

Shattering stereotypes through story: The Primary school library cultivating healthy identity

By Michele Rutter

Snapshot

The 2022 winner of the SLAV Research Fellowship, Michele Rutter, describe her action research project - Shattering Stereotypes Through Story: The Primary School Library Cultivating Healthy Identity. The project explored the potential of primary school library teaching programs in cultivating healthy identities and dismantling stereotypes through bibliotherapy as an intentional teaching practice. The project implemented an 8-week teaching unit focused on the utility of bibliotherapy and diverse literature in primary school libraries to foster socio-emotional skills, empathy, and an understanding of stereotypes and identities.

Introduction

Teacher librarians believe in the power of the book and advocate for the transformative power of children's literature, recognising its ability to shape perceptions and foster empathy while emphasising the academic, social, and emotional benefits of book access. Recent literature underscores the need to investigate school library programs' impact on student wellbeing and the efficacy of bibliotherapeutic practices (Merga, 2020). Within the framework of Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of books as 'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Doors' (Bishop, 1990), which emphasises the importance of students finding themselves represented in literature while exploring diverse perspectives, the project aimed to challenge stereotypes and facilitate positive identity development. By drawing from Dr Margaret Merga's research on school libraries' influence and Bishop's metaphor, the project sought to implement targeted bibliotherapeutic pedagogy to challenge gendered stereotypes and foster prosocial characteristics among young learners.

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Purpose

While the school library is recognised for its role in fostering wellbeing, the evidence of how this influence might be demonstrated through targeted pedagogy is anecdotal. Merga (2020) considers reading for pleasure and bibliotherapeutic practices, the active and intentional use of texts to promote positive outcomes, and their positive influences on students' capacity to deal with wellbeing and mental health issues. The project sought to extend Merga's hypothesis to the field of gendered stereotypes and the encouragement of related prosocial behaviour and characteristics. The aim was to inform the development of library programs that equip younger

students with the socioemotional skills required to navigate their world while also supporting whole school curriculum and wellbeing priorities.

The following questions guided the project:

1. Can targeted teaching using reading for pleasure and bibliotherapeutic practices challenge gendered stereotypes and promote prosocial characteristics among young children?
2. Can reading experiences positively impact the way young students understand, view, and interact with the world around them?
3. Can the stories young students read influence perceptions of gendered stereotypes and self-identity?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bibliotherapy

The action research project is grounded in literature exploring bibliotherapy in educational contexts. Dr. Margaret Merga's (2020) study on the influence of school libraries on literacy and wellbeing illuminates bibliotherapy's potential as a pedagogical tool. Heath, Smith, and Young (2017) advocate for bibliotherapy to address social and emotional needs, suggesting its utility in mental health prevention and intervention. Bibliotherapy, derived from the Greek term for 'treatment,' involves using literature to tackle personal issues (Gregory & Vessey, 2004). This project employs bibliotherapy to foster empathy and insight among students, allowing them to

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connect emotionally with characters and narratives. As Johnson et al. (2000) outlined, developmental bibliotherapy tailors literature to children's emotional and social needs, promoting positive self-identity and challenging stereotypes.

Developmental bibliotherapy targets common adjustment issues such as friendship and bullying, utilising children's literature as a tool for social-emotional learning (Heath et al., 2017). Teachers proficient in story engagement are well-equipped to integrate developmental bibliotherapy into their instructional practices. With increasing recognition of mental health's importance in educational settings (George, 2023), bibliotherapy emerges as a vital strategy. With their extensive knowledge of books, teacher librarians are ideally positioned to implement bibliotherapy programs.

Windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor, 'Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors,' underscores books' roles in shaping readers' experiences (Bishop, 1990). Books are mirrors when readers

encounter characters and cultures reflecting their own, fostering self-affirmation. Conversely, books act as windows, offering insights into diverse worlds and promoting empathy and understanding (Bishop, 1990). Sliding glass doors, the most immersive aspect of Bishop's metaphor, invite readers to step into narratives, fostering deep connections with characters and their experiences. This engagement cultivates empathy and transforms readers' perspectives, highlighting the transformative power of literature.

