

# Examining the Use of Bibliotherapy in a Third Grade Classroom

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## Abstract

*This six-week bibliotherapy study was developed to determine if using children's literature books to help students think about, understand, and work through social and emotional issues helped third grade students' develop more social and emotional skills (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). Data collection included pre- and post-surveys, interruption tally charts, pre- and post-sociograms, class meeting videos, student work, and a teacher-research journal. Findings revealed that students had a more accepting attitude of their classmates, had a significant*

*decrease in interruptions, and had an overall growth in their social and emotional skills.*

*Key words: cooperative learning, classroom meetings, bibliotherapy, social skills*

This action research study began my first year of teaching, on the first day of school. I was an excited novice teacher that not only wanted to help my students get along better but I wanted to improve my teaching skills at the same time.

I wanted to use cooperative learning groups, as research has suggested this approach enhances student learning, helps students develop emotional skills, and builds a safe learning environment (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). A cooperative learning classroom creates this safety through activities that are designed to help the students feel accepted, included, and comfortable within their classroom. However, for cooperative learning to work, students need to develop appropriate social skills and coping skills, in order to work well as team members.

## Daily Classroom Meetings

The first intervention strategy added was the daily classroom meeting. This informal meeting gave the students time to sit down and have discussions on a personal level about social issues they experienced both in the classroom and in life outside of the classroom (Glasser, 1969; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000).

**Lessons Learned.** At first, the class meetings went well. However, I soon realized that several of the students began to fabricate details about what they shared. For instance, during one meeting when I tried to get students to choose a color that represented their feelings, Anna said, “I’m on yellow today because I went to Disneyworld last night!” Yellow, which was the happiest color, was used to represent the smiley face. Not to be outdone, Jacob built upon Anna’s contribution, adding “Oh yeah, well I’m on yellow because I went to Disneyworld AND a Dallas Cowboys game. Then my dog had puppies.”

This trend of building upon and extending what others had said became a trend, and I soon realized it was beginning to damage relationships in the classroom, as students began competing to see who could come up with a more outrageous or more interesting story. In addition, some of my students were painfully shy, even after several weeks of school and countless class-building and teambuilding exercises. I noticed that in a smaller setting, such as with their tablemates, they seemed less anxious but still not completely relaxed and confident.

Thus, even though research suggested that informal classroom meetings could provide students with a safe place to learn about and build social and emotional skills (Glasser, 1969; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000), it did not seem to be a place where my students learned about social skills and how to engage with one another. Thus, I researched for another way to teach social skills in a classroom, and found a body of literature that touted the implementation of bibliotherapy in the classroom (Maich & Kean, 2004; Pardeck, 1993; Prater, M.A., Johnstun, M., Dyches, T. & Johnstun, M., 2006; Regan & Page, 2008; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000; Sullivan & Strang, 2002).

## Bibliotherapy

Learning about this new approach led me to ask the following research questions:

- 1) How does the use of bibliotherapy in a cooperative learning environment impact social issues within a group?
- 2) In what ways does the use of literature impact a student’s ability to apply coping skills and social skills outside of the classroom meeting?

Bibliotherapy is recognized as a powerful strategy that has the potential to help children learn how to interact with others (Maich & Kean, 2004). Bibliotherapy is the use of books and literature to stimulate healing across all ages and has been used in educational and psychological disciplines (Regan & Page, 2008). Using the bibliotherapeutic approach for teaching social skills and coping skills provides a non-invasive and non-threatening way to help students think about and understand how their behaviors impact others (Iaquinta & Hipsky, 2006). Specifically, bibliotherapy gives readers and/or discussants the opportunity to notice and name the impact particular behaviors have in social situations (e.g. tattle tailing, stealing, bullying).

**Lessons Learned.** Using children’s literature during daily meeting times allowed for a more structured, formal approach to talking about both appropriate and non-appropriate behaviors in a non-threatening manner. As seen, in the study write up below, using the

bibliotherapy approach to help students build social and emotional skills necessary for working well in cooperative groups was successful.

## **Research**

### **Setting and Participants**

This action research was conducted in my third-grade classroom. The school is a pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade campus that is located in a small rural town. The school population contains 597 students, which consists of 2.8% African American, 81.9% Hispanic, 14.2% White, and 1.1% other. The school is a Title 1 campus, meaning over half of the school's population is considered economically disadvantaged. Being a Title I campus, the school receives extra funds for several things including hiring tutors to better assist our students. At this school, 73.2% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged, and 63.8% of the students are considered at-risk.

My classroom had 17 students (6 boys and 11 girls), 2 self-identified as African American, 13 self-identified as Hispanic; 2 self-identified as White, and 71% of my students were considered at-risk. Seven of my students listed Spanish as their first language and English as their second language.

