YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE IN ENGLISH — ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN BIBLIOTHERAPY FOR STUDENTS OF A TERTIARY INSTITUTE

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ABSTRACT

Bibliotherapy refers to a type of therapy to help people go through their emotional or mental problems by reading books, articles or texts. Although there is much literature and scholarly writing on bibliotherapy, its effects and usefulness for Malaysians are not fully explored or documented. In light of this, this research was conducted to find out how effective bibliotherapy is by having students read selected young adult books in English. The findings suggest that for some readers, bibliotherapy does help them to provide some emotional and mental relief, although there are a number of readers who do not report any positive effects. Finally, recommendations and considerations for further research are presented.

Introduction

The earliest use of bibliotherapy can be "traced to the Grecian times" (Nystul, 2003: 219). Bibliotherapy has been used by therapists and counselors to aid individuals with emotional problems through reading. Depending on the type of reading materials, it has been argued that this type of therapy "works well with all ages" (Pledge, 2004: 113).

However, research on bibliotherapy within a localized landscape is not well documented. In light of this, this research is conducted to find out how effective bibliotherapy is in helping selected young adults cope with issues and problems that they are facing. As the scope of this research is on young adults from a tertiary institute, young adult texts are used as research material. We will first discuss what young adult literature is before moving on to discuss bibliotherapy, the methodology used in and the data collected from this research.

Young Adult Literature

It seems that young adult literature has caught the attention of academia these past few years. Evidence for this is the increasing number of studies being done on it by students for their post-graduate degrees. Some papers and books have also been published. *Engaging Young Adult Readers through Young Adult Literature* (edited by Too Wei Keong, Sasbadi, 2006) is one such work that plots the trajectory that young adult literature (or YAL) is going through in this country. Although YAL has "made a strong impact among readers, academics, writers and publishers over a few decades," its development in Malaysia is unfortunately slow — research on YAL in Malaysia only emerged in early 2000 (Too, 2006:1).

Donelson and Nilsen (1997) describe YAL as texts which readers between 12 and 20 would voluntarily choose instead of being coerced to read. YAL, sometimes labeled as "adolescent literature or literature written for young adults" (Herz & Gallo, 1996:1), refers to texts where the main characters are teenagers, thus creating a bond between the text and the reader (i.e. creating an interest in the young reader to read the text). Consequently, the issues that emerge in the texts are seen from the perspective of and intimately related to the young readers (Herz & Gallo, 1996:8). Some of the issues that emerge in YAL are "relationships with family and home […], identity and coming of age" (Zitlow & Rogers, 1999:206)

What is bibliotherapy?

Bibliotherapy is the use of literature to promote healing and mental health (Myers, 1998) or to "facilitate the therapeutic processes" (Glicken, 2005: 136). Patricia Shanti (2006) explains that bibliotherapy can aid in healing the emotions of an individual. It is also explained as an activity in which a person reads a book "for self-help or to find answers to [one's] difficulties such as how others dealt with a loss, learned to become self-assured, or overcame a hardship" (Forgan, 2002:75). The main activity for the participants of bibliotherapy is to identify which literary characters in the books are similar to them in order to "release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting with peers and adults" (Cook, Earles-Vollrath & Ganz, 2006:93). Apart from literature, "self-help books" can also be used to "supplement" the work that counselors do with their clients (Kotler, 2004:167). The main premise of bibliotherapy is that reading can help change the reader's "attitude and behavior and is thus an important influence in shaping, molding, and altering values" (Marlowe & Maycock, 2000:325). Corey similarly agrees that the contents of a book may be "extremely therapeutic" as they provide a lot of material for discussions during therapy sessions (2005:360).

Bibliotherapy has been used for all manners of behavioral counseling. For example, bibliotherapy is used to counsel substance abuse victims where relevant books are recommended to them for consumption. This helps keep "clients actively involved beyond the therapy session and therapists and clients can later discuss the content of such reading materials in session." This aims to "expand the client potential for critical thinking and active choice regarding personal substance use" (Glidden-Tracey, 2005:. 175). In the medical fraternity, it is used as a tool for patients of depression to "self-manage their condition better" (Williams & Whitfield, 2001:134).

