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Social Workers' Use of Bibliotherapy with Children & Issues of Diversity

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Running head: BIBLIOTHERAPY WITH CHILDREN

Social Workers' Use of Bibliotherapy with Children & Issues of Diversity

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility of social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to explore how social workers use bibliotherapy with children, and how they consider issues of diversity in their selection of books. A mixed mode survey was sent through email to 270 social workers who work primarily with children. Sixty-eight surveys were completed and the data was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings lend support to the widespread use of books as a therapeutic tool, with 99% of respondents reporting that they use books in therapy with children. Participants reported using books for a variety of therapeutic purposes, however, the majority (62%) reported having no formal training in bibliotherapy. Overall, respondents indicated that issues of diversity are taken into account when selecting books for their child clients, however, limited access to quality literature may constitute a barrier to this end. Future research is necessary to learn more about how social workers use books in therapy, the role of diversity in this intervention, and the role of education in preparing social workers to use books effectively in therapeutic settings.

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Social Workers' Use of Bibliotherapy with Children & Issues of Diversity

Bibliotherapy can be broadly defined as the use of any type of literature in a therapeutic setting. The use of bibliotherapy is widespread and has been supported by ample research indicating its effectiveness on a variety of treatment outcomes (Marrs, 1995). Although the majority of research on bibliotherapy has examined its effectiveness with adults, there is evidence that it can serve as a beneficial intervention for children as well (Adler & Foster, 1997; Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010; Borders & Paisley, 1992; Shechtman, 1999; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Unfortunately, little is known about the specific ways that professionals use bibliotherapy in their practice, particularly when working with children (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). Additionally, the degree to which therapists consider representations of diversity in their selection of books for use with children has not been addressed in the current literature. The present study seeks to address these gaps in the current research by asking the questions: how do social workers select and make use of bibliotherapy with children, and how do they address issues of diversity in the process?

Bibliotherapy

In one of the seminal texts on the use of books in therapy, Russell and Shrodes (1950) defined bibliotherapy as "a process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature- interaction which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth" (p. 335). This interaction, according to this definition, is conceptualized using psychodynamic theory and takes place through processes of "identification, catharsis, and insight" (p. 336). During these processes, the reader feels a sense of connection with a character, shares that character's experiences vicariously, and

gains better understanding of his or her own situation in the process (Russell & Shrodes, 1950). While its theoretical roots are psychoanalytic, bibliotherapy is compatible for use with a variety of theoretical orientations, including cognitive-behavioral, solution focused, family systems, and brief therapy (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010).

Studies exploring the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in addressing a wide variety of issues abounded during the 1960's, 70's, and 80's and yielded mixed results. A meta-analysis of 70 bibliotherapy studies conducted by Marrs (1995) found that, overall, bibliotherapy appears to have a moderate degree of success when used in therapy with adults. Certain problem types, such as anxiety and depression, seem more responsive to bibliotherapy than others (Marrs, 1995).

Despite extensive research investigating the effectiveness of bibliotherapy for a myriad of purposes, to date there has been little inquiry into the ways that mental health professionals make use of bibliotherapy in their practice. Pehrsson and McMillen (2010) sought to address this gap in the research by conducting a national survey of bibliotherapy practices amongst professional counselors. They found that the majority of counselors surveyed (79%) reported using bibliotherapy with clients. The most common formats for implementing bibliotherapy reported by participants were assigning independent reading (96%) and reading with or to clients (92%). Other formats reported by at least half of counselors surveyed included group therapy reading, reading with accompanying art activities, and reading accompanied by writing. The types of books counselors reported using most often were self-help materials (78%), workbooks (77%), and information pamphlets (65%). Picture books and fiction were less commonly used,

with approximately one third of counselors reporting their use. (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010).

The researchers examined differential usage of bibliotherapy based on client age and were surprised to find that only 33% of counselors reported using bibliotherapy with children aged 2 to 7 years. The researchers conclude that this finding is consistent with the types of books counselors report using most often, such as self-help materials and workbooks, as their cognitive orientation is more developmentally appropriate for use with adults than with young children. They hypothesize that the low reported usage of picture books and fiction may also be reflective of the study's sample, with less than 22% of respondents reporting working in K-12 settings. Overall, the researchers conclude that more information is needed about the use of bibliotherapy, particularly with children (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010).

Bibliotherapy with Children

Research on bibliotherapy has tended to focus on applications for adult clients, but several studies with children support the notion that bibliotherapy can be an effective intervention for a range of purposes in this age group as well. The results of these studies will be briefly reviewed and then discussed in terms of their common components that appear to enhance efficacy.

Effectiveness of bibliotherapy with children. Several studies lend support for the use of bibliotherapy in addressing a variety of psychological issues in children. Shechtman (1999) found that the implementation of a program using short stories to discuss themes of anger with children was associated with lower levels of teacher-reported aggression and increased levels of self-disclosure, responsiveness, empathy, and

insight. A bibliotherapy-based intervention was also found to be effective in decreasing social anxiety and adjustment symptoms in children (Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010).

Borders and Paisley (1992) found a significant association between the implementation of a literature-based guidance curriculum and children's increased scores on the Paragraph Completion Test, a tool for measuring developmental growth associated with conceptual level. A low score on this measure indicated concrete thinking, inflexibility with rules, and a strong desire to please others. A high score, in contrast, indicated an ability to consider alternative views, make decisions based on personal principles, and accept responsibility for consequences of behavior (Borders & Paisley, 1992).

In addition to addressing psychological and developmental issues, bibliotherapy has demonstrated efficacy in teaching values and skills to children. Adler and Foster's (1997) study on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in teaching adolescents values related to caring found that although participants' beliefs about caring tended to remain consistent pretest to posttest, a significant association existed between the literature-based intervention and increased support for the specific belief that friends "can be like family in providing emotional and social support" (p. 281).

A study by Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) found that the use of children's books depicting non-stereotypic gender roles had a significant influence on the gender role perceptions of preschoolers. When asked if a selection of traditionally stereotyped occupations were "for men," "for women," or "for both," the response "for both" increased from 49.4% to 78.4% of total answers from pretest to posttest, yielding a highly significant relationship between the intervention and response type according to a chi-square analysis (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999).

Elements of effective bibliotherapy with children. These studies provide evidence supporting the therapeutic use of literature as an effective tool for working with children. They also highlight the elements of bibliotherapy that may enhance its effectiveness with children. All of the studies reviewed above conducted interventions in group settings, such as classrooms or treatment groups, and included some form of therapeutic group discussion in conjunction with the reading of stories (Adler & Foster, 1997; Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010; Borders & Paisley, 1992; Shechtman, 1999; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Shechtman (1999) suggests that this "therapeutic discussion" is key to the change process, as it provides an opportunity to enhance the child's understanding of the themes addressed in stories, while creating a feeling of belonging and mutual understanding with their peers (p. 50).

The theoretical approach used in bibliotherapy with children also appears to contribute to its overall effectiveness. Betzalel and Shechtman's 2010 study compared two common approaches to bibliotherapy: affective and cognitive. The researchers used fictional stories for affective bibliotherapy, which they define as "focused on emotional self-exploration, repressed thoughts, and experiences" (p. 430). One of the affective bibliotherapy sessions, for example, used the book *Not a Single Lion* (Zarchi, 1992), in which child characters experience fear and anxiety. After the book was read, the counselor led a discussion about the feelings of the children in the story, encouraging participants to share their own feelings and experiences related to fear (Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010).

Cognitive bibliotherapy, in contrast, seeks to create "cognitive-behavioral change by using realistic literature" that refers directly to the issues being addressed (Betzalel &

Shechtman, 2010, p. 430). One of the books used in this treatment group was *When I Feel Afraid* (Meiners, 2003), a story involving the self-dialogue of a girl experiencing fear.

The story provides several concrete techniques for coping with fear, such as talking to an adult or singing. After reading the book, the children were encouraged to share their own techniques for coping with feelings of fear (Betzael & Shechtman, 2010).

