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Storytime is a Sunrise: Employing Children’s Literature to Mediate Socio-Emotional Challenges in the Life of a Young Child

Carolina Soto Bonds

Storytime is a sunrise. Every storytime is sketched in hope—the hope that messages come across, meaning is made, synapses fire, and smiles ignite. Sometimes the colors of storytime are a smooth ephemeral palette of blending colors, a sunrise of consolatory, reassuring intent. Sometimes, reading to young children is a wild exploration painted in bursting, vivid colors, a celebration of jubilation, childhood, and freedom.

I relish the times of day when we gather on the rug, a book in my hands, and words stream from the page, out of my voice, into little hearts. Often, kids inch closer, a few cuddle into the nook of my side, and the echoes of ancient, primal storytelling and listening drown out the social constructs that keep us partitioned. The words are often a sinuous tendril of black letters, phonemes, an invisible rope used to climb out of or swing into anything. It is always an opportunity to introduce content, to make ideas more accessible, and to shape narratives.

Suvilehto (2019) considers teachers’ use of literature to bring up social and emotional issues to be a kind of therapeutic healing, or bibliotherapy:

Many teachers in day care and at school practice bibliotherapy in some manner, often without giving their practice a formal name. However, effective follow-up activities, thoughtful questions, and focused discussions require that teachers are mindful about their use of books to address individual and group issues. (p. 1)

While teachers do not necessarily practice the structured, clinical approach of bibliotherapy, the strategy of employing literature to access difficult conversations with children is a powerful and effective tool. Because how teachers work with literature does not have a specific name and there are no formal, studied examples of our practice, it is useful to refer to bibliotherapy as an influential framework to address challenging situations in students’ lives. Suvilehto (2019) also notes that, “[a] focus on bibliotherapy as ‘healing words’ is an acknowledgement of children as capable, complete, equal citizens and also productive members of society” (p. 2).

Using books to generate difficult conversations with children is also an exercise in ethics. We are bound to question whether what we do might veer off into clinical work. As teachers, we are often unlicensed, unprepared pediatric and family therapists; we are medical unprofessionals, actors, writers, caretakers, content creators, servers—and it’s hard.

However, it is important to note the distinctions. Bibliotherapy is a structured, careful, and highly informed multi-step process that takes place after significant bureaucratic intervention. On the other hand, using books to discuss tough topics with children is usually a teacher’s more informal attempt to deal with a student’s socio-emotional suffering. This supportive practice aims to offer students insight into what may be happening in their lives or in the social environment around them, and there is no expected outcome,

only hope. As a facilitator of their experience with literature, I hope to offer students some moments of clarity.

Knowing Will

When I met Will (a pseudonym), his smile seemed bigger than his little body. His sunny cap of hair always gleamed like his eyes. Will was a charmer. He was vibrant, effervescent, animated. He was one of the most brilliant children I had ever worked with. At just over 3, he had an extensive vocabulary, displayed exceptional pre-computational math skills, and zoomed past most of our class in almost every academic domain. His behavior, on the other hand—his attention span and social-emotional development—was riddled with nooks and crannies. Nonetheless, when he came to school every day, his smart uniform was always crisp and clean. It was clear he was well loved.

I knew Will lived most of the time with his mother and grandmother and saw his father rarely. Will's mother was a slight, lovely woman. Her honeyed voice was almost a whisper. Once, during a routine phone call, she revealed that there were times, after sending him off on a yellow school bus, that she lay in bed in a dark room for the rest of the day.

This admission began filling in the blank canvas I had of Will's home life. And then, over several weeks, Will's behavior, which could be characterized as playful, impish at times, morphed into an unmanageable, unyielding barricade of uncompromising "No's!" He refused to have his pull-ups changed and he refused to put on his coat to go home. He screeched in anger at having to sit at a table to eat. Everything was a "No!" He shook his head from side to side rapidly, putting his hand up in a "Stop!" when anything was requested of him. When we asked what he wanted to do, offering several choices, the answer was always "No!"