Bibliotherapy is also used to aid people to be more aware of their identities and problems as well as being more conscious of their surroundings with the aim of creating "a fulfilling style of life" within themselves (Prochaska & Norcross, 2003:80). Prater Johnstun, Dyches and Johnstun (2006) claim that, apart from exposing students to real social life, bibliotherapy also brings them to be more appreciative of literature.

Amer (1999), in her study, used bibliotherapy to help children with short stature and diabetes to cope with their physical and medical problems. She also concludes that the books used in the bibliotherapy sessions can be used "again and again with the same child to address pertinent issues affecting the child's life" (Amer, 1999:95). In short, bibliotherapy can be used with anyone as long as he or she can read.

Gladding (quoted in Myers, 1998) presents a four-step process that defines the benefits of bibliotherapy for counseling clients—discovery of oneself, a sense of therapeutic relief, the emergence of self-knowledge and an awareness of the universality of one's problems and the emergence of a more positive and constructive way of dealing with one's problems. Deepa and Vaughn (2000) similarly present three experiences that a reader should have in a successful bibliotherapy session—the reader identifies with the main characters and events in the story, the reader births an emotional tie with the character and the reader develops an insight concerning the problems or issues that he or she is experiencing and the subsequent solution to those problems or issues.

In short, using YAL is a powerful tool for bibliotherapy for young adults as YAL "provides rich literary material for exploring issues and dilemmas of the human experience as perceived by the young" (Bontempo, 1995: para 1).

Limitations of Bibliotherapy

There are, however, limitations of bibliotherapy that researchers must be aware of. Riordan and Wilson report that there are conflicting responses to whether or not

bibliotherapy really works although there "appears to be an increased interest in bibliotherapy among (counseling) practitioners" (1989:507). Nystul concurs that research on "the efficacy of bibliotherapy has provided mixed results" (2003:219). One reason why there is skepticism about bibliotherapy is that participants may have the tendency to "project their own motives onto characters" which results in them reinforcing their beliefs with regard to a certain issue or they may be "defensive", resulting in them "fail[ing] to identify with" the characters in the texts they read. (Mardziah & Abdul Halim, 2005:80). In addition, the participants in the bibliotherapy sessions may fail to find time to read, resulting in a failure of the programme (Mardziah & Abdul Halim, 2004/5). Another limitation is the unavailability of reading books that relate to a certain problem or issue faced by a participant may hinder the programme from taking off.

The above mentioned limitations can be overcome through proper administration of the bibliotherapy sessions by practitioners who are sensitive to the nature of the students' problems. Networking with academics and book publishers may also help in locating suitable books for the use of the participants. Networking with other bibliotherapy practitioners may also help to develop and improve one's skill in conducting bibliotherapy sessions.

Methodology and Scope

Deepa and Vaughn advise that the most pertinent step when using bibliotherapy is "to match appropriate books with the student and his or her various problems" so that the student can see "similarities between him or herself and a book character" (2000: 74). In order for this to be realized, there are four basic stages in the implementation of bibliotherapy—identification, selection, presentation, and follow-up (Pardeck, 1993).

In the identification stage, a questionnaire was given to selected students from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. These students are undergraduates in their first or second year of their studies. The aim of this questionnaire was to find out the potential problems or issues faced by these students and to find out if the students are willing to go through a 'reading programme' (read: bibliotherapy) for a period of about four months. The questionnaire, as given in Appendix 1, consists of 13 primary areas that are of concern to young adults. The respondents tick in the boxes provided to indicate the areas that are of concern to them. The primary purpose of this was to find a book that wouldl match the areas that are of concern to the respondent, should the respondent be willing to go through the bibliotherapy process. Finally, the respondents tick to indicate if they are willing to take part in a reading programme of about three to four months. The term 'reading programme'

was used instead of 'bibliotherapy' in this questionnaire to avoid any confusion on the part of the respondents when they respond to the questionnaire.