Children in both the affective and cognitive bibliotherapy groups showed significant reductions in social anxiety compared to a control group, however, only affective bibliotherapy was associated with lower scores on a measure of adjustment problems (Betzael & Shechtman, 2010). This finding has significant implications for the use of bibliotherapy with children, as cognitive approaches appear to dominate in the field (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). Betzael and Shechtman (2010) hypothesize that the use of fiction in affective therapy may "speak to the children's imagination and increase their attention and interest" in a way that cognitive approaches do not (p. 436). The use of fictional stories may also foster a sense of distance from problems, allowing for the exploration of difficult topics (Betzael & Shechtman, 2010). Shechtman (1999), who found affective bibliotherapy to be effective for decreasing aggression in boys, explains the appeal of this approach in another way: "children and adolescents do not like therapy, but they do love stories" (p. 40).

The literary quality of books used in bibliotherapy may also influence its effectiveness in work with children. Borders and Paisley (1992) used guidelines for quality established by experts in children's literature to select books for their experimental group. Plot, illustrations, length, characters, and multicultural appeal were evaluated based on these guidelines. The books used for the control condition were

selected from pre-existing guidance curricula with similar themes, but no attention to literary excellence (1992). Only the experimental group showed improved scores for developmental growth according to the Paragraph Completion Test, suggesting that the quality of content has an impact on outcomes (Borders & Paisley, 1992).

A final consideration in effective bibliotherapy with children concerns their ability to identify with a story's characters. The original theory behind bibliotherapy posited that the reader must "see themselves" in a character in order to experience the character's story vicariously and thus achieve insight into their own situation (Russell & Shrodes, 1950). Situations and feelings shared between the character and the reader are one way to foster this perceived similarity. In Shechtman's intervention with aggressive boys, for example, books with characters experiencing various aspects of anger were selected, a theme that resonated and was easily connected to the boys' lives (1999). Theoretically, one would expect that identification with other aspects of a character's identity, such as gender or ethnicity, may also be a vehicle for vicarious experience in bibliotherapy. Empirical studies that test this hypothesis are scarce, however, related research lends support to the importance of children "seeing themselves" in characters that share their ethnicity or culture.

A study by Costantino, Malgay, and Rogler (1994) assessed the effectiveness of a "culturally sensitive storytelling intervention" for reducing psychiatric symptoms in Hispanic children. The intervention, conducted across eight sessions, used stories and discussion related to anxious, depressed, and fearful feelings in conjunction with illustrations depicting "Hispanic cultural elements and Hispanic families and neighborhoods in urban settings" (p. 16). Children in the control group participated in

psychoeducational discussions with no special attention to culture. The group that received the culturally sensitive intervention showed significantly decreased anxious and phobic symptoms pretest to posttest (Costantino et al., 1994). These results lend support to the hypothesis that children are more responsive to bibliotherapy interventions that depict characters of their ethnicity.

Graves (1999) provides a meta-analysis of studies primarily conducted during the 70's and 80's that explore how the portrayal of African-Americans on television affects children. Overall, the studies indicate that children prefer, are more easily influenced by, and more easily recall information about same-race characters on television.

Additionally, the portrayal of non-white characters can positively influence white children's attitudes about other racial groups, demonstrated by several studies on the effects of watching *Sesame Street* (Graves, 1999). Although television is a qualitatively different medium than books, the evidence that children are differentially affected by characters with whom they identify ethnically has useful applications for the role of diversity in bibliotherapy.

Conceptual Framework

The constructs of Social Learning Theory provide a framework for understanding the ways that children relate to characters in bibliotherapy. According to this theory, first posited by Albert Bandura, our understanding of the world is formed based on our observations and the meanings that we derive from them. In this view, our perceptions of events are more important in predicting behavior than the nature of the events themselves. The formation of the worldviews occurs through observational or social learning, wherein we observe other people (models), make meaning of their behavior

(encoding), and then commit what we have learned to memory (storing) (Shaffer, 2005). These memories, in turn, form schemas, which are defined as "ingrained and systematic patterns of thought, action, and problem solving" (Hutchison, 2011, p. 109). Schemas are continually shaped by processes of assimilation, in which existing schemata influences a response to an experience, and accommodation, in which an experience that is inconsistent with existing schemata is incorporated (Hutchison, 2011).

Viewed through this lens, the characters portrayed in children's literature can be considered social models for behavior, thinking, and feeling. Characters with whom children identify are especially powerful in this respect, while characters that children perceive as different may serve to influence their schemas related to diverse groups. By the same token, negative portrayals of diverse populations can serve to reinforce harmful societal stereotypes. In other words, children's stories can provide either "self-affirming mirrors" or "windows into other lives" (Smolkin & Young, 2011, p. 217).

Depictions of Diversity in Children's Literature

Given the empirical and theoretical evidence supporting the importance of quality depictions of diversity in bibliotherapy with children, an examination of what the "mirrors" in children's literature are currently reflecting is warranted. A review of the literature on depictions of diverse populations in children's literature demonstrates that while progress has been made towards equitable and non-stereotyped representations, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Social workers should be mindful of this issue when selecting books for use with children in therapy.

Gender

One of the most-studied themes in children's literature is the portrayal of gender. There are several ways to assess the ways that characters are portrayed in relation to gender, and one of these is simply comparing the prevalence of male versus female characters. Turner-Bowker's (1996) analysis of 30 Caldecott Medal and "honors" books found that male characters were mentioned significantly more often in titles, and were also seen significantly more in illustrations and pictures than female characters, a finding consistent with prior research conducted during the 1970's and 80's. It should be noted, however, that the books selected for this study were written between the years of 1984 and 1994, rendering the results somewhat outdated (Turner-Bowker, 1996). More recent studies have indicated that children's literature may be becoming more balanced in regard to depicting male and female characters. A content analysis of 82 elementary-age stories by Evans and Davies (2000), for example, found 54% of characters to be male and 46% to be female. Poarch and Monk-Turner's (2001) analysis of illustrations from "easy-to-read" literature found that 40% of characters were female. A study analyzing the portrayal of disabilities in children's literature found male-only portrayals accounted for 52% of the total, while only 30% of primary characters were female (Ayala, 1999). These findings seem to indicate that while male characters are still portrayed more often than female characters, the division has become less drastic.

While comparing sheer numbers of male to female characters gives us some insight into their overall depiction in children's literature, it fails to capture the quality of these depictions. Studies examining the traits and roles of male and female characters provide a more in-depth picture of the degree to which stereotypes permeate children's

literature. Using Bem's Sex Role Inventory (1981), Evans and Davies (2000) analyzed the main characters of 82 stories for eight masculine and eight feminine traits. They found that male characters were significantly more likely to be described as aggressive, competitive, and argumentative, traits stereotypically assigned to males. In addition, male characters were significantly less likely to be affectionate, emotionally expressive, passive, and tender, traits traditionally assigned to females (Evans & Davies, 2000). These findings were consistent with an earlier study by Turner-Bowker (1996), which found the most commonly used adjectives for males to be "big, horrible, fierce, great, terrible, furious, brave, and proud," while female characters were more likely to be described as "beautiful, frightened, worthy, sweet, weak, and scared" (p. 475). Gender differences in moral decisions were found in Tetenbaum and Pearson's analysis of 50 school-age works of fiction (1989). The researchers found that male characters were more likely to make moral decisions based on justice, whereas females tended to make these decisions based on caring. In other words, boys were more likely to consider what was fair when making decisions, while girls tended to consider the needs of others. (Tetenbaum & Pearson, 1989).

In addition to character traits, depictions of gender can also be assessed by the roles and activities that characters participate in. An analysis of the illustrations in "easy-to-read" literature categorized characters' activities as related to "production," "household," or "personal/leisure" (Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001, p. 73). Results showed that while females characters were equally likely to be portrayed in household or production activities, males were unlikely to be portrayed in household activities, especially in books written by male authors (Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001). A study of

previously identified "sexist" and "nonsexist" elementary literature by Diekman and Murnen (2004) also looked at social roles in regards to gender, finding that portrayals of female-stereotypical domestic and leisure roles were equally present in books categorized as sexist and nonsexist. The researchers concluded that books considered nonsexist were successful in portraying female characters participating in masculine gender roles, but they failed to depict "male characters as adopting aspects of the feminine gender role or female characters shedding the feminine gender role," resulting in "a narrow vision of gender equality" (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 381).