My first instinct was to consider what his mother had mentioned and explore the possibility that Will was dealing with some change in his life. I couldn't imagine anything else but a change in circumstances that would warrant such a change in him.

On a cold December day, his mother came to see me, to make up a parent-teacher conference she had missed. I assured her that we could talk over the phone, but she insisted on coming in. When we met, she always showed a big toothy smile, but there was a sadness etched into her face and embedded in her eyes. As we sat and talked, no matter how much I praised Will's accomplishments, she cried. She cried about her frustrations with his behavior, and told me about her struggles with him. She cried about her frustrations with Will's father and his absence. She said she needed support and asked for counseling. Her tears were heartbreaking and her desperation spoke of a need I was not sure I could handle.

Trying to find the balance between staying appropriately bright and showing concern wasn't easy. Choking down my unsolicited opinions, I said as confidently as I could, "Everything's going to be okay." Neither of us really knew if things would work out, but there was melancholy hope. I sent Will home several days later with a note in his bookbag, listing resources our school offered.

Will, and many other kids, are born into lives where adult circumstances unrelentingly smack them in the face. The image of chubby cheeks stained with reality is deplorable, jarring, and uncomfortable, but it is real. For many little ones, childhood isn't a delicate prism of light and opalescence. Childhood is often gritty and unmerciful. We lie to ourselves when we ignore this; veiling the ugly parts in gossamer. We do children an injustice and we disrespect their truth.

Weeks later, when Will's behavior was becoming increasingly challenging, his mother called. She said she and her mother were sick, so Will had been staying with family members and close friends. His behavior began to make sense now. Will was uprooted, displaced. Physically, he was well, but he cried and screamed every day when it was time to leave school. He would be red with anger and his voice hoarse. Often he had to be carried out of the building onto the bus by me or other teachers. He refused every material, activity, or food that was offered throughout the day. His days consisted of running around the classroom, playing with toys he chose for a few minutes at a time before moving onto the next one, or crouching by our front door with his hands tucked into his body, his eyes huge and round as he shook his head, "No."

Gentleness always broke him. His loud defiant "No!" would spiral down from harsh barks and crumble into unintelligible screeches, then whispers, then whimpers. I often held him until his fury was no longer a threat to himself or others. He'd melt a little into my arms, and I could feel tears burn the back of my eyes—feeling the contradiction between being such a flawed, sensitive human when I should be a professional, ideal teacher. Sometimes, my neck was a cradle to the back of his head for a few minutes—other times, he would race off as if nothing had happened, and push me away as if growing impatient with kindness. At almost 4 years old, like an old soul, he held on to the armament of distance.

I thought about him a lot, and his behavior made perfect sense. His oppositions and objections were really the only grip he had on control in a world where he could control nothing else. I tried to disentangle the puzzle of what he must be feeling—anger, sadness, confusion, exhaustion, fear. I know he achingly missed his mother, his grandmother, and his stability. Many of us might underestimate that. Maslow (1943) says,

Confronting the average child with new, unfamiliar, strange, unmanageable stimuli or situations will too frequently elicit the danger or terror reaction, as for example, getting lost or even being separated from the parents for a short time, being confronted with new faces, new situations or new tasks, the sight of strange, unfamiliar or uncontrollable objects, illness or death. (p. 378)

In a life where adults pay hard-earned money for rushes of excitement, coveting spontaneity or newness, to a young child, routine, sameness, and stability are everything. Not only do they mean safety, they offer a solid, secure base (Bowlby, 1905) for children to gain the courage it takes to step out and explore the world. I thought about Erikson's psychosocial stages of development and the importance of trust, "and the interruption of emotional development as it relates to a stable home environment and attachment to caregivers" (Erikson, 1950, p.247). I knew it would be difficult to help organize the pieces of Will's life to where they made sense to him again—but if his time in our classroom was the only constant, then I would try. Another resource for me, in thinking about how to support Will, was Maslow's (1943) theory on human motivation. He says,