In the presentation stage the respondents for this research were chosen and given books to read. The questionnaire as described above was given to one hundred respondents from the four faculties in the university. Out of these one hundred respondents, fifty three respondents indicated that they were willing to go through bibliotherapy. Of these forty six, sixteen were from the Faculty of Accountancy and Management (FAM), seventeen from the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology (FICT), ten from the Faculty of Arts and Social Science (FAS) and ten from the Faculty of Engineering and Science (FES). As only ten respondents from each faculty (to have a total of forty respondents) were needed for this research, ten respondents were selected randomly from FAM and FICT. The data from the questionnaires were collated and summarized to find out what the major issues faced by the respondents were. Subsequently, suitable books that portray these issues were selected and given to the respondents who were given about three to four months to read the chosen book.

In the final, follow-up stage, the respondents were given a second questionnaire to answer. This second questionnaire consists of six questions as shown in Appendix 2. The primary purpose of these questions was to find out which parts of the book the respondents found interesting and most relevant to the issues that they were facing. Subsequently, the last two questions of the questionaire aimed to find out whether the books that they had read had helped them to overcome or cope with the issues that they were facing.

Discussion of data

Two books were selected for the forty respondents who indicated that they were willing to go through the reading programme. These two books, *Any Place I Hang My Hat* by Susan Isaacs and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain were selected because the issues featured in these two books were the main issues that were faced by the respondents. The data collected from the first questionnaire seem to indicate that the common issues faced by all the respondents are issues related to friends and studies.

Unfortunately, of the forty respondents chosen for this research, only seventeen respondents answered the second questionnaire. The other twenty three respondents, for various reasons to be presented in a later section of this paper, did not read the books given to them.

Of the seventeen respondents who answered the second questionnaire, four respondents did not find any part of the books they read interesting. One of these

respondents wrote that the language used in the book was boring and this de-motivated him/her to read further. Consequently, all four respondents thought that the books that they read did not relate to their personal lives and did not find the books of any help to the personal issues that they were facing.

The other thirteen respondents, however, found some parts of the book that they read interesting. Nine respondents read *Any Place I Hang my Hat* while the other four read *Huckleberry Finn*. One respondent who read the former thought the part where the protagonist decided it was best to live without her mother an interesting section while another respondent who read the same book opined that the part that was interesting was when the protagonist finally met up with her mother. In short, as expected, there were no common parts of the book that all respondents found interesting. This reflects the individuality of each reader.

Although one respondent who read *Any Place I Hang My Hat* found some parts of the book interesting, he/she could not relate the book to any particular issues that he/she was facing. This respondent also thought that the book taught him/her that one should not expect life to be how one planned it. Nonetheless, the respondent viewed the protagonist's life as different from his/her own life and could not relate to the book and did not find the book helpful in overcoming any issues he/she was facing.

Two other respondents who read the same book opined that there was minimal help in whatever issues they were facing from their reading. The other respondents, however, thought otherwise. They could relate to the characters in the book and could find some help in relation to issues they were facing. For example, one respondent wrote that he/she had the tendency to recall unpleasant things in life. Consequently, he/she had, at times, doubted the decisions that he/she made in life. By reading the book, this respondent realized that "nothing is impossible" in life and if one were to be determined, one could make a difference in life. This respondent wrote:

" […] I learnt that I shouldn't be the one judging my decisions. Instead, I ought to try it out and   see the end result. So in a way, this book has 'opened my eye' (sic) wider."

Another respondent, who thought the book was a bit boring, found the story helpful in some ways: "It helps me change point of view and improve my self (sic) not to making (sic) same mistakes fro (sic) the future." This respondent was facing some relationship problem, similar to what the protagonist was facing. The book helped him/her not to think "in one direction only and need (sic) to think from others (sic) point of view."

Another respondent thought the book did not help in coping with the issues

he/she was facing but felt that the book did provide some insights as to how one should view life and that success in life comes through hard work.

Four respondents read *Huckleberry Finn*. Although all four mentioned that there were some parts of the book that were interesting, only two thought the book was helpful in overcoming certain issues that they were facing. One respondent, for example, thought that the part in the book about the protagonist's escape from his abusive father and how he also escaped from trouble was relevant to his/her life. This same respondent wrote that reading the book has helped him/her to understand that problems happen to everyone in the world. Running away from such problems does not help the individual to overcome those problems. This respondent also thought that reading the book has helped him/her to understand that one should not create problems to overcome other problems.