Race and Ethnicity

Evaluating depictions of race and ethnicity in children's literature is a complex task that generates disagreement regarding what constitutes quality. Even books intended to portray minority cultures positively are often subject to criticism, in what has been coined the "authenticity debate" (Ching, 2005, p. 129). In a discussion about multicultural children's literature, Ching (2005) asserts "when discourses of racial harmony are not accompanied by discourses of power, the teaching of multicultural literature to children remains incomplete" (p. 135). In this view, the portrayal of different cultures in children's books is not enough; experiences of oppression related to culture must also be addressed. Others, such as the Youth Services Manager for the St. Paul Public Library, disagree with this approach and consider it too didactic. From this viewpoint, characters from diverse cultures should be equitably portrayed in all types of stories, regardless of plot. Narratives centered solely on cultural issues are considered too heavy-handed and increase a sense of division (M. Hawkins, personal communication, April 9, 2012). Social workers must be sensitive to these issues as they select books for use in

bibliotherapy, particularly in light of evidence that, like gender, depictions of race and ethnicity in children's literature have improved over time but are still prone to stereotype.

African-Americans. In a study of 2,448 children's books published between the 1930's and 1990's, researchers found that African-Americans are grossly underrepresented in children's literature, both historically and in recent years (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). Only 15% of books contained at least one black character. While the overall trend over time was towards more frequent representation, this trend was largely accounted for by one specific group of books: those that had won Caldecott Awards. A study of 59 children's books portraying disabilities published between 1974 and 1996 also reflected this imbalance of racial representation, with Caucasian characters making up 50% of the sample, and African Americans represented by less than 1% (Ayala, 1999). Interestingly, 26% of the books reviewed contained individuals of multiple ethnic backgrounds, a finding that the researcher suggests is reflective of an effort by the literary community to provide books that appeal to multicultural audiences but do not focus on providing ethnically specific information (Ayala, 1999).

Pescosolido's (1997) study of books ranging from the 1930's to 1990's found that when black characters were present, their interactions with white characters lacked "mutuality- intimate, egalitarian relations central to the story line," a trend that remained stable across time of publication (p. 455). Reviews of more recently published works depicting African-American characters suggest that their portrayal may continue to reinforce stereotypes. McNair (2003) conducted a critical analysis of 12 "social conscience" children's books, defined by the author as books written primarily by white

authors and aimed at developing an awareness of racial issues in white readers. McNair (2003) found that despite authors' good intentions, the literature contained racial stereotypes, depictions of "the active white standing up for the passive black," European-American standards of beauty, inauthentic dialogue, and the depiction of whites as color-blind (p. 28). The problematic implications of "color-blindness" are also addressed in a study examining the sports biographies of African- American football players (Winograd, 2011). The analysis of eight popular biographies for school-age children, seven of which were written by white authors, found only two passing mentions of race. No explicit references to racism or African-American history and traditions were found. The researcher suggests that the exclusion of these elements constitutes a "racism of color-blindness," reflecting the problematic practice of white authors using "their own cultural narrative frameworks and language to tell the stories of black men" (Winograd, 2011, p. 339).

Hispanics. In a review of 21 content analysis studies of children's books depicting Hispanic characters, Nilsson (2005) found several overall trends. According to these studies, books featuring Hispanic (including Mexican and Puerto Rican) characters and themes have been increasing in number since the 1970's. Overall, the depictions found in these books do contain some stereotypes, a problem that seems to be less severe with Mexican American characters than Puerto Rican ones. The researcher concludes that while the presence of Hispanic characters in children's literature has increased over time, the degree of improvement still varies by Hispanic subgroup and book type. Additionally, when compared to the proportion of Hispanics in the United States population, the

proportion of children's books containing Hispanic characters is sorely lacking (Nilsson, 2005).

Less-Studied Diverse Populations

A review of the literature found very few empirical studies of diverse groups in children's books besides those previously discussed, however, much discourse on this topic has occurred in the form of theoretical discussions, recommendations, and book reviews. A few of these groups will be discussed here, however, it is important to note that definitions of multicultural groups are numerous and constantly expanding. Those covered in the scope of this paper are far from exhaustive.

Native Americans. In a discussion on recent children's books published about Native Americans, Lindsay (2003) cites an online survey of the Horn Book Guide indicating that books about Native Americans from 2000-2002 were given much lower quality scores than those written from 1989-1999. The author reviews some of these books, noting that nonfiction books about Native Americans are written "almost entirely in the past tense, suggesting that these people and their ways of life are gone" (Lindsay, 2003, p. 43). Another problematic example offered is that out of hundreds of sources for a biography about Sitting Bull, only a few are Native. Lindsay (2003) concludes that, as seems to be the case for other ethnic minority children, there are simply not enough high quality books in which they are well represented.

People with disabilities. People with disabilities are a multicultural group that may be less obvious, but are equally important. An analysis of 59 children's books published between 1974 and 1996 portraying characters with disabilities found a gradual increase in the number of books published each year (Ayala, 1999). The most common

disability portrayed was orthopedic, with 22% of books featuring a character with this disability. Characters with a variety of other disabilities were represented as well, including learning disabilities, medical disabilities, autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, visual disabilities, and multiple disabilities. None of the books portrayed a character with a primary emotional disability. The researcher also investigated the roles assigned to characters with disabilities, finding that the majority of the literature (63%) portrayed the protagonist as a hero. The role of a victim or outcast characterized 10% of characters with disabilities, while 20% were characterized in more realistic terms, treating individuals with disabilities as competent, contributing members of society (Ayala, 1999). Ayala (1999) concludes that while children's books currently depict a wide range of disabilities, portrayals of these characters as either heroes or victims lack necessary depth.

LGBT people. The portrayal of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in children's books is particularly salient in today's political climate, where issues related to this group have come to the forefront in recent years. The publication of *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), a children's book chronicling a same-sex penguin couple and their child, was met with high critical acclaim as well as controversy, appearing in the top 10 of the American Library Association's "Most Challenged Book List" every year from 2006 to 2010 (Smolkin & Young, 2011; American Library Association, 2012). Hermann-Wilmarth's (2007) review of eight children's literature survey textbooks from 2000-2002 found that only four mention gay and lesbian issues, two of which seem to discourage the issue by placing it in the category "Sensitivity to Community Standards." Only one of the textbooks, according to this review, provides a clearly positive endorsement of including books related to gay and lesbian issues (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). A similar content

analysis of six top-selling children's literature textbooks also found mixed results, with four of the books demonstrating "solid aspects of inclusion" and one having "nothing to say on the topic" (Smolkin & Young, 2011, p. 220). The authors also noted the presence of what they coined "stealth inclusions," in which two of the textbooks did not acknowledge LGBT content in their table of contents or index, but did contain this information in their chapters. Smolkin and Young (2011) speculate that this practice may be reflective of "the complex tango danced by textbook authors and textbook publishers," wherein publishers place pressure on authors to avoid politically controversial material in order to protect profits (p. 223).

Implications for Research

Given the potential impact of theoretical orientation, literary quality, and depictions of diverse characters on the outcomes of bibliotherapy with children, the finding that counselors lack standardized tools for evaluating books is problematic (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). "Reading the book myself" was cited by 74% of counselors surveyed as their primary method of selecting books for therapy. Less than 3% of counselors reported using librarians for literature recommendations. The researchers conclude that libraries and librarians, with their specialized training in literature, are "undiscovered therapeutic allies" (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010, p. 422). Also troubling is the finding that the children's book most cited by counselors, *Dinosaurs Divorce*, was published more than 20 years ago and contains outdated and stereotypic images related to gender (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010, and McMillen & Pehrsson, 2010). These findings suggest that the selection practices of counselors may yield works that are well known, but not necessarily high in literary quality by current standards. For these

reasons, inquiry into the ways that professionals select books for children, how they use those books in therapy, and their approaches to issues of diversity is warranted.

Methods

This study addressed the questions: how do social workers select and use books in therapy with children, and how do they approach issues of diversity in these processes? Members of the sample were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in a survey administered online using Qualtrics online survey software. The survey instrument consisted of 16 quantitative questions that gathered information about the ways social workers incorporate books into their work with children, the strategies they use to select books, and their perceptions about diversity in children's books (Appendix A). Participants were also asked about their practice setting and years of experience working with children. Survey questions were primarily multiple-choice, and at the nominal level of measurement. The survey also contained two qualitative questions asking participants to provide a short response. As this research is exploratory in nature, some questions allowed respondents to choose as many answers as were applicable, and several questions allowed respondents to select "other" and fill in the blank with a qualitative response.