Another indication of the child's need for safety is his preference for some kind of undisrupted routine or rhythm. He seems to want a predictable, orderly world. For instance, injustice, unfairness, or inconsistency... seems to make a child feel anxious and unsafe. This attitude may be not so much because of the injustice per se or any particular pains involved, but rather because this treatment threatens to make the world look unreliable, or unsafe, or unpredictable. Young children seem to thrive better under a system which has at least a skeletal outline of rigidity, in which there is a schedule of a kind, some sort of routine, something that can be counted upon, not only for the present but also far into the future. (p. 377)

Reading for Will

Teaching had brought me to similar moments again and again. I had used storytimes to discuss, soothe, and teach in the past. While students' cultures, funds of knowledge, strengths, needs, and developmental stages generally inform curriculum and provide me with a point of reference to construct a plan, in my experience, impromptu explorations—often lessons guided by student's lives and their present—render the deepest connections and most meaningful success. I refrain from using bibliotherapy terminology to describe the strategies I used in this situation because I am not a clinician. But I strongly believe in the power of literature to nourish children in a way my words alone cannot.

There is a great deal of support for this perspective. "Pardeck saw the therapeutic intervention for children using books both as a clinical tool and a practical tool for personal growth, tackling problems such as anger, fear... loss and transition," (Baraitser, 2014, p. 86). Heath and colleagues (2005) note, "it is very appropriate for teachers to use stories to assist students in learning life skills" (p. 5). And Shrodes (1955) reminds us:

Materials need to be carefully selected to meet students' individual needs so that students can identify with the characters and learn that they are not alone in dealing with a particular problem. (p., 24, as cited in Myracle, 1995, n.p.)

I began our foray into some literary healing by reading *The Colour Monster* by Anna Llenas (2015). This story attributes emotions to colors—yellow is happiness, blue is sad, red is fiery anger, black is afraid, and green is calm. Color Monster's friend helps him make sense of his mixed-up feelings, encouraging emotional literacy. Through this book, we explored feelings in a lighthearted way that had Will giggling at the beautiful, relatable illustrations—they were familiar-looking and new at the same time. He seemed excited every time I turned the pages, and for five minutes, he was attentive. During choice time, I left *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr (2005) and *The Colour Monster* sprawled on a table with paper and crayons next to them. *The Feelings Book* describes how a wide range of feelings, slight or complex, can come and go, supporting an acknowledgement and acceptance of them. For days, Will zoomed around the room as usual, stopping sometimes before the table for a few seconds to watch as other students looked through the books and drew. He always darted off again, but no matter where he was in the room, his eyes would wander back to the colorful books for a few treasured seconds.

During circle time one morning, in a frenzied blur, Will grabbed *The Colour Monster* from the bookshelf, holding it up and away from himself like a prize. In the middle of our "Good Morning" song, he threw open the book and looked intensely at the pages, his brows furrowed. The other kids looked at him and then at me, then back at him, some losing their clapping rhythm, their incredulity palpable. I tried not to look at him and instead continued to sing for the other students, but my voice wavered.

The next day during storytime, Will's interest secured, I brought out *My Happy Sad Mummy* by Michelle Vasiliu (2015). Told through a child's lens, this story features a mom who is very happy some days and very sad other days. Dad, alongside grandparents, lift up the child while mom takes care of her health. When mom returns, her love is always the same. To introduce this deliberate a text so soon might have seemed a little hasty even to me, but I took the win from the day before and ran with it. While I battled nervousness and apprehension in putting forth content that might seem complex, grim, and could very well miss the mark, taking a risk was simply part of trying to help. My hope here was that, "because readers can become emotionally involved in a character's struggle, they [would] gain understanding about their own situation through carefully selected literature," (McEncroe, 2007, p. 4).