As for the other respondent who found the book helpful, he/she wrote that one issue that he/she was going through was a relationship with a friend that soured (they have not talked to each other since having a conflict). Reading the novel helped him/her to think of, in the respondent's words, 'ways to solve (the) conflict'.

The data gathered from the second questionnaire shows that there is a mixed response towards the use of novels to help readers deal with the problems they are facing. Some respondents believe that there are benefits to the reading, while other respondents do not think that it is of any help. Many respondents who agreed to go through this bibliotherapy session later rescinded and did not read the prescribed novels. This provided the researchers with some recommendations that future researchers can consider to prevent this from happening. In the next section, we will discuss these problems in detail and suggest how one can overcome such problems in future research.

Problems faced during the research

This research was not without its problems. There was a low number of respondents who agreed to take part in the bibliotherapy sessions. There was also a lower number than expected of respondents who completed the sessions, the majority failing to even read the books. Several reasons contributed to these problems:

(i) All the respondents were students of a university. They had their usual assignments, deadlines, part-time work, etc. and all these activities occupied most of their time, resulting in many of them not being able to commit themselves to reading the novels assigned to them.

(ii) This led to the next problem, namely that reading fiction is not a primary pastime of the students. As a result, a number of the respondents did not read the books assigned to them.

(iii) The different schedules of the forty-odd students from four different faculties made it difficult for the researchers to interview them either in groups or individually.

(iv) The books given to the respondents were written in English. It may be possible that some of these respondents (whose native language is not English) do not usually read fiction in English. Consequently, asking these respondents to read an English text may not be motivating.

Recommendations for future research

In light of the problems faced by the researchers as listed above, future researchers in bibliotherapy should consider having a small number of respondents. In this research, the researchers were over-ambitious in aiming for forty respondents, not knowing that many of these respondents would fail to read the books assigned to them due to meeting deadlines to complete their assignments in university. Moreover, working with a smaller number of respondents will allow researchers to have a closer rapport with the respondents, and consequently allow for a more committed cooperation by the respondents in going through the bibliotherapy process.

Future researchers could also consider allowing the respondents to choose the books for themselves. Instead of limiting the books to literary texts, researchers could also consider self-help books. In addition, researchers should also consider using books that are 'linguistically familiar' to the respondents, that is, the texts that they are asked to read could be written in a language that is familiar and comfortable to them. Thus, they could be allowed to read texts that are written in a language other than English.

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy does seem to produce therapeutic effects on some individuals. However, as this research seems to show, there are various factors that researchers need to consider so as to ensure that bibliotherapy is executed well. Nonetheless, this research treads on a research area that is still in its infancy as far as Malaysia is concerned. There need to be more quantitative studies done to discover how bibliotherapy can be of benefit to the public at large and how it can be executed in schools, institutions and counseling organizations so as to help individuals of various ages to find solutions to the problems that they may be facing.

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APPENDIX I

Name: _____
Programme: _____   Faculty: _____
Gender: _____
Age: _____

What are the concerns/issues that you may be facing in your personal life presently?
You may tick more than one box.

Relationship with friends   [   ]
Relationship with parents   [   ]
Relationship with the opposite sex   [   ]
Religious commitment   [   ]
Moral issues   [   ]
Political issues   [   ]
Sexuality/ Sexual Orientation   [   ]
The future (how things will turn out for me)   [   ]
Career (job opportunities, career decisions, etc)   [   ]
Marriage/Singlehood   [   ]
Social responsibility   [   ]
Personal role in society (how I can contribute to society,
     what role I can play most effectively in my society, etc)   [   ]
Studies   [   ]
Others: _____

* Would you like to take part in a reading program during
     the next four months?   Yes   [   ]   No   [   ]

APPENDIX II

(i)   Which parts of the book do you find most interesting?

(ii) Why?

(iii) Which parts of the books do you find most relevant to the issues that you are facing?

(iv) Why?

(v) Has this book helped you to see your problems from a fresh / new perspective?

(iv) Has this book helped you to cope with the issues / problems that you are facing?