

"Character" Building: Using Literature to Connect with Youth

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This article describes a bibliotherapy program where graduate students work with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The following article illustrates how literature can be used as a medium to connect with children and adolescents with an emotional or behavioral disability (EBD).

A boy by the name of Bradley, who is not identified as having an emotional or behavioral disability, attended 4th grade at a public elementary school. He was often teased and rejected by his peers at school. Even his teachers found Bradley to be uncooperative, unmotivated, and a disruption to the flow of instruction. Although Bradley was deeply hurt by his feeling of rejection and lack of belonging, Bradley reinforced this perception that others had of him, and it became his self-perception, as well. He picked fights with others, lied, spit at others, and showed a reluctance to perform in school. Bradley felt that it was much easier to reinforce his negative reputation rather than risk being his true self, thereby bolstering his irrational belief that he would always be rejected by others. Hating others first was much safer than having them only reject him later. Everyone always did; Bradley did not have a single positive relationship.

The description above of a rejected and lonely boy is fictional, however, similar to many troubled youth. Bradley Chalkers is a character from the novel *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* by Lois Sachar. In a teacher preparation program, 20 graduate students observed 16 literature selections and considered how the characters and themes in these novels could help to facilitate the social-emotional learning of troubled youth. Applying the literature-based approach when teaching language arts, the graduates were to select a novel to read and then link the literature selection to

both academic instruction and social-skill development. The graduates, as pre-service teachers, used The Circle of Courage Model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990) to provide a context for the social-emotional healing which could potentially be facilitated through bibliotherapy. The interactive assignment and the results from the on-line discussions are presented. Graduates were able to express their understanding of student needs, connect theory to practice, and categorize the novel selections to aid student healing.

Background

Across classrooms today, books, short stories, poems, newspapers, magazines, anthologies, and basal readers are used to support language arts instruction. Using these materials and others, a balanced literacy classroom typically embraces all four approaches to language arts instruction including the language experience approach, the technology approach, the basal approach, and the literature-based approach. The latter involves a core piece of literature which is often selected based upon a common theme embedded in the curriculum. The literature-based approach embraces student discovery, inquiry modes of learning, and predictive reasoning. Teachers may create this environment for learning by facilitating literature circles, paired reading activities, book clubs, reciprocal reading groups, and/or guided reading

routines. Students in these learning environments, guided by their teachers, not only read and comprehend the elements of story grammar, but they respond to literature in a variety of ways, and make connections with a) their own prior knowledge, b) their own personal experiences (text-to-self), c) world events (text-to-world), and d) other literary pieces (text-to-text) (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). The click of comprehension, however, occurs only when the reader evolves a schema that explains the whole message (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

In order to maximize student comprehension and learning, the selections used when embracing the literature-based approach are vital and must consider that every learning task has both a cognitive and affective component. Specifically, the selections should require external schemata for the reader to attach facts or emotions to effectively. For example, when a young child experiences the death of a family pet, educators may offer a favorite picture book like *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* by Judith Viorst. The unfamiliar topic of death may be somewhat easier for a child to broach in the context of a narrative story. A book, short story, or poem may act as a tool to share how other children have experienced similar situations in order to teach children how to prepare to handle these difficult emotions.

Bibliotherapy

Using books and literature to promote healing across all age groups is not a new concept. In fact, the term bibliotherapy, defined here as the use of literature for social/emotional development across ages, has existed since 1916 (Jones, 2006). The history of bibliotherapy includes its use to treat mental illness, to meet the psychological needs of war veterans, to address the emotional needs of those seeking counseling, and to teach social skills to children and adolescents. Bibliotherapy is identified by McCarty and Slygh (2004) as a proactive intervention for youth who are at-risk and/or present with behavioral challenges. This tool would generally be used in conjunction with other positive behavioral supports for students with emotional/behavioral challenges. School-wide programs, community programs, supportive social networks, and direct counseling services may be a part of such behavioral supports. Furthermore, bibliotherapy has obvious ties with wellness and character development programs as initiatives for school age youth. The American

Psychological Association, for example, has a wealth of storybooks and picture books to help children deal with a variety of psychological concerns and challenges (www.maginationpress.com). For those within special education, particularly those working with children with emotional and behavioral disabilities, social skills and emotional learning are a part of everyday instruction. Bibliotherapy is reportedly used in clinical settings and in classrooms for students with disabilities and with at-risk youth (Prater, Johnston, Dyches, & Johnston, 2006; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). Bibliotherapy may be used to help children cope with fears and death (Corr, 2004; Nicholson & Pearson, 2003), depression (Gregory, Canning, Lee, & Wise, 2004), problem solving (Forgan, 2002), and social stressors among adolescents in school settings (Duimstra, 2003; Vare & Norton, 2004).