The moment I read the title, Will mouthed the words, and for the first time in a long while, he was riveted. His eyes were big and wide on his face, his lids barely blinking as I turned the pages. I'd glance at him as I read the text, often seeing his eyes move searchingly, ravenously along the pages. On some pictures, his eyes didn't move at all. As I closed the book, the illustrations depicted in soft washes of color were put away and there was no discussion—the children seemed to want to get away from everything the book brought forward as soon as possible, which was fine. Even as I questioned my choice of such a gut-wrenching topic, I remembered a challenge could never be easy. And I reminded myself that this was for Will.

I remember that night vividly because I could not sleep. Will was a constant character in my restless dreams. It wasn't the first time a student's troubles had kept me up. I was wracked with anxiety. Although it seemed as if he were becoming more open to unraveling the skein of his life, I couldn't shake the feeling that as I inched closer to an attempt to help him, I was growing closer to touching the issue of mental health, which was a sore one for me.

As someone who experiences anxiety myself, taking care of others is complex. Dealing with anyone else's mental health struggles when you do not want to confront your own is the real band-aid. Throughout my day, the words, "it's okay, you're okay—everything is okay," leave my lips a hundred times. They are the proverbial band-aid. They resolve anything from a little boo-boo to crying over a pilfered toy. Slapping on a superficial bandage becomes survival. Digging through the wounds that comprise mental health baggage to find healing would otherwise be too deep, too much of a gory, messy thing to sprawl out on the clean classroom floor. As an educator or a parent, sometimes looking outward—outside of yourself, caring for others and comforting children—evolves into survival. And that is because sometimes, introspection seems to be a dangerous thing.

For me, old experiences bridged to this one. Some years ago I used *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz (2002) to illustrate to a little girl what love for her brown skin might look like after she refused to play with dolls her own color. This influential moment led me down a cultural, ethnic, social justice renaissance and a reconvergence with who I am as a woman of color. Most recently, I wielded *Hair Love* by Matthew A. Cherry (2019) to slay the fears a student had about her vivacious curls. I have always loved books where students see themselves represented. They hold up a gilded mirror by which children may feel visible, important, and a part of the world—intertwined and invested, not standing on the sidelines. It helps them develop a sense of ownership and leadership, empowering them to shepherd their lives.

And while I have used literature for children to discuss potentially difficult or complex topics like skin color, hair texture, ethnicity, culture, self-love, racism, homelessness, abuse—this was different. In the past, there had been a sense of safe dissociation because many of the issues didn't pertain to my personal life. And when the issues of culture, hair, and skin color came up and they spoke to my own experience, well, I'd been armored, I was equipped. I had dealt with these issues inside and out my whole life and I had strong convictions and quick responses.

But what happens when a student's life is plagued by something that you as a teacher haven't resolved in yourself? For all intents and purposes, mental health obstacles comprise a giant thing that is invisible. Sure, sometimes we see the physical ravages of its effects—but more often than not, it is a silent, inconspicuous weight many of us carry. How could I teach about this when there was so much more for me to learn? I relied a lot on reflection on how to go about it. While reflection is usually a vital methodology for educators, in this instance, I was anxious about my anxiety and my facade of words: "You're ok—everything is ok."

Will's reality threatened my own and I was afraid to be real. I figured the only way to progress was to proceed. I could not just forget about introducing all these books because they made *me* uncomfortable. They were needed.

In the next days, we continued to dissect *My Happy Sad Mummy*, and I would leave it out on the table with paper, much like the other books—and one or two students would come by, draw a happy or sad face, and talk about how they were feeling themselves. Not Will. I know we would all like to think that as in a fairy tale, Will came up to the book one day, sat down, and drew beautiful pictures of his mother, identifying with the literature and spilling out his feelings. But he didn't—and he never did.

It would have been easy to consider this a failure. But it wasn't, it never is. A week later, I read and added to the table and to our library *Sad Book* by Michael Rosen (2005) and *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss (1998), two books also illustrating feelings through accessible depictions while expressing the emotional complexity of human experience. *My Happy Sad Mummy* stayed, for Will and anyone else who wanted it. Instead of pushing more and more books on the sadness theme, I switched it up and brought in books that were definitely not sad. I used cheerful, peaceful books, like *The Jar of Happiness* by Ailsa Burrows (2016), *The Popcorn Astronauts and Other Biteable Rhymes* by Deborah Ruddell (2015), *Knuffle Bunny* by Mo Willems (2004), and *Draw Me a Star* by Eric Carle (1998), to help the children unwind and spend some time escaping through a window to a world not their own.