Survey questions were devised based on existing research, lending content validity to the measure. Possible answers for the question: "What types of books do you use most often?" for example, were drawn from the types of books cited by the current literature on bibliotherapy with children. McMillen and Pehrsson's (2010) survey about bibliotherapy practices served as a model for this survey; several questions were adapted to apply to working with child clients. The use of a previously existing measure as a

guide bolstered this survey's validity and reliability. In addition, the survey was reviewed for validity and reliability by a panel of eight Master's-level social work students.

Prior to the survey, participants were informed that there would be no risks or benefits related to participation in the study. The content of the survey asked questions pertaining to the participants' experience using books in therapy and was therefore unlikely to cause any emotional distress. The survey was administered online so that participants would be completely anonymous; the identities of participants are unknown, including to the researcher. Participants could therefore be confident that no personally identifying information would be linked to their answers on the survey. There were no negative consequences for declining to participate in the survey. Participants did not receive any benefits for their participation, besides possible personal satisfaction in aiding a social work student in her research. Participants were asked to acknowledge that they read and understood these possible risks and benefits before consenting to begin the survey.

Sample

The sample for this study was obtained from the Minnesota School Social Workers Association's (MSSWA) member list and from the "Therapy Directory" on PsychologyToday.com. The survey was emailed to all 258 social workers on the MSSWA member list. Minnesota social workers from the Psychology Today directory were selected for the sample if they mentioned working with children in their profiles. Based on these criteria, the survey was e-mailed to 12 additional social workers. A total of 68 social workers completed the survey for a response rate of 25%. Some survey

questions were not answered by all 68 participants; the lowest response rate to any individual question was 60 participants.

Social workers surveyed in this study reported a wide range of years of experience working with children. The range spanned from one year to 42 years of experience, with a mean of 15 years and a standard deviation of 8.9 years. The majority (89%) of respondents reported working in school settings. The remaining respondents reported working either in private practice (8%) or in agency settings (3%). Social workers in this study also reported working with a range of age groups, spanning from two years or younger to 14 years or older.

Findings

Question One served to obtain informed consent from respondents. Participants were asked to choose either "Yes" or "No" after reading the following passage: "This survey seeks to learn how social workers use books in therapy with children, and how they address issues of diversity in the process. There are no risks or benefits associated with participation in this study, and no negative consequences for deciding not to participate. Your answers are anonymous and confidential. Do you consent to participate in this study?"

In response to the next question, "Do you use books in therapy with children?" 99% of respondents chose "Yes," and only one respondent (1%) chose "No." The survey was designed so that respondents who selected "No" on this item would be sent directly to Question 14, skipping questions that were irrelevant based on their response.

Question Three asked participants what types of books they use most often and allowed them to choose multiple answers. Fictional picture books were the most

frequently reported type of book, with 86% of respondents indicating their usage.

Workbooks/Instructional books and Non-fiction picture books were also reported by more than half of respondents (69% and 54%, respectively). Results for other types of books are included in Figure 1 below:

| # | Answer | Response | % |
|---|-------------------------------|----------|-----|
| 1 | Picture books: fiction | 56 | 86% |
| 2 | Picture books: nonfiction | 35 | 54% |
| 3 | Non-picture books: fiction | 19 | 29% |
| 4 | Non-picture books: nonfiction | 22 | 34% |
| 5 | Workbooks/Instructional Books | 45 | 69% |
| 6 | Audio Books | 8 | 12% |
| 7 | Electronic Books | 10 | 15% |
| 8 | Other: | 0 | 0% |

Figure 1. Types of Books Used

Question Four asked respondents about the age groups they use books with and also allowed them to select multiple answers. Results indicated that respondents work with a wide range of ages. Over half of therapists reported using books with children in the ages groups 4-6 years, 6-8 years, 8-10 years, and 10-12 years. These results are summarized in Figure 2 below:

| # | Answer | Response | % |
|---|-------------|----------|-----|
| 1 | 0-2 years | 2 | 3% |
| 2 | 2-4 years | 4 | 6% |
| 3 | 4-6 years | 41 | 64% |
| 4 | 6-8 years | 50 | 78% |
| 5 | 8-10 years | 49 | 77% |
| 6 | 10-12 years | 40 | 63% |
| 7 | 12-14 years | 23 | 36% |
| 8 | 14+ years | 14 | 22% |

Figure 2. Age Groups of Clients

Question Five asked respondents to approximate the percentage of their child clients who were ethnic minorities (non-white). Almost half (46%) of respondents indicated that 20% or less of their clients are ethnic minorities. The rest of responses were spread fairly evenly across the 20%-40%, 40%-60%, 60-80% and 80%-100% categories, as shown in Figure 3 below:

| # | Answer | Response | % |
|---|----------|----------|------|
| 1 | 0%-20% | 30 | 46% |
| 2 | 20%-40% | 11 | 17% |
| 3 | 40%-60% | 9 | 14% |
| 4 | 60%-80% | 6 | 9% |
| 5 | 80%-100% | 9 | 14% |
| | Total | 65 | 100% |

Figure 3. Percentage of Minorities

Question Six inquired how often participants attempt to use books that portray characters representing their clients' ethnicities. Only 10% chose "Never" or "Rarely" in response to this question. The majority of respondents chose either "Sometimes" (43%) or "Most of the time" (38%). The remaining 10% of respondents reported that they "Always" use books portraying their client's ethnicity. These results are depicted in Figure 4 below:

| # | Answer | Response | % |
|---|------------------|----------|------|
| 1 | Never | 1 | 2% |
| 2 | Rarely | 5 | 8% |
| 3 | Sometimes | 27 | 43% |
| 4 | Most of the time | 24 | 38% |
| 5 | Always | 6 | 10% |
| | Total | 63 | 100% |

Figure 4. Portray Clients' Ethnicities

When asked how difficult it is to locate books that portray ethnic minorities, over half of respondents (60%) responded that it is "Somewhat difficult." Thirty-two percent reported that it is "Not at all difficult," and only five respondents (8%) indicated that they find it "Very difficult" to find books portraying ethnic minorities (Figure 5).

| # | Answer | Response | % |
|---|----------------------|----------|------|
| 1 | Very Difficult | 5 | 8% |
| 2 | Somewhat Difficult | 37 | 60% |
| 3 | Not at all Difficult | 20 | 32% |
| | Total | 62 | 100% |

Figure 5. Difficulty Finding Books with Minorities

Question Eight asked participants whether they use bibliotherapy with individuals, groups, or both. The majority of respondents (83%) indicated that they use books with both individuals and groups, while 11% reported using books only with individuals and 6% only with groups. Figure 6 below depicts these results:

| # | Answer | Response | % |
|---|----------------------------------|----------|------|
| 1 | With individuals | 7 | 11% |
| 2 | With groups | 4 | 6% |
| 3 | With both individuals and groups | 53 | 83% |
| | Total | 64 | 100% |

Figure 6. Bibliotherapy Format

In Question Nine participants were asked what activities, if any, they use in conjunction with books. Multiple responses were permitted. Results showed discussion, art, and role-play or drama activities as the most common activities used with books, with 64, 54, and 52 respondents indicating that they use these activities, respectively. Writing

was also a commonly used activity, reported by 39 participants. Fewer participants (n=17) indicated that they use music, and one participant wrote in "Yoga Calm" in the "Other" category, where space was allowed for a text response. These results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Activities Used with Books

| # | Question | Yes | No | Total | Mean |
|---|-------------------------------|-----|----|-------|------|
| 1 | Discussion | 64 | 1 | 65 | 1.02 |
| 2 | Art | 54 | 8 | 62 | 1.13 |
| 3 | Role-play or Drama activities | 52 | 8 | 60 | 1.13 |
| 4 | Writing | 39 | 17 | 56 | 1.30 |
| 5 | Music | 17 | 33 | 50 | 1.66 |
| 6 | Other: | 1 | 15 | 16 | 1.94 |

Question Ten asked participants about the formats they use to present books to children. The majority of respondents reported reading aloud to children (n=61), and reading cooperatively with children (n=47). Twenty-nine respondents indicated that they provide books to children for independent reading, and 31 reported providing books for parents to read to their children (Table 2).

