Lifelong Reading by Teachers as Bibliotherapy

Don Lumpkin

Developing lifelong readers stands as an ultimate, highly desirable goal which educators view as critical and toward which they consistently strive. Indeed, this has long been designated as a prime objective, paralleling the treasured goal of achieving literacy for all (Bacharach, 1990-1991). Reading teachers express regret that even when they attain success in teaching their pupils to read, many do not become lifelong readers. In fact, many read so little that fear of extinction is genuine (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985).

Teachers who work to develop lifelong readers experience feelings of frustration when they observe low levels of reading performance. To avoid teacher burnout, ways to reassure teachers that their efforts are worthwhile need to be found. The flexibility of bibliotherapy makes it adaptable to a very wide array of audiences. One of the intriguing potential applications that has received limited attention is the use of bibliotherapy by teachers and bibliotherapists themselves.

Educators have long been urged to design opportunities for students to read about situations and characters they can relate to and to read literature that might enhance positive self concepts (Lumpkin, 1984). This helps establish a setting which promotes guidance through reading, or bibliotherapy for learners (Schultheis, 1982).

Some recent efforts to use stories and excerpts from literature examining the concept of using in teacher education courses appear promising. Eanet (1991) has described how she uses imaginative literature in
teacher education classes. Her initial efforts explored whether reading of selected content “appeared to stimulate reflection about teaching and learning” (p. 65). Eanes reported consistent positive responses and recommended use of story material “as an integral part of the learning experience of future teachers” (p. 65). Lumpkin (1988) found evidence to support this recommendation from analysis of responses by 141 undergraduate students in reading education classes. These future teachers selected and read books having a teaching-learning-school theme. As an aid to clarifying their understanding of learners, this class activity was rated as “extremely valuable” by 56%, “valuable” by 26%, and “of some value” by 16%. None of the students checked “of no value” or “negative value” although 2% did not respond to the survey.

In a companion study of responses by classroom teachers, Lumpkin (1988) noted a more positive rating by prospective teachers. Ninety-seven percent (97%) perceived reading and discussing a book about teaching-learning extremely valuable in understanding and accepting learners in their classrooms. These teachers, involved in planning and implementing instructional programs, also felt the reading experience could provide a positive tool in combating burnout tendencies. Lumpkin urged further research to ascertain the impact of bibliotherapy on teacher performance and on increasing longevity of teaching experience.

Currently, a study is being conducted to identify topics of major concern to groups of teachers and to match their concerns with books that portray elements that could increase their understanding of teaching problems. Where possible, selections that can be correlated with early childhood, the elementary school, secondary, and higher education are being sought. Examples of materials for teacher-bibliotherapist readings include children’s books as well as those written for mature readers—as long as they connect with the problems and concerns that educators face. The accompanying bibliography represents types of books deemed appropriate for use by teachers as bibliotherapy. Effectively utilizing the bibliography would involve making suitable choices of books to match the concerns of teachers. Ideally, longitudinal studies could be designed to examine the merits of bibliotherapeutic literature for teachers. Initial research to explore the impact on teacher effectiveness could be followed by measures of length of professional service.

A strand related to “Behavior of Learners and Discipline” might start with Harry Allard’s Miss Nelson Is Missing. In this story a caring teacher is able to express some of her basic feelings about an undisciplined primary class. After a mean and thoroughly memorable substitute, Miss Viola Swamp, uses a sharp tongue and autocratic methods to whip the class into shape, the youngsters gleefully welcome Miss Nelson’s return.
Teachers can be reminded of young children's fears and anxieties by looking at Miriam Cohen's *Will I Have a Friend?* This story provides an illustration of youngsters who come to school with great trepidation. It can also be reassuring to go on to another book in this series titled, *The New Teacher* and read about children coping with uncertainty as their teacher is replaced at mid-year.

Adults and young readers are indebted to Beverly Cleary for her series of novels on Ramona and the Quimby family. Over a thirty year period of writing Cleary has brought Ramona to the third grade. Ordinary, day-to-day events and situations at school and in a modern family ring true and still hold an irresistible charm and humor.

To move to the middle grades, teachers can chuckle with Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. A picture of Peter Harcher's life with little brother Fudge can expand appreciation and understanding of sibling problems that pupils bring to school. Also appropriate to the middle grade is Barthe DeClements' *Nothing's Fair in Fifth Grade*. Elsie, the overweight girl in her class, is funny, sad, awkward and consistently interesting. DeClements moves ahead another year in a follow-up volume, *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You*.