Linking Literature with Social Emotional Learning

Laurie Wenger (1998) first looked at using books for building circles of courage for positive youth development. In 2004, McCarty, a professor of special education at the College of Charleston, collaborated with a librarian-media specialist and similarly used the Native American philosophy to set a context for linking literature to social and emotional learning. McCarty and Slygh (2004) asserted that "books have the potential for healing and renewal if they are rich in quality, relate to students' external and internal lives, are carefully selected, and are reflected on through mentorship and instruction" (p. 7). Their investigation resulted in a structured form to use for analyzing a story in terms of its emotional impact. The framework for supporting this structured form entitled the Analysis/Annotation worksheet was the Developmental Therapy-Developmental Teaching Model (Wood, with Combs, Gunn, & Weller, 1986) and The Circle of Courage Model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990).

Developmental Therapy-Developmental Teaching Model. The Developmental Therapy-Developmental Teaching Model is based on the premise that when children develop through the given stages, they are often presented with anxiety stressors and, when unresolved, these may become moral crises. These unresolved issues are summarized by McCarty and Slygh (2004) as: abandonment, inadequacy, guilt, conflict, or identity. The developmental anxiety

framework is one way to decode the underlying issues associated with the problematic behavior of the character(s) within a particular novel. Literature brings many of these familiar anxieties to the surface for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities creating a forum for potential catharsis. By reading the novel and engaging in rich discussions facilitated by the teacher, children may identify with these anxieties and then witness the manner in which the character(s) cope and/or resolve their inner conflicts. For example, McCarty and Slygh (2004) identify *abandonment*, *inadequacy*, and *guilt* as the underlying stressors in Maurice Sendak's classic children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Circle of Courage Model. The Circle of Courage is based on Native American child-rearing values and positive youth development. The model is presented in four parts of the medicine wheel, which is significant to the Native American culture as it represents a person standing in the middle of the circle with its four directions. When children are nurtured in environments of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, they develop their potentials and thrive. The Circle of Courage principles are universal to all cultures and are the foundations of resilience.

Graduate Intern Participants

Twenty graduate students participated in the semester course, *Methods of Instruction in Language Arts*. During the school day, these individuals acted as teachers in training or interns as members of a Professional Development School (P.D.S.). In order to understand each of their students developmentally, socially, and emotionally, the graduate interns are exposed to a psychoeducational framework. Among the theorists of study, they are richly exposed to the work of Nicholas Long (1991) and Fritz Redl (1966), as well as Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern's (1990) Circle of Courage Model. Participation in this literature book-share assignment occurred in the spring semester after each graduate had at least seven months of classroom experience working with children or adolescents with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Exploring Literature: The Process

Fueled by the work of McCarty and Slygh (2004), the twenty graduate students participated in an on-line

discussion of using literature selections among students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Graduates were given the following steps prior to participating in the on-line discussion.

1. Read the report by McCarty and Slygh (2004), *Linking Literature with Social-Skill Development in Students with Behavioral Challenges*.
2. Select a novel appropriate for your grade level of choice which may have the potential to lend itself to social emotional learning for students. (A list of approximately 30 books was provided but did not limit other choices).
3. Using the analysis/annotation form in the report as a springboard, consider the developmental crises evident in the novel and link the plot of the text to the complex needs of children and adolescents with EBD.
4. Engage in on-line entries using Blackboard¹ and make four specific entries.

By thoughtfully considering the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, using the analysis/annotation worksheet, and revisiting the premise of the Circle of Courage Model, the graduate students were able to exchange their insights with others in an on-line forum. In so doing, they were able to embrace the literature-based approach to support the academic as well as the social and emotional learning of children.

Results

In order to capture the experience of learning among the graduates, some results from the on-line discussion are presented for each of the four dimensions within the Circle of Courage. As some of the graduates selected the same novel, 16 total novels were considered in the discussions (see Figure 1). Although many of the novels encompassed more than one of the dimensions, the graduates were asked to select the most relevant dimension in order to categorize the literature selections.