Table 2. Formats for Presenting Books

| # | Question | Yes | No | Total | Mean |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----|----|-------|------|
| 1 | Read aloud to child(ren) | 61 | 1 | 62 | 1.02 |
| 2 | Read cooperatively with child(ren) | 47 | 13 | 60 | 1.22 |
| 3 | Provide for independent reading | 29 | 28 | 57 | 1.49 |
| 4 | Provide for parents to read to child | 31 | 25 | 56 | 1.45 |
| 5 | Other: | 1 | 14 | 15 | 1.93 |

Participants reported using a variety of methods for selecting books to use with children. Independent research or reading the book themselves constituted methods used "Often" by 57 participants. Recommendations from peers were used "Often" by 47 respondents and "Sometimes" by 18 respondents. Fifty participants indicated that they use the books provided by the agency or setting either "Often," (n=28) or "Sometimes," (n=22). Methods for selecting books that were less commonly reported were recommendations from clients, library resources, catalogues, ads, and bibliographies. The results for these methods are included in Table 3 below. Participants were also provided space to write in catalogues, ads, or bibliographies that they use. These results are included in the list of resources in Appendix B.

Table 3. Methods for Selecting Books

| # | Question | Often | Sometimes | Rarely or Never | Total |
|---|--|-------|-----------|-----------------|-------|
| 1 | Independent research or read the book myself | 57 | 8 | 0 | 65 |
| 2 | Recommendations from peers | 47 | 18 | 0 | 65 |
| 3 | Recommendations from clients | 12 | 28 | 19 | 59 |
| 4 | Library resources | 17 | 30 | 11 | 58 |
| 5 | Use what is provided by agency/setting | 28 | 22 | 7 | 57 |
| 6 | Catalogues or Ads (please list): | 10 | 9 | 16 | 35 |
| 7 | Bibliographies (please list): | 4 | 1 | 18 | 23 |

When asked whether they used books to address specific issues pertaining to the child, 100% of respondents who answered this question (n=60) selected "Yes." This question was designed so participants who responded "Yes" would be sent to Question 13

and asked to provide examples of topics and book titles that they found useful. The following topics were reported by multiple respondents: social skills (n=15), bullying (n=14), divorce (n=13), feelings and emotions (n=12), loss and grief (n=9), anxiety and worry (n=7), anger (n=6), self-esteem (n=4), depression (n=4), kinds of families or changing families (n=3), self-injury (n=2), and mindfulness (n=2).

The titles of 97 books were recommended by 44 participants, also in response to Question 13. This list can be found in its entirety in Appendix B. The following books were cited by multiple respondents: *Dinosaurs Divorce* by Marc Brown (n=5), *When Mom & Dad Separate* by Marge Heegard (n=3), *The Recess Queen* by Alexis O'Neill (n=3), *One* by Kathryn Otoshi (n=3), *Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain* by Trevor Romain (n=2), *Hands Are Not for Hitting* by Martine Agassi Ph.D. (n=2), *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss (n=2), *Queen Bees & Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman (n=2), *Superflex... A Superhero Social Thinking Curriculum* by Stephanie Madrigal, Michelle Garcia Winner and Kelly Knopp (n=2), and *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain (n=2). The author Julia Cook was recommended by four participants, and Cheri J. Meiners was recommended by two participants.

Respondents were next asked whether they agreed, disagreed, or felt unsure in response to the statement "Books can be agents of social change." Only one participant (2%) responded that he/she was not sure, and the remaining 98% of participants (n=64) indicated that they agreed with the statement.

Over half of respondents (62%, n=41) reported having no formal education or training on the use of books in therapy. The remaining respondents reported receiving training through agency in-services or conferences (18%), as graduate or doctoral

students (15%), as undergraduate students (3%) or from other sources (6%). These results are depicted in Figure 7.

| # | Answer | | Response | % |
|---|---|--|----------|-----|
| 1 | No | | 41 | 62% |
| 2 | Yes, as an undergraduate student | | 2 | 3% |
| 3 | Yes, as a graduate or doctoral student | | 10 | 15% |
| 4 | Yes, through agency in-services or professional conferences | | 12 | 18% |
| 5 | Yes, through another source: | | 4 | 6% |

Figure 7. Bibliotherapy Training

The survey's final question provided space for participants to share any other thoughts they had about using books in therapy with children or issues of diversity. A total of 27 participants responded to this question. This qualitative data was analyzed using grounded theory, meaning that themes were derived directly from the data, rather than using pre-determined theory to analyze responses. Content analysis of the data involved a process of progressively color-coding responses based on common themes. Using this process, several themes emerged from the qualitative data.

Positive Feelings About the Use of Books

Overall, respondents reflected positive feelings about using books in their work with children. Many social workers reported that they not only use books in their practice, but consider them "absolutely vital," "an important part of [their] work," and "one of the most effective tools." Respondents also mentioned how books are especially

favorable interventions for children specifically, stating that they are a "natural way to teach and teach to support children," and that children "always like storybooks."

Participants also reported using books for a range of therapeutic purposes, listed below:

- *Start a conversation about a particular issue*
- *Learn complex ideas*
- *Springboard for discussion*
- *Promote the value of reading*
- *Permission to talk about difficult subjects*
- *Lets them know they're not alone*
- *Help overcome fears*
- *Normalize thoughts*
- *Exposure to issues, topics, and areas of life that we might not otherwise experience*

Books for Modeling & Building Empathy

Many respondents cited the use of books as a way to foster the development of empathy through identification with characters, perspective-taking, and role-modeling. "Stories allow students to understand that other people face challenges in their lives and they offer role modeling on how to handle problems and develop character," offered one participant. Another respondent wrote that children are able to "use empathic skills to relate stories to themselves and others, and to recognize when their experience, or story, is different from the character's story." Overall, six respondents mentioned this theme of books as a useful tool for helping children connect with others. This sentiment is

summarized by one respondent: "Children can easily make the connection to oneself and their community through a book."

Importance of Diversity

The theme of diversity in children's books was referenced by six participants. Five of those participants regarded this as an important issue: "I think it's incredibly important that children see themselves positively and realistically (rather than stereotypically) portrayed in the images that surround them." Personal experiences of using books with diverse audiences were also shared. One social worker explained that as a Caucasian working with primarily African American families, "having a multitude of books related to diversity and other books that depict families who are NOT of my race/ethnicity has helped." Another participant shared a similar experience: "When I have found books on specific diversity issues (like African American hair) they become very excited to have characters that look like them." Only one respondent stated that he/she "never [worries] about matching the student's race to the book," based on the rationale that "kids get that problems are universal so it doesn't really matter."

Availability of Books with Diverse Characters

Several respondents shared their thoughts related to the availability of children's books depicting diverse characters. Three of these respondents felt that availability has improved in this respect during recent years. "Compared to 10 years ago," wrote one social worker, "there are way more books available for culturally diverse audiences." Another respondent agreed that there are "a lot more resources to draw from today than even a few years ago," but added that there remains room for improvement in this area: "We have a LONG way to go in terms of respectfully portraying the diversity that is our

world." One specific area of improvement was mentioned by a different respondent, who felt that there "is a need for more books on the diversity of GLBT."

Barriers to Using Books

Convenience and cost-effectiveness were cited by two respondents as barriers preventing them from using books with children. As one of these respondents explained: "What's frustrating the most is lack of funds. I usually leave the books in the social work office... I have moved schools so much and have to leave my books behind." Another participant expressed a desire for more training on the use of books for diverse audiences: "It would be nice to see MSSWA sponsor more in-services on this topic."

Discussion

This exploratory study provided some useful information about how social workers use bibliotherapy with children, why they use it, and how they perceive issues of diverse representation in the books they select.

Out of 67 total respondents, a decided majority of 99% (n=66) reported using books in therapy with children. This finding echoes previous studies suggesting that bibliotherapy is a widely used therapeutic tool (Marrs, 1995; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). The especially high rate found in the present study may reflect some self-selection bias, as social workers with an interest in this topic may have been more likely to complete the survey. It is also likely that the sample, which included only social workers that work with children specifically, is reflected in these findings as well. Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) study, in contrast, sampled counselors without attention to the ages of their clients, with less than 22% of the sample reporting work in K-12 settings. In that

sample, 79% of counselors surveyed reported using books with their clients (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010).