Both students and teachers continue to enjoy Paula Danziger's *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, published in 1974. Marcy's view of herself, her social life, weight, parents, is just "rotten," and it is inspiration to read how a remarkable teacher brings dramatic change. Then, there is a social protest theme with an unexpected but reassuring message of support from students for a teacher! Another title with which teachers as well as learners can empathize is *Today Was a Terrible Day* by Patricia Reilly Giff. Ronald Morgan is a hapless second-grade hero who suffers from acute bumbling. Readers of all ages seem to easily identify with bumbling!

Educators often declare their desire to understand learners of today. To this end, teachers can read about a blended family setting provided by Barbara Williams in *Tell the Truth Marly Dee* and other books in the series about Mitzi McAllister. A good-humored description of home and school settings can help readers see problems in this multi-faceted family which impact the lives of children in schools today.

Desire to learn and change is often coupled with concern about losing old pleasures. This can be manifested at any age level. Dan Elliott has captured the threat of change in *Grover Learns to Read*. The boy ponders the possible danger that his mother might discontinue reading to him if he learns to read for himself.
Teachers experience some of the same trepidation when they plan changes and wonder about the responses of students, parents, and the community. A provocative book from the 1950s, The Wheel on the School by Meindert DeJong, describes an innovative teacher who sends all of his students out to “wonder!” Set in a small Dutch village in another era, it seems to hold a message for thinking educators of any day.

Historical perspective can aid in visualizing change in schools and education as an ongoing process. A biographical novel by Jesse Stuart details his experiences teaching in rural Kentucky early in the century. The Thread That Runs So True has been credited with advancing education in America by vividly portraying the tremendous potential coupled with the dire needs of many schools of the time. The book has been translated into six languages for use in countries where changes in education are sought. Numerous other volumes that can inspire teachers might include:

To Sir, with Love by E. R. Braithwaite
Susan Cornish by Rebecca Caudill
The Hoosier Schoolmaster by Edward Eggleston
Pat Hawley, Preschool Teacher by Shirley Sargent
Bright Midnight by Trumbull Reed

It is hoped that bibliotherapeutic experiences for teachers can provide insights to inspire and empower them as they struggle with classroom challenges that might lead to burnout. The courage and determination to meet the challenges of education for all diverse learners needs to be sustained. Teachers deserve resources that can help them maintain and enhance qualities of accepting, believing and caring, qualities which contribute significantly to the development of skills, competencies and positive self-concepts in those they teach. Teacher education should establish an environment that sustains constructive, developmental learning episodes which foster a motivated, lifelong search for knowledge and skill in teachers (Dahlberg, 1990). Lifelong reading by teachers, as an example and as a type of bibliotherapy, holds promise for instilling those behaviors and characteristics in teachers which can help them build lifelong readers for the future.

References


**Books for Reading by Teachers as Bibliotherapy**

This bibliography provides author, title, publisher and date of publication. In addition, the target audience is indicated in parentheses. Content depicting the "Teacher as Professional" is noted by use of the letters, TP.


Cleary, Beverly (1952) *Ramona*. NY: Morrow. (5-8). Modern day-to-day family situations ring true, hold irresistible humor.


Elliott, Dan (1985) *Grover Learns to Read.* NY: Random House. (4-8). Concern about change... Learning to read may result in reduction of pleasurable time spent with Mother reading to Grover!


Gates, Doris (1940) *Blue Willow.* NY: Viking. (7-12). Janey, daughter of migrant workers, has memories, desires and dreams. Teachers and schools exercise a significant impact on her life.


Knowles, James (1959) *A Separate Peace.* NY: Macmillan. (12+). Adolescent boys at Devon School can be “their own worst enemies.”


Patton, F. G. (1954) *Good Morning, Miss Dove*. NY: Dodd, Mead. (TP). All in town have been influenced by a teacher who is both feared and loved.


Bibliotherapy for Classroom Use guides teachers and librarians through several practical ways to encourage students to read. Acknowledging the difficulty teachers face in learning students’ individual interests, needs, and problems, this book facilitates the process with activities and resource information. This book is a lifesaver for teachers and librarians who want to be. Bibliotherapy will help you encourage your students to develop a lifelong habit that will promote critical and abstract thinking, foster moral development and problem solving, encourage discussion and compassion, celebrate culture differences, motivate debate and creative endeavors, and provide springboards for high-quality writing experiences! Tomorrow” (Kathleen Evans and Terry Bratcher); "Lifelong Reading by Teachers as Bibliotherapy" (Don Lumpkin); "Scenes from a Classroom: Literature for Thinking about Teaching--An Annotated Bibliography" (Marilyn Eanet); “Caldecott Medal Books (1938-1991): Some Observations” (Sylvia Hutchinson and Ira E. Aaron); “Promoting Readership within Public Schools: Survey of Administrators and Recommendations for Practice” (Emilie P. Sullivan and others); and “Assessing Job-Related Basic Skills: Job Trails as an Example” (Eunice N. Askov and Bernic