METHODS

Context

This action research project was implemented over a nine-week term, during Term 2 of 2023, in the context of a PP-12 Boys College Primary Campus. The Junior School accommodates a student body from Pre-Primary to Year 5, totalling 220 students across nine classes comprising 25 students per class. Students attend the library for a weekly 45-minute library lesson with the teacher-librarian. Each session incorporates explicit teaching, reading aloud, as well time for borrowing books.

Considerations

The project aimed to align with school library goals and broader curriculum priorities. It encouraged student engagement with diverse literature through reading, viewing, and listening, fostering a love for reading and deeper literary understanding. Curriculum connections were made to ACARA guidelines, including General Capabilities and Learning Areas like English and Health and PE, with a focus on respectful relationships. Emotional intelligence resources from Aristotle-EI were also integrated. The project emphasised promoting current, quality children's literature to support student wellbeing, tapping into the untapped resources of the primary school library's wellbeing collection. Through targeted book selection and promotion, it aimed to facilitate discussions and reflections promoting emotional literacy and empathy among students, enhancing student wellbeing and fostering a positive learning environment.

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Planning

The 8-week teaching unit integrated bibliotherapy approaches tailored for various age groups within the primary school. Detailed lesson plans were crafted based on Grijalva's (n.d.) developmental bibliotherapy phases and teaching sequence model. Attention focused on observing and documenting student perceptions, which align with the four critical phases: Identification, Projection, Catharsis, and Insight. Each lesson followed a structured sequence, including learning outcomes, pre-reading activities, reading sessions, discussions, and follow-

up activities.

Students were prompted to explore how their reading experiences could shape their understanding and interactions with the world and whether the stories could influence perceptions of gender stereotypes and self-identity. The unit aimed to:

- Incorporate diverse books featuring characters of various genders, races, abilities, and backgrounds to challenge assumptions and broaden perspectives.
- Facilitate open discussions in a safe environment to encourage exploration and reflection on beliefs and values.
- Utilise developmental bibliotherapy as a teaching approach, incorporating the four critical phases and lesson sequence.
- Reference Bishop's metaphor of books as Doors, Windows, and Sliding Doors.

Lessons focused on exploring gender stereotypes, celebrating family diversity, promoting healthy relationships, fostering positive self-image, developing emotional intelligence, and cultivating empathy and kindness. Each lesson included slideshow presentations, read-aloud sessions, and discussions, complemented by reflective activities tailored to students' developmental levels.

The project in action: Lesson delivery

A multimedia approach was adopted in delivering lessons, using physical texts and lesson slideshows to engage students. Slideshows integrated key concepts such as book covers, thought-provoking questions, and reflection prompts. Each lesson commenced with a read-aloud session from pre-selected picture books or junior and middle-grade fiction texts. Pre-selected 'excerpts' for close reading activities were used to ensure novels were accessed. To enhance accessibility and variety, Story Box Library resources were incorporated, complemented by strategically arranged book displays in the teaching area.

Following each session, reflection played a pivotal role in consolidating learning experiences. For students in Years 3-5, journaling provided a structured means of introspection, while whole-class discussions and brainstorms fostered collaborative reflection among younger students (P-2). Additionally, creative expression was encouraged through drawing responses and integrating digital tools. Discussions were not confined to formal lesson times but extended into browsing and lunchtimes, fostering a continuous dialogue around the themes and concepts explored. This comprehensive approach to lesson delivery aimed to immerse students in a rich literary environment while promoting

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critical thinking and meaningful engagement with texts.

Text selection was a critical aspect of the project. It focused on stories with a diverse range of characters of different genders, races, abilities, and backgrounds, aiming to challenge students' assumptions and broaden their horizons. Literature with embedded concepts, where the narrative and characters took centre stage, rather than instructional-style texts, was favoured for teaching sessions.

A varied approach was employed to source high-quality texts. Attention was given to the School Library Catalogue, where a focus on subject headings facilitated the development of a collection aligned with wellbeing topics. Lists and collections were curated to ensure these texts could be found quickly and easily. Resources such as commercial standing orders were helpful in providing teacher notes relating to thematic considerations. Digital platforms, including Story Box Library and the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature database, provided an expansive array of search options, enabling exploration by collection, theme, or topic, with the ability to refine searches based on age group through filters. Furthermore, the platforms offered many activities and teaching ideas to complement selected texts.