Fictional picture books were the type of book used most frequently by social workers in this study, with 86% of respondents (n=56) reporting using them in therapy. This is in contrast with Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) survey of counselors, in which only 39% of respondents indicated that they use picture books in their practice. The difference is not surprising given the child-oriented work of social workers in the present study; picture books are likely to be a more appropriate intervention with child clients than with adult clients. This is consistent with Betzalel and Shechtman's (2010) hypothesis that fictional books "speak to the children's imagination and increase their attention and interest," (p. 436) to a greater degree than more cognitively-oriented approaches. Use of the second most common type of books, workbooks or instructional books, was reported by 69% of respondents (n=45) in the present study. This finding corroborates that of Pehrsson and McMillen (2010), who found workbooks to be one of the most common formats used by counselors, with 77% of participants reporting their use.

Social workers in this study reported using books with a range of age groups, spanning from two years or younger to 14 years or older. The age groups respondents reported using books with most often were between four and 12 years of age. This finding suggests that social workers are able to use books with a range of ages and developmental levels.

Respondents were asked about the proportion of their child clients that belong to an ethnic minority group (non-white). Nearly half (46%) of respondents indicated that

less than 20% of their clients were ethnic minorities. The remaining half of respondents reported a range of percentages of non-white clients; 11 reported that 20% to 40% of their clients were non-white, nine reported 40% to 60%, six reported 60% to 80%, and nine reported their clients to be between 80% and 100% ethnic minorities. This finding is likely a reflection of Minnesota's demographics as a state; respondents in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area may be more likely to work with non-white clients, whereas other areas of Minnesota are less diverse (United States Census Bureau, 2013).

When asked how often they attempt to use books that portray characters representing their clients' ethnicities, 43% chose "Sometimes," and 38% chose "Most of the time." Only 10% of social workers (n=6) surveyed indicated "Never" or "Rarely" doing this, while the remaining 10% (n=6) said they "Always" attempt to use books that match their clients' ethnicities. This finding lends support to the notion that most social workers in Minnesota are taking issues of ethnic representation into consideration in their selection of books for children.

Those respondents who did not select "Never" in response to the previous question were also asked how difficult they feel it is to locate books portraying ethnic minorities. Over half (60%) reported that this is "Somewhat difficult," contrasting with one-third (32%) of respondents who indicated that it is "Not at all difficult" to find books representing ethnic minorities. Only 8% (n=5) of participants reported finding it "Very difficult." This finding suggests that while children's books with diverse characters are available, some social workers find that they require some extra effort to locate. The fact that so few participants found this task "Very difficult" is a promising indication of the availability of books portraying diverse characters. This is congruent with studies

indicating that the representation of diversity in children's books has become more equitable over time (Evans & Davies, 2000; Diekman and Murnen, 2004; Nilsson, 2005; McNair, 2003; & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007).

Most respondents (83%) in the present study reported using books with both individuals and groups, rather than using one of these formats exclusively. Social workers also reported using a variety of activities in conjunction with books in therapy. The most frequently reported activities were discussion (n=64), art (n=54), and role-play or drama activities (n=52). Writing, music, and yoga were also reported to be used in conjunction with books. This finding lends support for the use of accompanying activities with books in therapy. It is also consistent with previous studies evaluating book-related interventions with children; some form of therapeutic discussion appears to be a common component in many of these studies (Adler & Foster, 1997; Betzalel & Shechtman, 2010; Borders & Paisley, 1992; Shechtman, 1999; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Shechtman (1999) suggests that this process of "therapeutic discussion," or exploration of the book's material, is key to the change process.

When asked about the formats they use for presenting books to children, most respondents reported reading aloud (n=61) or reading cooperatively (n=47) with the child. Fewer respondents reported providing books for independent reading (n=29) or for parents to read to their children (n=31). This finding contrasts with Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) survey of counselors, in which independent reading and reading to or with the client were the two most-reported formats, cited by 96% and 92% of respondents, respectively. As with earlier questions, this discrepancy between the two studies is likely related to the ages of the participants' clientele; reading aloud or

cooperatively are more developmentally appropriate formats for children who are still learning to read.

Participants in the present study reported using a variety of methods for selecting books to use with children. Independent research or reading the book themselves, recommendations from peers, and using the books provided by their work setting were the most frequently reported methods. Recommendations from clients, library resources, and catalogues or bibliographies were reported less often. This finding corroborates findings from Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) survey of counselors, in which 98% of respondents reported reading the book themselves and 73% reported using peer recommendations as primary methods for selecting books. Pehrsson and McMillen were surprised to find that only 3% of participants reported using library resources for finding books; they refer to librarians as "undiscovered therapeutic allies," due to their specialized knowledge about literature (2010, p. 422). In the present study 17 respondents reported that they use library resources "Often" and 30 respondents indicated using them "Sometimes." This finding is promising as it suggests that although library resources are not the most preferred method, a sizeable group of respondents (n=47) use them either "Often" or "Sometimes." This difference in findings may be explained in part by the participants' work settings; 89% of respondents in the present study work in school settings, where libraries may be more easily accessible.

One-hundred percent of those respondents who answered Question 12 (n=60) reported using books to address specific issues pertaining to their child clients. Respondents were asked to list some of the topics they used books to address in therapy, as well as the books they found most useful for these topics. Topics mentioned by

multiple respondents included: feelings or emotions, social skills, divorce, bullying, loss and grief, self-injury, anger, self-esteem, depression, anxiety and worry, mindfulness, and different kinds of families. Three of these topics overlap with those mentioned by counselors in Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) survey; family or couple issues, grief or loss, and social skills were commonly reported in that study as well. It makes sense that social workers in the present study reported several topics not mentioned in Pehrsson and McMillen's survey, as some of the issues most pertinent for children (such as bullying) are likely to differ from those faced by adults.

Social workers in this study were also asked to list books and authors that they found useful. This list can be found in Appendix B. An analysis of the content of these books is beyond the scope of this paper, however, the book mentioned most frequently, *Dinosaurs Divorce*, is worth noting for its implications. Published in 1988, *Dinosaurs Divorce* has been criticized for its stereotyped representations of gender (McMillen & Pehrsson, 2010). Interestingly, it appears to remain a popular choice amongst counselors; it was the most-cited fictional title in Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) survey as well. This is problematic, as it suggests that some of the books being used by social workers may be well-known but outdated; even more recent titles may contain harmful stereotypes.

When asked if they agreed with the statement: "Books can be agents of social change," 98% of participants who responded to this question (n=64) indicated that they agreed. No respondents disagreed with the statement, and only one respondent said he/she was "Not sure." This finding is promising as it indicates that social workers see a

connection between literature and broader, macro-level issues of social justice, a stance that is consistent with social work values.

Over half (62%) of social workers surveyed reported receiving no formal education or training on the use of books in therapy. This finding makes sense in light of Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010) study, which found no standardized programs for preparing counselors to use bibliotherapy. Considering the widespread use of books in therapy, this is significant as it indicates that many professionals are using bibliotherapy without any training on how to do so.

Qualitative Data

At the end of the survey, social workers were invited to share any other thoughts they had about the use of books in therapy or issues of diversity. The 27 comments provided were analyzed qualitatively using grounded theory, revealing themes consistent with the literature as well as a few emerging themes for further study.

Positive feelings about the use of books. The first theme included comments expressing positive feelings about using books in therapy, as well as comments referencing a variety of uses for books. The fact that social workers like to use books with children is implicit in the finding that 99% of those surveyed reported doing so, however, the qualitative information substantiates this finding and adds depth to it. Many respondents reported that books are one of their most favored interventions with children, referring to them as "absolutely vital," and "one of the most effective tools." Social workers also identified a variety of therapeutic reasons to use books with children, including: "starting a conversation about a particular issue," learning "complex ideas,"

providing "permission to talk about difficult subjects," helping children "know they are not alone," and "normalizing thoughts."

Books for modeling & building empathy. Social workers in this survey made several comments relating to the use of books for role modeling and teaching empathy to children. They cite the opportunity to "identify with the feelings and experiences of various characters," and to "view things from the perspective of others," to be the primary mechanism through which books facilitate this learning. This finding echoes Smolkin and Young's (2011) description of books as "self-affirming mirrors" or "windows into other lives" (p. 217). It is also consistent with the psychodynamic theory of "identification, catharsis, and insight" in bibliotherapy first described by Russell and Shrodes (1950), as well as Social Learning Theory's concept of "modeling" as an avenue to teach ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling.