Belonging

The first value or "Spirit" in the Circle of Courage is the Spirit of Belonging. According to the Native American culture, it is not only the job of the parents, but all adults to teach and create a sense of community. The overriding goal of this core value is to develop and nurture a climate of caring and a

sense of community where individual actions/ reactions are seen as part of the whole, and not just isolated individual acts in a vacuum. Although meeting the needs across all four areas of the model is necessary in educational environments, the dimension of Belonging was a dominant category (10 novels). Anxieties which surface for literature characters when this need of belonging is not met include *inadequacy*, *abandonment*, and *rejection*. The need to be accepted and to feel valued is present with varied characters including personified animals, teens, and orphans. Characters across the 16 selected novels are provoked by the following situations: an older woman loses her sense of belonging with the death of her husband; a child's parents get divorced; a boy in elementary school is rejected by all of his peers and even by his teacher; a young male orphan struggles to understand his own identity; a boy, after losing his parents, struggles to live with isolating and uncommunicative relatives; a delightful pig desperately seeks friendship; an adolescent boy continuously falls short of his father's standards; and a sister struggles to help her disabled brother belong in society. A graduate participant presents the stressor of *inadequacy* for Jess in *Bridge to Terabithia*:

Jess felt that he had to prove himself to his father.... Even though he worked tirelessly on the farm, he perceived that it was not good enough for his family. This propelled him to try to excel in sports but he was beaten by a girl in this task. Most EBD students are faced with similar situations which make them question their own competence. They face rejection from their families and feel unwanted and unloved. Consequently, they resort to various means and people for acceptance and assurance. In some cases, like Jess's, they create meaningful friendships that can compensate for family rejection. Jess was able to resolve this conflict by focusing his time and attention on building Terabithia (with Leslie)...

As described earlier from *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, young Bradley Chalkers mirrors similar behaviors and feelings of youth with EBD and subsequently, as the story unfolds, Bradley's coping mechanisms may also serve as a teaching opportunity for struggling youth:

Bradley feels worthless and undesirable. This is a very common stressor for students with EBD. Their self-concept is so low that they feel worthless and hopeless. They show a mask to the rest of

the world and hide their real face to avoid getting hurt. Most of them have been hurt so many times that they have created a shield to avoid another painful experience. A lot of our students do not have the social skills necessary to be able to have a lot of friends. They often feel rejected and alone, just like Bradley felt....

Self-defeating thoughts and autistic perceptions surface throughout this novel. However, similar to the friendship observed in *Bridge to Terabithia*, one positive relationship significantly impacts Bradley to transform his choices and subsequently, his behaviors:

Bradley experiences what it is like to have somebody that believes in him (Carla Davis, the school counselor), somebody who understands and respects him. This motivates Bradley to start showing his real self. He starts putting more effort in his school activities and starts being more pleasant to his peers and teacher. In the beginning, he does this to impress Carla and to make her proud, but then he starts believing in himself and his positive transformation begins. I think that our students can truly relate to Bradley's life and learn from his mistakes and his successes. They can see the differences between the qualities that made Bradley "undesirable" to others and the qualities that made him feel accepted. I think that Bradley's life can give our students hope—the hope to be able to find someone who can truly see how special they really are.

Through positive relationships observed between characters, individuals discover their own strengths and abilities. Exposure to literature allows young people the option of mirroring the positive behavior and values of characters; Jess and Bradley provide a true sense of the term "character."

Generosity

The value of generosity from the Circle of Courage implies a need to be unselfish and empathic to others and to feel the warmth of giving, of care. The Spirit of Generosity incorporates the idea that children learn to give to others their gifts of time and stories. This comes from the view that things are less important than people and so, if giving to someone helps the person, then it was well worth the loss of the material good (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). Our students are often the recipients of service, and experiencing the role of providing a

service can be empowering and enlightening. This value may be demonstrated by helping others with tasks during cooperative learning methods or team building exercises, or through service learning initiatives. *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry was the only novel among the literature selections to be discussed in this dimension. The anxiety stressors from the novel, identified by the two discussants, include *inadequacy, guilt, abandonment, and conflict*. The novel takes place in 1943 during the Holocaust and the occupation of Denmark by Nazi Germany. The story is one of bravery and integrity for the Danish who sacrificed their lives for many Jewish friends as demonstrated by the young ten-year-old girl in the story. One of the graduate students reflected on how he would use this novel to impact the social-emotional growth of his students with EBD:

