the issues chosen were those that trouble teenagers, such as drugs, sex, divorce, death in the family, violence, and teenage relationships. Selection of the books was made by a combination of three criteria: (a) popular books in these fields as per the lending list; (b) recommendations by the joint staff of school representatives: teachers, educational counselor, and librarians; and (c) examination of recommended bibliographies on the above-mentioned subjects. Such bibliographies can be found in Hebrew in the book by Adir Choen (1990), the leading Israeli expert in this field. There are also bibliographies in English such as Baruth and Phillips (1976), Compton and Skelton (1982), Martin (1983), Carroll (1999), Doll and Doll (1997), and Kaplan (1999). Other recommended lists can be found in Hynes McCarty and Hynes Berry (1986).

As for displaying the books and marketing the idea to the whole school, we decided to set up the new section in a quiet corner of the library far from the reference room in order to give the pupils privacy. The books were not displayed in the usual manner. They were arranged with their covers facing the readers in the attractive way that news magazines are displayed, and each shelf presented a different subject. Each subject was assigned its own color, and a label in the appropriate color was affixed to each book, along with a label containing a few words about the content.

In order to prevent having the pupils appear to be in need of help, we gave the section an attractive and challenging name: "You and I will Change the World," and in addition to the display of books, a board was set up displaying brochures on aid organizations and support groups. As in any new project, there was a need for marketing. A colorful advertisement was displayed in the style of "Everything you wanted to know about ... you can find in ..." The teachers were presented with brochures that included information on the background of the activities, the targeted audience, and the types of activities planned for the future. Books were loaned for periods of two weeks, or longer if a pupil so requested. A special box was hung in the area in which pupils could leave questions for the educational counselor. Every month, the focus was on a specific topic, and a wider range of activities was offered, including a video movie, newspaper sections, and special lec-

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tures given by teachers, especially literature teachers. The first topic chosen was "Yes to tolerance; No to violence."

What were the main findings after a year of observation? There was a significant overall increase (32%) in the number of readers for most of the subjects found in the section. The exception was the subject of sex; however, in the section on sex, many books were stolen or lost, indicating heightened interest in this subject. The most significant increases were in the area of typical teenage relationships (83%), death (67%), and drugs (59%).

A strong connection was found between age and increase in reading. The greatest increase was among grade 9 students (178%), perhaps because they were older and more aware of the subjects mentioned above. A connection was also found between the sex of the reader and increase in reading. Although girls generally comprised the greater part of the reading population in the libraries, there was an increase of 123% in reading from the new self-help section among the boys, as opposed to an increase of 14% among the girls. As for the number of readers, more girls read items from the section than did boys—177 girls as opposed to 69 boys—but the rate of increase among the boys was most significant. The boys were interested mainly in the following subjects, listed in order of importance: adolescence-related problems (increase of 500%), divorce (increase of 500%), and drugs (increase of 200%). With the girls, the subjects that increased were death (increase of 60%), teenage problems (increase of 59%), and drugs (increase of 33%).

The librarians who observed the pupils during a period of about a year noticed that the pupils began to talk about subjects that until then had been taboo, such as sex, drug addiction, and violence. They argued among themselves, and even in class they discussed these issues with greater openness—the previous secrecy and shyness almost completely disappeared. Another important result was the development of a good and creative relationship between the teachers and librarians, who, in effect, shared in the desire to turn the project into a successful educational venture. The awareness of the use of literature as an "aid tool" grew, and the counselor started asking the librarians to recommend books for pupils with problems. The network of relationships between the administration, the teachers, the librarians, and the educational counseling staff is of the utmost important to the promotion of school libraries in the future (Webb & Doll, 1999).

The project did fail, however, in one respect: no pupil left a note with any kind of question, and the box designated for questions remained empty. Apparently, there was a fear of too much exposure or a lack of desire or awareness to turn to this therapeutic element. However, a year later, some aid organizations told the librarians that a few pupils had called them asking for help in family matters.

What were the main conclusions of the project? First of all, we were surprised by the increase in reading, especially among the boys. The social project appeared to be an excellent device to promote reading. When books

on subjects attractive to youths were made available, reading became a pleasure and a experience to share. Even as an initial experiment, it was clear that we had achieved our goal, namely, developing an increase in awareness of social problems and of preventive actions. Reading became a tool for channeling energy, tension, and pressure. Relationships between the librarians and the pupils became friendly, because the librarians did not represent themselves as therapists but as neutral and objective persons. We hope that the pupils who experienced the self-help section will, in the future, be more aware people who know that they can search for solutions to their problems and find help in information and literature. One question that was left unanswered was why pupils did not use the question box to ask about their personal problems and why they did not turn to the counselor. We learned from the librarians, who knew the pupils, that it was clear that there were those among them who did urgently need counseling and guidance.

If we were developing this project today, we would try to include the parents, although some of them were illiterate. For this purpose, a number of informative meetings would be needed to convince the parents that turning to guidance is not a form of "blaming" about what goes on at home, but rather a way to get aid and support. This would be quite complicated, because openness to counseling does not exist among most of the parents, and some of them see it as undermining their authority. Over time, the families might become more supportive if the self-help section became a regular part of the school library and if they were kept informed about its activities and importance. During the course of the project, we were also surprised at the creative mutual relationships created between the librarians and teachers. I would strengthen this cooperation by creating a bibliotherapeutic, analytical catalogue that will be built not only according to the rules of cataloguing, but also based on joint discussions with the teaching and counseling staff with the purpose of choosing the most appropriate collection for the pupils (Baruchson-Arbib, 1996).

The model presented in this article is one example of the development of a self-help section. A creative librarian with a talent for marketing and with empathy for both pupils and teachers will be able to develop such a section with additional methods as well, in accordance with the particular needs of each school. Such a librarian will also be able to include electronic books and Internet sites in the collection. In Israel, the idea of a self-help section has still not been adopted in most schools, but it has been adopted and developed in 30 community centers, as reported in a recent article in the *Ha'Aretz* newspaper. These community centers have developed "the special shelf," a self-help section exhibiting books dealing with the problems of the local communities.

If school librarians adopt the idea of developing a section for supportive knowledge in their libraries, then the school library can expand its social activity among pupils and teachers and contribute to the educating of citizens for the 21st century—citizens with values, with a sense of responsi-

bility, and with an awareness of the possibilities of finding creative solutions and ideas in literature and information.

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