

## *A reading program applied in a misbehavior case*

### 利用閱讀治療處理學生情緒行為問題

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#### **Abstract**

“Reading to learn” has been one of the four key learning strategies in the curriculum reforms implemented by the government (CDC, 2002). Local schools have strengthened reading across curriculum and the teaching of reading strategies. However, apart from integrating reading as a component of curriculum, most of the schools ignore the other functions of reading. Inspired by the theory of Bibliotherapy, a reading program is launched as a strategy to communicate with misbehaving students in a local secondary school. The objective of this study is to find out if Bibliotherapy has a positive effect on a misbehaving student, when implemented by a content subject teacher. Understanding the role of reading inside and outside the classroom, and mastering the strategies of teaching reading should be a professional competency of all local teachers. The function of reading outside the regular classroom will be explored in this paper. How a teacher brought his teaching professionalism into full play by applying reading instruction for correcting a student's misbehavior will be investigated as well. The results in the study clearly show that reading can improve a student's behavior because it can help the student to shift from cognitive knowledge to consciousness of awareness and reflective attitude by making analogy between the reading topic and his misbehavior. The observation in this study can provide significant reference for the future development of reading curriculum and teacher professionalism.

## **Background**

### **Limited Use of Reading as a therapy in Local Schools**

“Reading to learn” has been one of the four key learning strategies in the curriculum reform implemented by the government (CDC, 2000). Students’ reading habits and attitudes are an integral part of school evaluation (EMB, 2003). Local schools have strengthened reading across the curriculum and the teaching of reading strategies. Reading not only helps to improve the learning quality, but also serves other social functions. Western educators and medical doctors explored the functions of reading in many ways. As early as 1812, Dr. Benjamin Rush suggested using fiction reading to help with the treatment of psychological problems. It was not until 1900’s Samuel McChord Crothers in the *Atlantic Monthly* first used “Bibliotherapy” which is defined as the practice of prescribing books in the treatment of illness (Rubin, 1978). Caroline Shrodes (1949) explained that, “Reading, like all other human behavior, is a function of the total personality”. When we read fiction, poetry, or drama, we perceive selectively in accordance with our needs, goals, and values. Compared with the western countries, the application of reading theories in practice is still at the beginning stage. Understanding the role of reading inside and outside the classroom and mastering the strategies of teaching reading should be a professional competency of all local teachers. The function of reading outside the regular classroom will be explored in this paper. I try to investigate how a teacher brought his teaching professionalism into full play by applying reading instruction for correcting a student’s misbehavior.

### **Traditional strategies in tackling misbehaving students**

In local schools, cases of misbehaviors, no matter light or

serious, are usually transferred to a discipline or counseling committee, the members of which are supposed to possess professional knowledge to solve problems. However, discipline problems keep repeating and growing in many primary and secondary schools. Can the discipline or counseling teams really solve problems by imposing punishment or by making students talk out their feelings? The following questions have been asked: does it really work to put all the misbehavior cases on the shoulders of discipline and counseling committees? Even if some of the schools successfully solve a crisis, does it mean that students’ misconceptions and values have been changed and corrected after punishment has been imposed? Despite some improvements induced by measures such as reinforcing the parental role of each homeroom teacher, misbehavior problems are still the hard nut to crack for every school.

The traditional measures adopted by schools seem not so effective in solving the behavior problems. Worse still, some school discipline committee members do not correctly interpret and analyze the misbehaving cases. This failure could result in wrong prescriptions, which may further create serious problems in future. As Rudolph Dreikurs mentioned, students misbehave and seek “mistaken goals” because they do not have a sense of belonging or are being valued. With this strong belief, the study reported in this paper uses reading to help a student redirect his goals and change his misconceptions.

Hong Kong teachers lack “Bibliotherapy” training during either pre-service or in-service periods. It is quite unrealistic to ask them to take this kind of courses under the harsh working situation. In addition, the importance of Bibliotherapy has not been recognized, and thus is underdeveloped in the local teacher education institutes.

## **Objectives of this Study**

Inspired by the theory of Bibliotherapy, a reading program is launched as a strategy to communicate with misbehaving students in a local secondary school. The objective of this study is to find out if Bibliotherapy has a positive effect on a misbehaving student, when implemented by a content subject teacher.

## **Design of the Study**

Bibliotherapy deals with misbehaving students by enhancing their cognitive development and knowledge acquisition and then addresses the affective and psychological aspects by questioning and discussing the text. This is different from the traditional methods of problem solving, used by discipline and counseling teachers who focus on the psychological and emotional aspects. Besides, interacting with teachers using printed material as a medium helps to reduce the students' discontent with the way they are treated by the "justice system and punishment framework". To start with the program, teachers guide the students to read a piece of material, and direct them to think about the content first, then identify the concepts and implications using the questions given, and finally discuss thoroughly with them. Finally, there is the observation phase of a student's behavioral changes.