Importance of diversity. Social workers in the present study identified the depiction of diverse characters as an important factor in helping children connect with books in therapy. Respondents expressed the importance of children being able to "see themselves positively and realistically," and of using books portraying "a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds." One respondent related a story about how excited children become when they see "characters that look like them," citing the example of a book about African-American hair. Overall, this data constitutes an emerging finding indicating that many social workers are mindful of issues of cultural representation in their use of books with children. This stance is consistent with research suggesting that bibliotherapy interventions using elements of a child's culture may be more effective than interventions without cultural specificity (Costantino et al., 1994). Only one respondent

made a statement against the importance of diversity in children's literature, explaining that "kids get that problems are universal so it doesn't really matter." Another participant thanked the researcher for bringing up this issue, after realizing his or her books were "not as diverse as I thought they were."

Availability of books with diverse characters. Social workers in this survey provided some useful comments about the availability of books for culturally diverse audiences. Several participants referenced an improvement in this area during recent years. One respondent explained that although there are "a lot more resources to draw from today than even a few years ago," there is still "a LONG way to go in terms of respectfully portraying the diversity that is our world." This finding is compatible with a review of the literature on the depictions of diverse groups in children's books; the visibility of these groups and the quality of their depictions have improved over time, but many groups remain underrepresented or are portrayed in ways that perpetuate harmful stereotypes (Evans & Davies, 2000; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Nilsson, 2005; McNair, 2003; & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). One respondent spoke to this issue by identifying a need for "more books on the diversity of GLBT."

Barriers to using books. Finally, two participants named the lack of "cost-effective access" to quality books as a barrier to using them in therapy. One mentioned a problem that may be familiar amongst social workers who work with children: leaving books behind when moving to a different setting. One social worker expressed a desire to learn more about the issues presented in this study, stating that "it would be nice to see MSSWA sponsor more inservices on this topic."

Implications & Conclusion

The present study corroborates earlier findings showing that the use of bibliotherapy is widespread amongst professional counselors (Marrs, 1995; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). To date, however, there has been little research examining the details of how books are used with therapy: how, why, and with whom? This is especially true of the therapeutic use of books with children, despite the logical inference that younger clients may be especially well-suited to this intervention. The present study is limited by a small sample size (68), low response rate (25%), and limited region (Minnesota). It provides emerging evidence that social workers use books for a range of therapeutic purposes with their child clients. Given respondents' enthusiasm for this intervention and its prevalence in the field, more extensive research on how and why social workers use books in therapy with children is warranted.

Overall, social workers in this study indicated that they are mindful of representations of cultural diversity in the books they select for their child clients, and several referenced the child's ability to identify with characters as an important consideration in this process. Respondents reported experiencing varying levels of difficulty in finding diverse books, however, many felt that availability has improved in recent years. Future research should continue to examine how social workers consider diversity in their book selection process, the accessibility of quality children's literature portraying culturally diverse characters, and how a child's ability to identify with those characters might influence treatment outcomes.

The results of this study provide considerable support for the greater inclusion of bibliotherapy education in the social work field. Over half (62%) of respondents reported

having no formal education or training on the use of books in therapy. This is problematic in light of bibliotherapy's prevalence and the field's increasing emphasis on evidence-based practice. More information is needed to distinguish the many contributing factors that could make the use of books effective in therapy. What are the key aspects of bibliotherapy in terms of setting, type and quality of book, accompanying activities, age, and presenting problem(s)? How do younger clients interact with picture books portraying characters that look like them, versus those that look different? There are many unanswered questions.

Another troubling finding in this study was the continued popularity of *Dinosaurs Divorce*, a children's book published in 1988 that has been criticized for its stereotyped gender depictions (McMillen & Pehrsson, 2010). Given that so few social workers have formal training in the use and selection of books, and that relying on the agency's existing books is a common practice, it is not surprising that some of the selections being used in therapy may not be up to current quality standards. Pehrsson and McMillen (2005) cite the lack of any standardized bibliotherapy evaluation tools as a key part of this issue, advocating for the creation of such a tool to aid professional counselors in selecting quality literature. Further research is needed to explore other ways to assist social workers in evaluating books for quality and diversity.

One respondent in this study thanked the researcher for bringing awareness to this topic, explaining, "My books are not as diverse as I thought." Books and stories seem to be naturally compatible with children; perhaps this is part of the reason their use in the therapeutic setting has gone largely unexamined. A greater understanding of how books can be used to support therapy would benefit the field, and our clients by extension.

Social workers, particularly those who work with children, can promote cultural inclusivity by practicing more mindful selection of picture books and by educating ourselves on how to use those books in ways that will benefit our clients the most.

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APPENDIX A: Survey

Q1 CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY: This survey seeks to learn how social workers use books in therapy with children, and how they address issues of diversity in the process. There are no risks or benefits associated with participation in this study, and no negative consequences for deciding not to participate. Your answers are anonymous and confidential. Do you consent to participate in this study?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If Yes Is Not Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Q2 Do you use books in therapy with children?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To Agree or disagree: "Books can be agen..."

Q3 What types of books do you use most often? (Choose all that apply)

- Picture books: fiction (1)
- Picture books: nonfiction (2)
- Non-picture books: fiction (3)
- Non-picture books: nonfiction (4)
- Workbooks/Instructional Books (5)
- Audio Books (6)
- Electronic Books (7)
- Other: (8) _____

Q4 What ages group(s) of children do you use books with? (Choose all that apply)

- 0-2 years (1)
- 2-4 years (2)
- 4-6 years (3)
- 6-8 years (4)
- 8-10 years (5)
- 10-12 years (6)
- 12-14 years (7)
- 14+ years (8)

Q5 Approximately what percentage of your child clients are ethnic minorities (non-white)?

- 0%-20% (1)
- 20%-40% (2)
- 40%-60% (3)
- 60%-80% (4)
- 80%-100% (5)

Q6 How often do you attempt to use books portraying characters that represent your clients' ethnicity?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Most of the time (4)
- Always (5)

Answer If How often do you attempt to use books portraying characte... Never Is Not Selected

Q6a How difficult do you find it to locate books that portray ethnic minorities?

- Very Difficult (1)
- Somewhat Difficult (2)
- Not at all Difficult (3)

Q7 In which format do you use bibliotherapy?

- With individuals (1)
- With groups (2)
- With both individuals and groups (3)

Q8 Do you use the following activities in conjunction with books?

| | Yes (1) | No (2) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Discussion (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Art (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Role-play or Drama activities (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Writing (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Music (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other: (6) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q9 Which of the following formats do you use to present books to children?

| | Yes (1) | No (2) |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Read aloud to child(ren) (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Read cooperatively with child(ren) (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Provide for independent reading (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Provide for parents to read to child (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other: (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q10 How often do you use the following methods for selecting books to use with children?

| | Often (1) | Sometimes (2) | Rarely or Never (3) |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Independent research or read the book myself (1) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Recommendations from peers (2) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Recommendations from clients (3) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Library resources (4) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Use what is provided by agency/setting (5) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Catalogues or Ads (please list): (6) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Bibliographies (please list): (7) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Q11 Do you use books to address specific issues pertaining to the child? (Ex: divorce, bullying, social skills)

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Answer If Do you use books to address specific issues pertaining to... Yes Is Selected

Q11a Please list some of these topics and the titles of books that you find most useful for addressing these issues in therapy:

Q12 Agree or disagree: "Books can be agents of social change."

- Agree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Not sure (3)

Q13 Have you received formal education or training on the use of books in therapy?

(Choose all that apply)

- No (1)
- Yes, as an undergraduate student (2)
- Yes, as a graduate or doctoral student (3)
- Yes, through agency in-services or professional conferences (4)
- Yes, through another source: (5) _____

Q14 How many years of experience do you have working with children as a social worker?

Q15 In what type of setting do you currently work?