### **Procedures**

During the six weeks of data collection, classroom meetings were held using the structure bibliotherapy approach. The bibliotherapy lessons were developed around children's literature (see Appendix for list of books). The main purpose of using children's literature was to provide a non-threatening way for students to talk about behaviors exhibited by the book characters, to see how the character resolved the behavior issues, and then talk about other ways children could deal with these issues in real life. I hoped that by providing this structured talk that the students would build trusting relationships, resulting in an increased level of comfort and security in class settings so cooperative learning groups worked more effectively and enhanced the learning experience of all the students.

Critically selecting pieces of literature to use during classroom meetings was essential in order to address specific social skills that the students needed to build. The topics covered varied from poverty to personal space (See the Appendix for a complete list of books used during the six-week study). Follow-up activities were incorporated with the goal of allowing students to think about and practice the needed social skill talked about in the book in a safe environment. Follow-up activities included book talks, independent writing assignments, and role-playing in order to model both incorrect and correct behaviors.

### **Data Collection**

A variety of tools were used to collect data including sociograms, tally charts, anecdotal records, and surveys. Sociograms were given at the beginning and the end of the six-week project in order to identify student(s). The sociogram was utilized to see if any positive gains were made in the way students saw their peers.

An Interruption Tally Chart was created and used both pre/post to keep track of the students' blurts and interruptions within the follow-up activities. Interrupting was identified as one of the social skills targeted in class meetings, as students need to develop good listening skills so they can work in cooperative groups more effectively. In addition, because this survey was a pre/post, the post allowed students to reflect on how using bibliotherapy impacted their

behaviors, as well as thinking about how their growth impacted how they worked with others in cooperative learning groups throughout the day and/or week.

Observational teacher field notes were also collected throughout the day on how students behaved and worked with each other. These observational notes were to determine if the students were able to make any connections, and if they could apply this learning while working in cooperative groups. Filming allowed me to go back through the videos and add any significant behaviors to the field notes.

## Findings

Findings indicated that bibliotherapy appears to be an effective intervention for teaching a variety of social skills. Implementing this structured intervention in conjunction with follow-up activities helped my students to work better during cooperative learning group activities.

Skill #1 that needed to be built was breaking the habit of students' interrupting each other rather than listening to what each other had to say. To address the issue of blurting out in class, I read *My Mouth is a Volcano!* (Cook, 2008). After reading the book, we role-played interrupting, and then discussed ways to let someone know you have something to say other than by interrupting. I then implemented the following tally chart to keep a record of student's interruptions each week. The figure allowed us to see how students were growing in listening to each other and taking turns to speak. As seen in the figure below, 44 interruptions were recorded at the beginning of the study and only four interruptions were recorded at the end of the sixth week.

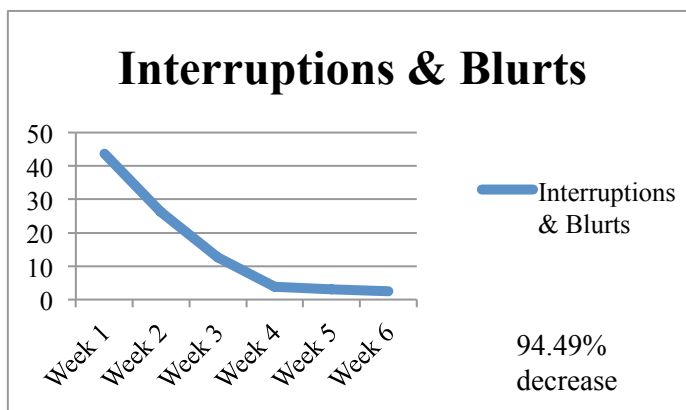


Figure 1: Interruption Record

Working well in cooperative groups, Skill #2, was another area for improvement, as some students were excluding one another and constantly bickering with those they were working with in cooperative learning groups. To address this concern, one of the books I read to the class was *The Crayon Box That Talked*, (DeRolf, 2011). We not only had a teacher-led discussion but I used the Kagan activities, which allowed my students to get better acquainted with one another.

After reading books about getting along and working as a team, the ranking of student partners using the sociograms changed dramatically. The students were asked to list their top three partner choices, one being their most desirable partner, two being the next most desirable, etc. In the sociogram, star students were defined as those students who were listed first by six or

more classmates while isolate students were not chosen by any of their peers. The students listed by one or two of their peers were considered low-range while students who were listed by three to five of their peers were considered mid-range.

The sociogram results seen in Figure 2 showed the majority of students had growth in learning to work together in cooperative learning groups from pre to post rankings, as low-range rankings became lower and mid-range rankings became more. However, it must be noted that the same two students received star ranking from pre to post.