In this study, reading is the fundamental step in the whole process, it uses a child's natural desire and interest to communicate with those in their world through language and reading as a basis (Gullo, 1994; Norton, 1991). Good (1973) further defined "the use of books to influence total development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature which is used for personality assessment, adjustment, growth, clinical and mental hygiene purposes; a concept that ideas inherent in selected reading material can have a therapeutic effect

upon the mental or physical ills of the reader". Discussion is also an important element in the reading process. "... the process of growth, change, and healing that occur in clients are not so much in the reading of material by individuals as in the guided dialogue about the material" (Bladding & Gladding, 1991).

## **Participants**

There are some misconceptions about reading pedagogy in the educational field. Most teachers think that only language teachers are the ones who should and could adopt reading instruction inside and outside the classroom. Since the term "content reading" became prominent in the 1970's, western educators believe reading instruction should be given by content subject teachers to guide, model, make explicit and support the cognitive development of students. Conventional counseling or Bibliotherapy are always conducted by medical personnel or professional social workers. Hendricks & Mckean in 1995 pointed out "whose goal is to assist victims to return to their pre-crisis levels of functioning and to seek avenues for positive change are crisis interveners". Based on their principle, all the teachers, including content subject teachers, should be the ones who come into contact with students in crisis or misbehavior. All content subject teachers are supposed to have the ability to use their professional subject knowledge and the reading instructional skill to deal with discipline problems. Despite the inadequate knowledge of psychology, teachers can still implement a therapeutic program by starting the interaction from the cognitive aspect. Reading is used to redirect their goals and help them to clarify and understand the concept for behavior change. The study presented in this paper will show how a reading program conducted by a content subject teacher enabled a student to clarify his misconceptions and mistaken goals, which helped to

change his behavior.

In this study, Mr. Chan, who was a science teacher in a secondary school, experimented with using reading to help Ka-Chun, a junior Form Two male student, who was always found disobeying the rules inside the classroom. Repeated punishment imposed on him seemed futile. Erickson (1959) identified the crisis and behavior change as maturational- developmental or accidental-situational. In the case of Ka-Chun, it is defined as the latter one, in which the crisis occurs during a transitional period of a person's life. These periods are characterized by cognitive or affective upset. Since Ka-Chun had fought with another student in the science lesson, he was removed from the class and then asked to stay in the counseling room as a punishment. This time, Mr. Chan requested to confront with the student before transferring the case to the discipline committee for punishment. After school, Mr. Chan selected a piece of text from Newton Graphic Science Magazine volume 233, P.71-78 with suitable length as the key to communicate and understand the conception behind the behavior of Ka-Chun. Mr. Chan was not a member of the discipline committee, he also had limited knowledge about the psychology or motivation behind students' behavior, but he believed that the student must have some misconception and misinterpretation towards himself or towards the outside world that made Ka-Chun act in an inappropriate way.

### **Selection of Reading Materials**

In Bibliotherapy, the professional likes to employ didactic books or fictions that relate to the student's situation or crisis or that can allow students to express the same feelings or mood (Pardeck, 1990; Rubin, 1978). It is commonly agreed that good quality fiction or literature can be beneficial to students even outside the context of Bibliotherapy (White, 1989). Worse still, poorly written

novels are flooding the market now, even the language teachers may sometimes carelessly select these novels or fiction. Reading stereotyped characters and simplistic answers to complex questions are probably worse than not reading anything at all and can even leave students with a negative view of literature. The typical fiction may serve as mirrors for students, reflecting their appearance, their relationships, their feelings and thoughts in their immediate environment. However, it may trigger discontent and embarrassment, which may result in worsening of behaviors.

As mentioned above, not all the teachers are experts in sharing stories and literature, especially the non-language teachers. Content subject teachers may not be as good as language teachers in sharing novels or literature-based materials with students. Therefore, to select an appropriate piece of reading material with which the content subject teacher is familiar seems to be an important step in the process of this study. This is the reason why Mr. Chan selected a piece of material with the topic which he has confidence in sharing with the student.

Pardeck (1990) suggested that books selected should reflect (as nearly as possible) the client's familiar situation and other critical circumstances related to the victimization. Similarity between the reader and the book character must be evident to the child. However, due to defense mechanism, these types of "direct message" of materials may result in negative outcomes. The stories or novels may unmask the latent personal unpleasant emotion, thus the student may incline to deny or not accept their misbehavior or wrong concepts. Similar situation described in the fiction always has "mirror" and "labeling" effects that make children perceive it as threatening and lesson teaching. This study explored if some expository or non-fiction materials enriched with interesting

knowledge may also have value for use.