Reviews, blogs, and professional networks were also leveraged to glean insights into recommended texts and emerging trends in children's literature. Digital curation tools were employed to compile resources discovered through various channels, ensuring a diverse and comprehensive selection of high-quality texts tailored to the project's objective.

Data collection

Employing a mixed-method approach, the research project integrated quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Quantitative data was gathered through pre- and post-unit surveys to assess student perceptions and understanding changes. Qualitative data was obtained through content and theme analysis, utilising reflection journals and observation notes. A research reflection journal was kept throughout the action research project. Reflection data varied for Year 3-5 and P-2 students. Older students used written journals, while younger students engaged in whole-class mind-mapping, brainstorming, drawing responses, and digital tools. In the final session, all students completed a post-unit questionnaire, providing data on any shifts in perceptions.

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DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data

The pre- and post-surveys comprised six questions developed with lesson topics and multiple choice answer options of yes, no, and not sure. Pre and Post-questions varied to reflect thoughts on changes in understanding pre and post-unit. The questions posed were:

I am better at understanding other people's feelings, even if they are different from me.

Pre unit

1. I can understand how other people feel, even if they are different from me.
2. I think that the world expects boys and girls to act in certain ways.
3. I feel good about myself most of the time.
4. I know how to handle different emotions.
5. I think all families look like mine.
6. I know how to be a good friend.

Post Unit

1. I am better at understanding other people's feelings, even if they are different from me.
2. I am more aware that the world expects boys and girls to act in certain ways.
3. I am better at knowing how to feel good about myself.
4. I am better at understanding how to handle different emotions.
5. I know of more types of families than I did before.
6. I know more about how to be a good friend.

The pre-survey responses exhibited diverse understandings and perceptions across different topics. Primarily, responses tended to fall into the 'no' and 'not sure' categories, except for the inquiry about family types, which indicated a prior acknowledgement of familial diversity. Notably, concepts concerning diversity, gender stereotypes, and emotional regulation elicited more 'no' and 'unsure' responses. Conversely, many students expressed confidence in being good friends and harboured positive self-perceptions.

The post-survey data revealed a notable shift in attitudes, with students showing a conscious change. However, it is essential to note that the post-survey questions were structured explicitly to probe for such changes. Across all questions in the dataset, a marked increase in affirmative responses was observed,

I am more aware that the world expects boys and girls to act in certain ways.

indicating a tangible change in attitudes and comprehension. Admittedly, some may argue that the phrasing of the questions leaned towards leading responses. Nonetheless, considering the target audience of younger students, the underlying aim was to foster deeper understanding throughout the unit.

**I know more
about how to be a
good friend.**

Qualitative data

The theme analysis examined student perceptions concerning the fundamental phases of the developmental bibliotherapy process: Identification, Projection, Catharsis, and Insight. A set of codes was developed reflecting the bibliotherapy phases, and these were applied to student responses across the various lesson topics. The focus was on three types of responses within observation notes and reflective journals:

1. Identification/Projection: responses where students recognise the thoughts and behaviours of characters related to the topic
2. Catharsis: responses demonstrate emotional involvement in the story, and links were drawn to their own experiences
3. Insight: responses demonstrate how these problems might be addressed

Thematic analysis revealed patterns in the reflections and observations following each lesson. Responses and discussions consistently displayed evidence of the Identification and Projection stages. Nearly all reflections demonstrated these phases, suggesting a strong focus on connecting the texts to personal experiences. Interestingly, comparisons to personal experiences were less frequent across the data. However, a high number of comments reflected Insight in their understanding. This suggests that the reflection prompts steered participants toward analysis and interpretation rather than personal connection. Furthermore, thematic analysis did not yield clear evidence of catharsis, a stage often associated with emotional release. Catharsis might be an internal process that is not readily articulated in the reflections of younger students. Alternatively, the prompts may not have facilitated the exploration of more profound emotional responses.

CONCLUSIONS

Challenging gender stereotypes and promoting prosocial characteristics

There is evidence to suggest a positive impact on these areas. The pre-survey highlighted a need for more understanding regarding diversity and stereotypes. However, the post-survey indicated a shift in attitudes, with students demonstrating a more conscious understanding. The qualitative data further supports this. Students consistently connected with characters (Identification/Projection), suggesting they saw themselves reflected in the stories. While

personal comparisons were less frequent, the high number of 'Insight' responses reveals deeper analysis and understanding. This analysis likely included aspects of behaviour and social interactions, challenging stereotypes and promoting positive social skills.