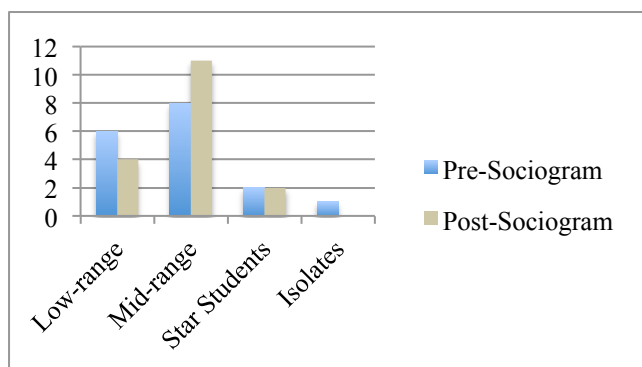


Figure 2: Sociogram Results

Skill #3 helped students reflect on their behaviors to determine how they thought they were getting along with others. A pre/post survey was created and given to the students to determine how they rated themselves in relation to their feelings about others. The students were asked to read the statements and circle the descriptor (never, sometimes, always) that best described their behavior. Statements included but are not limited to:

- I listen carefully to others.
- I take turns and share.
- I obey the rules.
- I compliment others.

	Pre- Never	Post- Never	Pre- Sometimes	Post- Sometimes	Pre- Always	Post- Always
I show concern for others.	0	0	8	2	8	14
I wait patiently for my turn to talk.	1	0	11	10	4	6
I tolerate the views of others.	5	0	4	5	7	11
I respect others' property.	1	0	5	4	10	12
I am honest with my teacher.	0	0	2	1	14	15

Figure 3: Pre/Post Student Self-Reflection Survey Results

Overall, the data (See Figure 3) shows the class had an increase in always exhibiting positive behaviors and social skills. The data showed that students felt they were more tolerant

and accepting. While the data I collected cannot be used to make a causal link the changes indicated, in my opinion, the change was a result of all the books read and discussed. Additionally, the follow-up activities allowed the students to examine and role-play the inappropriate and appropriate ways characters in books handled particular social situations. Role-play led to discussions about real-life experiences and how they could apply these lessons to their lives.

### **Lessons Learned**

In my classroom, literature seemed to be an effective tool to initiate honest talk and self-reflection. Teaching specific social skills using literature and cooperative learning follow-up activities was fun, noninvasive, and nonthreatening for my students.

Originally, I had books selected on a predetermined set of social skills I wanted to specifically address. However, the book discussions and cooperative learning activities lead to openness among my students, and they began to inadvertently divulge more personal information about their struggles. A common theme among my students was a feeling of inadequacy. Thus, I started looking for books on skills that students felt they needed more help developing.

From this action research project, I learned the importance of incorporating literature into daily classroom meetings. As I continue to read aloud to my future students, I plan to spend more time on fewer books rather than reading multiple books with similar meanings. We read twelve books over the course of the six-week study, but I recommend reading one book a week in order to have more time to focus on the theme and the lessons. In addition, even though a variety of follow-up activities were planned, role-playing seemed an essential part of the acquisition of social skills through bibliotherapy. Role-playing seemed to give students an opportunity to practice new social skills and discuss social issues in a safe environment. Overall, this project helped to build students' social and emotional skills, which helped to develop a more positive classroom atmosphere. Students worked together cooperatively and effectively while appearing to connect the bibliotherapy lessons to their interactions with their peers. "If one child in a classroom is able to face a social emotional problem with new strength and greater skills, the very use of bibliotherapy will have been its own reward," (Maich & Kean, 2004, p.10).

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## Appendix

### Children's Literature Books

**List of books used for the study:** The books used in the bibliotherapy study are grouped by similar themes and listed below.

Title, Author, (Illustrator), Publisher, Year

#### Theme: Social Behaviors

- *My Mouth is a Volcano!* Julia Cook, (Carrie Hartman), National Center for Youth Issues, 2008
- *Personal Space Camp*, Julia Cook, (Carrie Hartman), National Center for Youth Issues, 2008
- *It's Hard to be a Verb!* Julia Cook, (Carrie Hartman), National Center for Youth Issues, 2008

#### Theme: Honesty

- *Too Many Tamales*, Gary Soto, (Ed Martinez), Turtleback Books, 1996
- *Princess K.I.M and the Lie That Grew*, Maryann Cocca-Leffler, Open Road Media, 2010
- *Carlos and the Squash Plant/Carlos Y LA Planta De Calabaza*, Jan Romero Stevens, (Jeanne Arnold), Demco Media, 1995

#### Theme: Friendship/Teamwork

- *The Crayon Box That Talked*, Shane DeRolf, (Michael Letzig), Random House Children's Books, 2011
- *How Full is Your Bucket?: For Kids*, Tom Rath & Mary Reckmeyer, (Maurie Manning), Gallup Press, 2009
- *Teamwork Isn't My Thing, and I Don't Like to Share!* Julia Cook, (Kelsey De Weerd), Boys Town Press, 2012

#### Theme: Diversity/Self-Esteem

- *A Chair for My Mother*, Vera B. Williams, HarperCollins, 1982
- *Thank you, Mr. Falker*, Patricia Polacco, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2012
- *Those Shoes*, Maribeth Boelts, (Noah Z. Jones), Candlewick Press, 2007