## **Process of the Study**

In professional Bibliotherapy or counseling process, the intervener always monitors the child's own emotional experience and the problem being considered, and the emotional experiences of the child through his or her identification with the story character. The final step is to develop insight into the problem. In the whole process of this study, three one-hour sessions were planned for meeting Ka-Chun after school. The instructional session consisted of reading, discussion and journal writing activities. Each session began with a discussion of the previous journal entry, then reading of texts, thinking aloud, or discussion, modeling on using concrete objects and ending with a journal entry.

Mr. Chan neither touched the emotional experience of the student nor identified him with the story character. Instead, he just applied the reading strategies of the interactive model to guide Ka-Chun to read through three basic stages: pre-reading, during reading and post reading. Following the instruction of interactive model (Rumelhart, 1977), Ka-Chun had been guided to go through strategic process of questioning, predicting, confirming, and self-correcting. In the very beginning, Mr. Chan selected a piece of material related to the extinction of black Rhino in Africa from the Newton Graphic Science Magazine volume 233, P.71-78. At this stage, Mr. Chan asked some questions about his prior knowledge and experience that were related to this topic. Applying schema activation allowed students to ease their emotions and concentrate their mind. Then, Mr. Chan guided the student to do the active silent reading, gave him challenging questions, asked factual, creative and application questions that could help Ka-Chun to focus attention on his metacognitive activity, in which the student can shift from the cognitive

knowledge to the consciousness of awareness and reflective attitude by making analogy between the reading topic and his misbehavior.

Finally, with the guidance of questions and discussion: Ka-Chun could get insights by finding out "The extinction of black Rhinos because of their fighting character with unique horns which attracted the attention of hunters. If human beings always like to manifest themselves by using violence, the result is more or less the same as the black Rhino, which will result in the failure of social relationship, like friendship, love and family caring". In the post-reading process, Mr. Chan guided Ka-Chun to review and make reflection by writing something in response to the questions and activities that require application of the new knowledge learned from the text. After two days, Ka-Chun was asked to extend his reading by searching some similar cases of Black Rhino, which also has similar implications with this piece of material. Two more pieces of material about the survival skills of wild animals in Africa caught the attention of Ka-Chun and help him know more about the difference between animals and human beings.

## **Findings**

Scientific evidence indicates that Bibliotherapy has the potential to bring about change within an individual, the effects are found in intellectual, psychosocial, interpersonal, mental and behavioral levels. Different from the Bibliotherapy, the reading program in this study also brings about positive effects. Since the use of a piece of expository or knowledge-based material about ecosystem has no direct "mirror" effect, the student was found enjoying the reading and discussion time with the teacher. Without the burden of labeling effect, the questions and the challenges given by Mr. Chan give Ka-Chun a sense of achievement and satisfaction in the whole

process. Especially the guidance of Mr. Chan leads the student to get insight through his own effort, instead of passively receiving the direct message transmitted from novels or fiction type of materials that may be unconsciously rejected by the student as he thinks the story has the “labeling” effect. In this study, Ka-Chun is happy about his own comprehension ability as he can find out the implication of this expository text himself. The reading interaction with the use of knowledge-based materials could indirectly change student's self-concept, which is critical key for his change in attitude and behavior. The case of Ka-Chun reveals that when the teacher carefully selected the material that he was familiar with, some magic effect took place.

We found that the reading program, to a certain extent, can achieve the goals of Bibliotherapy: identification, catharsis and insight. The student managed to identify his own ability and role when he was able to comprehend and answer the questions raised by the teacher, then he felt satisfied and comfortable with the process. The release of emotion enhanced his motivation to keep looking for further implication of the selected material. Finally, he put effort in getting the insight by understanding the implication and the relationship between the material and his own situation.

A diagnostic interview and discussion about the reading topic discussed was conducted one week after the treatment program. Some factual questions and reflective questions were asked so as to ensure Ka-Chun remembered what he had last time. Verbal compliment and encouragement were given every time Ka-Chun answered correctly and responded positively. As observed by the discipline teacher and his teachers, Ka-Chun's behavior was improving.

## **Limitation of the study**

The main limitation of this study is the sharing of a single case. Mr. Chan and Ka-Chun are the only participants in this study. Moreover, the description and sharing of the case in one school with focus on the process and procedure of reading instruction, and observation of the initial change in Ka-Chun's concept are inadequate for showing long term effects. Systematic behavior assessment outlined for deeper analysis is required for the evaluation of the performance in this reading program. Behavioral recording will be provided for next research for the purpose of giving a precise picture of behavior change over time. The short period of reading treatment (just two hours after schools in two days) is another limitation. A more comprehensive program with more systematic empirical study design is needed.