Reading experiences and understanding the world

The research suggests a positive impact. The pre-survey highlighted various understandings across various topics, with a higher proportion of 'no' and 'unsure' responses concerning diversity and emotional regulation. Although potentially influenced by leading questions, the post-survey data displayed a marked increase in affirmative responses. This suggests that students gained a broader understanding of the world through the stories and discussions. The qualitative data reinforces this. Consistent 'Identification/Projection' demonstrates students connecting with characters and situations in the stories. Furthermore, many 'Insight' responses suggest they analysed the characters' experiences and potentially considered how those experiences relate to their world.

Stories influencing perceptions of gender and self-identity

While the data does not provide a definitive answer, it suggests potential for positive influence. The pre-survey indicates a need for more understanding of stereotypes. The post-survey suggests a shift towards a more conscious understanding. The focus on 'Identification/Projection' in the qualitative data suggests students were relating to characters, which could include characters challenging gender stereotypes. The 'Insight' responses, while not explicitly mentioning gender, do indicate deeper analysis that could encompass recognising and questioning stereotypes.

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Overall, the research provides encouraging evidence that targeted teaching using reading for pleasure and bibliotherapy practices can positively impact young children's understanding of the world around them, potentially challenging gender stereotypes and promoting prosocial characteristics. However, further research with more robust methodologies is needed to solidify these conclusions.

Challenges

The project encountered several challenging elements that required navigation throughout its implementation. Foremost among these challenges was the time constraint, especially in facilitating follow-up activities effectively. With limited time available, ensuring adequate attention to follow-up tasks proved demanding. The project also faced difficulties providing individual attention within a whole class setting, particularly among younger year levels. Not all opinions and voices were heard during whole class reflections. Additionally, competing priorities posed a significant challenge, making detailed lesson planning taxing. Juggling various responsibilities and demands necessitated careful

prioritisation and resource allocation. Moreover, finding 'just right' excerpts in middle-grade fiction texts proved a considerable challenge, requiring extensive exploration and evaluation to identify suitable passages aligned with the project's objectives.

Opportunities

The project yielded numerous positive outcomes, underscoring its efficacy in leveraging bibliotherapy as a guided instructional and therapeutic tool that effectively promotes socio-emotional development and challenges stereotypes. Discussions throughout the project were characterised by richness and thoughtfulness, facilitating a deeper exploration of concepts and themes. Creating a non-threatening environment enabled students to use stories and characters as conduits for personal reflection and exploration of complex issues. Moreover, the project highlighted the power of the read-aloud method across different year levels, emphasising its capacity to captivate and inspire learners.

The project's success lies in students' meaningful engagement with literature and their ability to empathise with characters' experiences.

Implementing the Mirror, Windows, and Doors language proved instrumental in engaging students and establishing meaningful connections with the texts. Additionally, the project led to notable improvements in collection development outcomes, with a reduced reliance on older and less engaging texts. It enhanced the ability of the Teacher Librarian to recommend books to staff, thereby strengthening the library's role in supporting teaching and learning initiatives. Ultimately, the project provided compelling evidence to the administration regarding the library's relevance in contributing to whole school curriculum priorities, affirming its pivotal role in shaping students' educational experiences.

Conclusion

Implementing the bibliotherapy-based teaching unit in a primary school library setting demonstrates the transformative power of literature in nurturing empathy, challenging stereotypes, and cultivating healthy identities among young learners. Despite challenges, the project underscores the importance of intentional text selection, reflective practices, and collaborative efforts in promoting socio-emotional development and fostering inclusive school communities. The project's success lies in students' meaningful engagement with literature and their ability to empathise with characters' experiences. As a proactive approach to promoting healthy identity development, bibliotherapy offers valuable insights and opportunities for personal growth. Primary school libraries can play a pivotal role in shaping students' perceptions and identities by utilising diverse literature and fostering reflective discussions. Through continued research and practice, primary school libraries can serve as dynamic spaces to promote positive identity

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development and foster a deeper appreciation for diversity and empathy among students

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