- School (1)
- Agency (2)
- Other: (3) _____
- Private practice (4)

Q16 Please share any other thoughts you have about the use of books in therapy with children or issues of diversity:

APPENDIX B: Resource List

(*s indicate multiple recommendations)

Participant-recommended books by title:

About to Burst: Handling Stress and Ending Violence; Rebecca Ruggles Radcliffe (1999)

Affirmation Weaver: A Believe in Yourself Story; Lori Lite (2011)

Agate: What Good is a Moose?; Joy Morgan Dey (2007)

Angry Octopus: A Relaxation Story; Lori Lite (2011)

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook; Edmund J. Bourne (2011)

Boundaries: A Guide for Teens; Val J. Peter & Tom Dowd (2000)

The Brown Bottle; Penny Jones (1983)

Bully B.E.A.N.S.; Julia Cook (2009)

***Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain*; Trevor Romain (1997)

Changing Families: A Guide for Kids & Grown-ups; David Fassler, Michele Lash, & Sally Ives (1988)

Check & Connect Manual; University of MN

Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Goodness Gorillas; Lisa McCourt (1997)

Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul; Jack Canfield (1999)

Chidi Only Likes Blue: An African Book of Colours; Ifeoma Onyefulu (2006)

Chrissa Stands Strong; Mary Casanova (2009)

Chrysanthemum; Kevin Henkes (2007)

Clifford's Manners; Norman Bridwell (2010)

Coping Cat Workbook; Philip C. Kendall & Kristina A. Hedtke (2006)

******Dinosaurs Divorce*; Marc Brown & Laurie Krasny Brown (1988)

Eggs; Jerry Spinelli (2008)

Enemy Pie; Derek Munson (2000)

The Family Book; Todd Parr (2010)

Franklin's Bad Day; Paulette Bourgeois (1998)

From Mad to Worse; Jim Boulden (1995)

***Hands Are Not For Hitting*; Martine Agassi Ph.D (2009)

Have You Filled a Bucket Today?; Carol Cloud & David Messing (2007)

Hot Stuff to Help Kids Chill Out: The Anger Management Book; Jerry Wilde (1997)

How It Feels When Parents Divorce; Jill Krementz (1988)

- How to Be a Friend: A Guide to Making Friends & Keeping Them*; Laurie Krasny Brown
(2001)
- How to Lose All Your Friends*; Nancy Carlson (1997)
- How to Take the Grrr Out of Anger*; Elizabeth Verdick & Marjorie Lisovskis (2002)
- I'm Like You, You're Like Me: A Book About Understanding and Appreciating Each
Other*; Cindy Gainer (2011)
- The Incredible 5 Point Scale: Assisting Students in Understanding Social Interactions
and Controlling their Emotional Responses*; Kari Dunn Buron & Mitzi Curtis
(2012)
- It's Not the Stork! A Book About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, & Friends*; Robie
H. Harris (2008)
- I Want to Play: A Children's Problem Solving Book*; Elizabeth Crary (1996)
- Just Like Josh Gibson*; Angela Johnson (2007)
- Keep Cool!*; Paula Galey (2004)
- Loser*; Jerry Spinelli (2003)
- Manners Can Be Fun*; Munro Leaf (2004)
- Mood Management: A Cognitive-Behavioral Skills-Building Program for Adolescents*;
Carol A. Langelier (2001)
- Mrs. Ruby's Life Lessons for Kids*; Joan Zientak (2004)
- My Best Friend Will*; Jamie Lowell and Tara Tichel (2005)
- My Daddy Is in Jail: Story, Discussion Guide, and Group Activities for Grades K-5*;
Janet M. Bender (2003)
- **My Many Colored Days*; Dr. Seuss (1996)
- My Secret Bully*; Trudy Ludwig (2005)
- No: Why kids--of all ages--Need to Hear It & Ways Parents Can Say It*; David Walsh
(2007)
- ***One*; Kathryn Otoshi (2008)
- On Monday When it Rained*; Cheryl Kachenmeister (2001)
- The Other Side*; Jacqueline Woodson & E.B. Lewis (2001)
- Please Stop Laughing At Me: One Woman's Inspirational True Story*; Jodee Blanco
(2010)

- **Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World;* Rosalind Wiseman (2009)
- A Rainbow of Friends;* P.K. Hallinan (2006)
- Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X.: A Research-Based Program of Relaxation, Learning, & Self-Esteem for Children;* Jeffrey S. Allen & Roger J. Klein (1997)
- ***The Recess Queen;* Alexis O'Neill (2002)
- Rhinos & Raspberries: Tolerance Tales for the Early Grades;* Lois Lowry & Leo Acadia (2006)
- Sea Otter Cove: A Relaxation Story;* Lori Lite (2008)
- See My Pain! Creative Strategies & Activities for Helping Young People Who Self-Injure;* Susan Bowman & Kevin Randall (2006)
- Some Secrets Are for Sharing;* Randy Winston-Hillier (1986)
- Sometimes I Feel Awful;* Joan Prestine (2001)
- Sometimes My Mommy Gets Angry;* Bebe Moore Campbell (2005)
- Speak Up and Get Along! Learn the Mighty Might, Thought Chop, & More Tools to Make Friends, Stop Teasing, and Feel Good About Yourself;* Scott Cooper (2005)
- Stop and Think Workbook;* Philip C. Kendall (1992)
- Stopping the Pain: A Workbook for Teens Who Cut and Self Injure;* Lawrence Shapiro (2008)
- Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves!* Trevor Romain & Elizabeth Verdick (2005)
- **Superflex... A Superhero Social Thinking Curriculum;* Stephanie Madrigal, Michelle Garcia Winner & Kelly Knopp (2008)
- The Survival Guide for Kids with ADD or ADHD;* John F. Taylor Ph.D. (2006)
- Taking the "Duh" Out of Divorce;* Trevor Romain (2009)
- Teamwork Isn't My Thing, and I Don't Like to Share!;* Julia Cook & Kelsey De Weerd (2012)
- They Broke the Law- You Be the Judge: True Cases of Teen Crime;* Thomas A. Jacobs (2003)
- Think Good- Feel Good: A Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy Workbook for Children;* Paul Stallard (2002)
- The Three Questions;* Jon J. Muth (2002)

- Today I Feel Silly: And Other Moods That Make My Day*; Jamie Lee Curtis (1998)
- Touching Spirit Bear*; Ben Mikaelson (2005)
- Trouble Talk*; Trudy Ludwig (2008)
- A Volcano in My Tummy: Helping Children to Handle Anger*; Eliane Whitehouse & Warwick Pudney (1998)
- **The Way I Feel*; Janan Cain (2000)
- Wemberly Worried*; Kevin Henkes (2010)
- What Does It Mean To Me? 24 Hidden Rules Worksheets to Help Children with Asperger's Syndrome Learn Social Skills*; Michael Canavan (2011)
- What to Do When Your Brain Gets Stuck: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming OCD*; Dawn Huebner (2007)
- What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*; Dawn Huebner & Bonnie Matthews (2005)
- When Charlie McButton Lost Power*; Suzanne Collins (2007)
- When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing*; Marilyn E. Gootman Ed.D. (2005)
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*; Laurie Krasnie Brown (1998)
- ***When Mom and Dad Separate: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief from Divorce*; Marge Heegard (1996)
- When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety*; Kari Dunn Buron (2006)
- When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief*; Marge Heegaard (1996)
- When Sophie Gets Angry--Really, Really Angry...*; Molly Ban (2004)
- Wilma Jean the Worry Machine*; Julia Cook (2012)
- Why Do They Act That Way: A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*; David Walsh (2005)
- Words Are Not for Hurting*; Elizabeth Verdick (2004)
- The Words Hurt: Helping Children Cope with Verbal Abuse*; Chris Loftis (1997)
- Yoga Calm for Children: Educating Heart, Mind, & Body*; Lynea Gillen & James Gillen (2008)

You are a Social Detective: Explaining Social Thinking to Kids; Michelle Garcia Winner
(2010)

You've Got Dragons; Kathryn Cave & Nick Maland (2003)

Zero; Kathryn Otsoshi (2010)

Recommended Series & Authors:

**Cheri J. Meiners series

Drawing Together series; Marge Eaton Heegaard

Free Spirit Publishing

Izzy Kalman audio tapes on bullying

****Julia Cook

Little Bill series; Bill Cosby

Michelle Garcia Winner

Monday-Friday series; Abram Moser

The Way I Feel series; Cornelia Maude Spelman

Recommended Catalogues & Bibliographies:

Boys Town Press

***Child's Work

***Child's Play

****Free Spirit

**Marco Publishing

NAMI

**PACER

Parents as Teachers

***Second Step Curriculum

Teaching Tolerance

**Youth Light