Switching to pleasant books as a way to detract from the dark content of previous days, I thought about the versatility of literature. Not only could I use books to discuss difficult topics with my students, but I could use literature to lift moods and provide a haven. While escaping through the words in stories was wonderful, discussing them, spending time reading them together, and connecting in a shared, real experience generated a bonding that in itself was sound, valuable practice.

There is much discussion in the theoretical literature on bibliotherapy about whether its beneficial effects derive from the actual reading of the text itself or from the interaction, discussion, and sharing around the text that typically accompanies that reading. It seems likely the answer is both. (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2019)

About a month after we had moved on to other books, Will came up to me as I worked on a tall tower of green clay dough with other students. He stood next to me for a long time, observing us. Just the idea of him standing still for more than five minutes was a big deal. I wondered what it meant. He looked at my face intently and trying to avoid his stare, I smiled at the tower and my working hands. He put his hand gently on my arm, and when I looked at him, he smiled, with what could only be described as contentment, or relief. I glimpsed some of the blithe playfulness he had when I'd first met him. I was still very confused about him. I wasn't sure my questions would be answered. All I could hope for was his well-being, and there it was.

His behavior became significantly easier to redirect in the following months. He was making choices again, and he was no longer screaming when it was time to go home. Will was also more affectionate and sweeter with all of us in the teaching team than he had ever been. I like to think the books gave him some comfort—a sense of understanding, and that in this understanding, he could find a drop of peace. There is no way for me to know.

We have such little, finite time with our students and their families. And when it comes to helping them through heavy life circumstances, there is rarely a satisfying happy ending. Even so, the symbiotic relationship of teacher and student often leaves us with as much as we give.

I identified more with Will's mom than I cared to admit, except that my dark days or anxious moments were spent in the classroom focusing outside of me. And much like a lot of other social justice issues becoming increasingly mainstream in early childhood education, I am grateful that mental health, self-care, and being mindful of stress have become more conventional themes after their history of social stigma. My own experiences with anxiety have informed my capacity for emotional responsiveness and have honed my teaching style to one that is acutely aware and observant of children's emotional needs, and the impact their personal realities have on their academic lives.

Utilizing books to breach challenging topics has helped me personally as a teacher—I can discuss things that mean a great deal to me while disaffiliating myself from the intimacy of the moment, until I am ready to connect. It helps that you can talk about anything with a book, and children love them. They are essential tools for teaching and learning that color the process of delivering content to young children. Appropriate, quality literature goes far beyond stimulating children's literacy learning. Books help to convey messages of every kind, illustrating ideas in concrete, visual ways to help children make sense of their lives, of others' lives, and of the world. They establish meaningful foundations for literacy, critical thinking, social interactions, and emotional literacy. Reading for Will reminded me to be vulnerable—and to own it.

From the perspective of many in American society, childhood is considered a time of carefree innocence, of sunshine and rainbows. While we all wish this were so, the reality is very different. In a field that centers around young children, discussing the ugly trenches of real life is often forbidden. When children themselves are living embattled experiences—hunger, police brutality, crime—how do we expect them to believe the lies about what their lives should look like? We've hidden the truths about the battlefield of life, while they are active soldiers in the war. As a teacher who believes there must be a balance of maintaining childhood's whimsical spirit while being honest about the realities of life, literature is a saving grace. The hope is that from the depths of ugly circumstances good things can grow.

Literature helped Will and me confront our realities, while painting them in soft strokes of watercolor come alive with tears. Will was a small, brave child facing whipping winds on a cliff, trusting he'd fly by the power of his own strength, alongside the loving arms both books and we provided.

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About the Author



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