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ABSTRACT

Film may be used in the classroom as a mental health intervention, offering a child with dilemmas, fears, or minor personality and social maladjustments an alternative means to mobilize his inner resources through expanding his acceptable models and coping strategies. Teachers using film in the classroom for this type of affective intervention must exercise care by (1) consulting knowledgeable therapeutic personnel in regards to specific films and situations, (2) ensuring that adequate pre- and post-viewing activities and discussions are provided, and (3) using rigorous film selection criteria. (Author/STS)

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The media revolution has captured society with its technological persuasion and the omnipresence of whirling, electronic images. Educators are increasingly aware that curricula, methods and materials must be more relevant to our "entertainment-oriented," "mass-communication" culture. Courses in visual literacy, film production and analysis are being incorporated into the speech, theater, language arts, reading and education curricula. Color motion pictures, cartridge films, sound film strips and slides are educational tools that energize discussions and facilitate the learning of new ideas with greater economy, retention and involvement. By harnessing the visual media's communication strengths, educators are moving to counter the forces behind their students' conditioned modes of reception.

Film, like good literature, arouses emotions that cultivate the viewer's identification and empathy with an idea, situation or personality. While film and literature are two diverse art forms, their links as communicators that shape behaviors are real. For example, the use of bibliotherapy involves a "process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature--interaction which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment or growth." (4) A natural

extension of bibliotherapy's tenets and practices in the classroom may be that of "audiovisiotherapy" (1) which is the use of film as a mental health intervention, offering children with dilemmas, fears, minor personality and social maladjustments an alternative means to mobilize their inner resources.

Russell and Shrodes (4) posit that the psychological mechanisms of identification, catharsis and insight are necessary conditions for a therapeutic reading experience. Johnson (3) cited that Jerome Bruner's identifications of film as a "dramatizing device" and a "device for vicarious experience" are essentially the same qualifications inherent to audiovisiotherapy. The camera is the mind's visionary, graphically adding emotion and detail to our facts, recollections and fantasies about the world. Caught up in the emotional immediacy of a visual experience, film viewers can share the most intimate experiences and responses of the film characters who represent their conflicts and strivings. Through the interaction between viewer and film characters, the viewer can expand his range of acceptable models and coping strategies.

While film's use in the classroom has validated the rationale of intellectual enrichment, film's real and most controversial power lies in its emotional impact. More and more teachers are now utilizing films for some type of affective intervention to nurture their students' social and emotional growth. If a student's parent has just died, a teacher may decide to show the class a film on death to provide insights into

coping with intense feelings of personal loss and the changes that death precipitates in a family's structure and emotional climate. Some teachers, in previewing films for such use, unfortunately, merely look for an appropriate surface message to match a circumstance, unaware that the film's underlying implications may adversely effect the thinking or mental health of the student population viewing the film. A teacher's decision of this type, based upon "proper circumstance" or an intuitive feeling about death, may destroy a bereaved child's defenses and free precarious group discussions to transgress psychological safeguards. Without insights from a knowledgeable therapist, a teacher might not foresee the negative effects of showing an emotionally-laden film to a bereaved child and his classmates.

No class should view a film without preliminary discussions which establish the motivation for showing the film and the expectations of what viewers are about to experience. Follow-up questions and activities should be designed during and immediately after the teacher previews a film. These activities and questions are important influences upon attitude change and the effectiveness of a teacher's intervention.

Teachers should be aware at this juncture that communication is of prime importance. A teacher's attitude and words during such follow-up activities as role-playing, self-awareness games or "open wound" discussions, in which the teacher helps children work through their feelings, can convey an acceptance or a rejection of a child's authenticity and

self-worth. These questions and activities should be designed to encourage children's investigations of their options and choices in different situations. The teacher who offers ready-made solutions and spurious assurances in lieu of skillfully steering his students through emotionally difficult discussions denies them the opportunity to acquire confidence in their feelings and abilities to solve problems. In essence, it seems as if this teacher is superimposing his value system on students who may not share his philosophy.

Often producers and distributors of films used for affective education publish sets of discussion questions and follow-up activities as well as elaborate commentaries on the film's content. While these discussion questions and activities may be valid and viable for classroom use, the appropriateness of the film guide's suggested useage with specific learning populations must be teacher-determined. Many times the film commentaries distort or misrepresent the film's subject matter and content. The producer's perceptions of situations that evoke emotional states and typical coping strategies may not reflect a child's self-concept, experiences and strivings that influence his perceptions of himself, the film subject to be modeled or the film's underlying theme.

A parallel to these discrepancies within publishers' perceptions of films is that of educational materials. A teacher surveying the marketed curriculum materials presupposes that theoretical research

underlies the basis of judging the validity of the materials to foster certain skills within a student or group of learners. More often than not, these research bases are conceptualized by the curriculum producers without any empirical evidence that they are worthy of the credit attributed to them. This same concern applies to film producers who are designing films for affective intervention. The producers' claims that a film series "helps children develop a personally effective life style" or "helps children become aware that well-being results from positive action based on knowledge and understanding" may not be exactly how they will work. (2)

Films command attention and acceptance from a generation of children popularly attuned and responsive to visual information. When sight, hearing and the emotions are harmoniously stimulated by a film, children are propelled to experience film roles designed to expand their limited perspectives. Shelton (5) reported that a film producer's task is to exploit film's potent advantage as multimedia enrichment so that his audience empathizes, processes and stores the information contained in the film. In essence, these conditions should not be a necessary component of a film, for there is in this--or should be--a source of moral conflict not just for the film producer, but for the teacher who uses his films for character building and emotional development.

Given relevant content, film can be a powerful communication vehicle for imitative learning and vicarious reinforcement of positive attitudes,

but it is not a panacea for children's emotional health. It is incumbent upon the teacher to make a discriminating judgement of the need for audiovisiotherapy and ultimately to decide if a child's problems can really be helped by a film. The teacher must know if a film is sponsored and produced by an agency whose films reflect in-depth planning and research and informed, unbiased information geared to a precise problem statement and audience analysis.

Until film producers use some kind of rigorous criteria for determining exactly how and what their films should be used for, and indicate their worth through documented research, we must be overly cautious in translating these producers' messages to the population who view their films. In essence, is it worth "a try" to see whether or not a film is effective in dealing with such a crucial area as a child's concept of himself and viewpoint towards his entire life experience, just because the producersays so?

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