One of the issues I struggle with in the classroom is convincing students that sometimes we must do things we do not want to do, because they are good and necessary. It is a constant tug-of-war to undo the damage of self-defeating beliefs, particularly the belief that they are not good at anything, and the fear of doing things that are uncertain, the fear of failing at new things. Right now the students I work with are entering the conflict stage of anxiety. This means they have a self-defeating belief that they are afraid to do what they know is right for fear it may be difficult or hurtful. This message speaks louder than any in Number the Stars.... The book is all about bravery and serving others. Discussion would be a part of the social skills instruction. Students would be able to share ideas of how they would handle themselves were they in Annemarie's place... how we can make our community better by giving a little of ourselves. ...so, I think it would be a good idea for the students to volunteer helping (others)....It might drive the (impact) of help(ing) others....

Independence

Two powerful novels befitting middle school/high school students, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry and *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Myers, were placed in the Independence value of the Circle of Courage. The Spirit of Independence includes the balance between independence and autonomy. The purpose includes teaching and modeling self-control and self-regulating behaviors. According to Long and Wood (1991), self-regulation emerges from understanding of people and events in the environment, motivation to

change unpleasant events, and trust in adults. If discouragement is courage denied (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990), and a child's circle is broken by others' actions, the child must be given the opportunity to learn from mistakes and empowered to have the courage to make more successful choices in the future. Both novels include young teen characters who struggle to "fit in" rather challenging environments. Jonas, in *The Giver*, challenges the rules of a stifled society in which individuality is discouraged—a world which dismisses genuine feelings of pain, joy, and melancholy memories. His dilemma and his ability to conquer his own independence are described here by a graduate student:

... (Jonas) realized he wanted something different from what he had been taught his entire life. He wanted something better for himself, so he chose to leave behind all that was familiar to him in order to ensure a better future for himself and Gabriel. All adolescents reach some point in their life where they have to make a choice that is right for them, and step into their independence, and this book does an excellent job of illustrating the theme.

... So when Jonas is able to experience feelings and he learns that there is so much more to life than what he has experienced thus far, he makes a different choice...

I believe the character Jonas modeled one way to effectively "solve" his conflict with identity; he chose to create a life that was his own despite the fact that everyone he knew and loved was telling him that their way was the only way. He believed in his heart that a life was only worth living if he could make his own choices, take risks, and experience both the joys and pains that life brings...

In contrast, *Scorpions* is a novel which embraces the realistic elements of peer pressure, broken families, violence, poverty, incarceration, drugs, and racism. Many students at-risk or with emotional and behavioral disabilities may find a connection with Jamal in the *Scorpions*. Jamal is influenced by his older brother, a leader of a city gang in Harlem, his hard working mother, his best friend, Tito, and the "pull" of the "street life."

This story applies to this theme (of independence) because Jamal wanted to be different from his brother. He saw the pain that his brother caused his mother and he didn't want to be that much of

a burden on his mother. At the same time, the more he tried to stay out of trouble, the more trouble kept finding him. He wanted to be the man of the house—the man that his brother or father could not be to his mother and his sister. Jamal made a lot of choices in this novel; some were positive and some were negative, but he constantly made choices that he thought would help him to be the man that he thought he needed to be....

When children struggle with feelings of inadequacy, they may compensate negatively and lose direction. Using this novel as a context, the layers of discussion are endless.