## **Conclusion**

The function and importance of reading in treating behavior problems are widely recognized in western countries. In this study, the reading program conducted by Mr. Chan may give some insights in answering the following questions:

1. Are the alternatives adopted by discipline and counseling committee for misbehavior cases all effective and professional in the schools?
2. Apart from typical psychological and motivation analysis, can cognitive aspect be considered as an entry point or an effective way for changing concept and behavior?
3. Should the teachers restrict their subject knowledge within the designated curriculum only?
4. Has the potential function of reading been completely explored and developed under the current educational system in Hong Kong?

5. How do we develop and strengthen the reading instructional skills of all subject teachers for educational improvement?

The case presented in this study tells us the reading program in Hong Kong schools still has room for improving its extensive and in-depth application. The implication and insights of these questions will be concluded as follows.

### **Satisfying the needs of students**

According to the theory of Rudolph Dreikurs (1952), what students always seek from their misbehavior are attention, power, revenge or displaying inadequacy. In this study, the process in reading instruction has a positive effect on a student with misbehavior. For those who seek attention, reading time allows a teacher to read and talk with the students individually. For those who seek power, reading can allow the students to lead and control in the process by giving creative and personal answers. Hendricks (1985) states “individuals have two main concerns when they approach a conflict. One of these concerns is people, both themselves and other people. The second, and equally important concern, is for the resolution of the conflict”.

The attention given to the student in reading time is also one of the resolutions for misbehavior case. For those who seek revenge, reading time allows building up trustful relationship. Close support is provided when the students are guided to express their opinion for questions and feedback. As Cinciolo suggests, “books can provide a source of psychological relief from the various pressures and concerns that stem from the things that happen to students”. For those who display inadequacy, the new knowledge acquired from reading gives the students a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

### **Reading instructional skill**

In this study, the content subject teacher has implemented the reading intervention program successfully. But what we should be seriously concerned with is that all content subject teachers should be equipped with the ability to teach reading must be the top agenda in future’s teacher training program. Despite the limited knowledge about reading and behavioral theories learnt in the educational institutions in the past, teachers could improve their professional skill in reading instruction and utilize their professional academic knowledge to solve the academic and behavioral crisis in the schools.

### **All teachers are crisis interveners**

For dealing with the misbehavior cases, the schools should not only depend on discipline or counseling committees, which has limited effect. Schools should try to explore alternatives like a reading program. As a professional teacher, we need not and should not feel embarrassed or obstructed by our inadequate background in psychology or counseling skills. In my view, knowing how and when to introduce the materials, being sufficiently familiar with the materials, and knowing each child’s particular situation is enough for conducting this kind of reading treatments for the students. Aiex (1993) states, “those who are interested, however, should possess personal stability, a genuine interest in working with others, and the ability to empathize with others without moralizing, threatening, or commanding”. All teachers are not only knowledge transmitters, but are also great listeners, sharers, and facilitators in reading. Accompanied with reading, open communication between teachers and students is vital to developing successful long-term relationship.

## **Great potential of reading in behavior management**

The use of reading materials has been proved to be good and effective entry points for teachers to talk with students about their behavior and thinking. They should also be considered as vehicles for presenting challenging ideas, promoting the growth of important concepts, and fostering the development of personal insights for all the students. In this study, to start with the cognitive entry point could directly enrich the student with concept clarification and knowledge acquisition, which is believed to be a catalyst to help behavior change afterwards. In fact, the performance and effect of this study is affected by many factors like relationship between the students and the teachers, the presentation and discussion skill of the teacher and the support from the family of the student. It is an agreed fact that no single factor leads to complete success of an event. The trial reported in this paper is not a cure-all for deep-rooted psychological problems either. These deep-seated issues are best served through more

intensive interventions. Other students may not yet be able to view themselves in the process of reading and may use reading for escape purposes only. Others may tend to rationalize their problems rather than face them. Still others may not be able to transfer insights into real life. However, the experience with reading shared in this study proved to be helpful to a certain extent.

Although Bibliotherapy is still not the mainstream in primary and secondary schools, I agree with Rubin (1978) who states that "Bibliotherapy clearly is and should be further developed as an interdisciplinary field". Reading should be developed in an extensive and intensive way nowadays as part of the school improvement programs.

This study suggests that teachers should be aware of the effects of reading upon students and should realize that, through reading, students can be helped. Reading is a powerful tool to guide thinking, strengthen character building, shape behavior, inform, and now, in the case of Ka-Chun, solve a behavior crisis.

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