Mastery

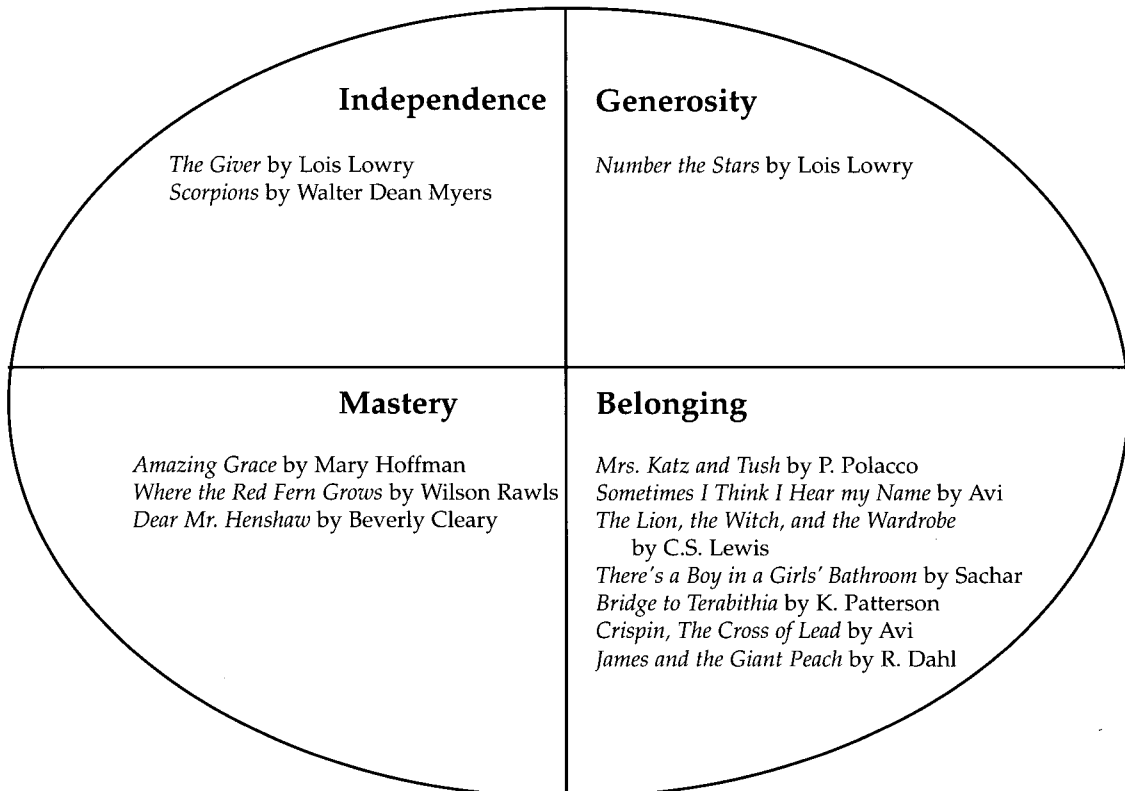
This dimension of the Circle of Courage seems to be a constant struggle for students who may often appear desperate for success and reluctant to articulate their strengths. The experience of failure is so familiar that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy at times. The Spirit of Mastery is a belief that children must feel competent in what they are asked to do in order to feel the motivation to achieve further.

According to Brendtro and colleagues (1990), the competencies focus on four levels: physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual. Furthermore, good judgment is gained through active listening and observing one's elders. Teachers encourage perseverance and teach students to problem solve by providing them with a variety of strategy selections. Teachers also focus on strength-based interventions.

I think Billy (in Where The Red Fern Grows) models dealing with his identity and trying to come into his own by finding one thing that he loves and enjoys and allowing himself to flourish through this talent. He dedicates himself to mastering hunting and having a relationship with his dogs.

This self-realization, however, does not surface easily for students. Often challenged youth are unable to recognize their own abilities, their talents, and their potential until they engage positively and genuinely with others. Leigh Botts in *Dear Mr. Henshaw* struggled with the stressors of abandonment and separation when his parents divorced and he had to move to a new school. In the novel, Leigh is befriended by the school janitor who inspires Leigh to express

Figure 1: Aligning Novels with the Circle of Courage Model.



himself through writing. The experience of success is highly underrated and no one bodes this alone:

The message that our students can take from this book is to find something you are passionate about and pursue it at a mastery level. Students should find something they like doing and use it as a tool to work through issues. Whether it be writing, sports, or reading, our students can cope better if they are able to do something that they enjoy.

Aligning novels with the Circle of Courage allowed the graduate students to connect with this Native American philosophy and to consider using literature as a medium for troubled youth. Through this, youth are given the opportunity to attach their own stories to other human experiences. Literature is a healing tool for all ages, for students and for adults, serving as a powerful and positive experience. Although fictional, rich literature allows readers to continuously connect with characters on a variety of levels. Summarized best by a teacher in the field:

...I think the Giver in this book (*The Giver*) is similar to us as teachers. The Giver was the one person who told Jonas he could have a different experience, indeed a different life, and that it was his choice. We are constantly encouraging and challenging our students to make new and better choices so they can have new and better experiences. Sometimes it just takes that one person who believes in them to help them take that step.

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NOTE

¹Blackboard is an on-line simulated classroom which facilitates social engagement via interactive postings which individuals can submit and respond to in a conversational format.

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