

Case Study: Emma Wallace, Senior Librarian, St Benedict's School, London Ealing

Creating a bibliotherapy collection to support pupils social and emotional well-being

I have always been aware of the important role the school library plays as a safe haven for a wide range of students; from the ones who are perhaps going through a difficult time at school or home; are being bullied or feel stressed by exams; who are perhaps questioning their identity; or have a special educational need. It is this broad range of students I had in mind when I decided, at the beginning of the academic year in September 2019, to create a special collection of books to support students' social and emotional needs. In year 7 and 8 library lessons, I already discuss with students the huge array of benefits that come from reading, such as helping improve memory, expanding knowledge, developing imagination and an understanding of relationships. I loved the idea of coupling these benefits with a 'Bibliotherapy' book scheme, which would include both fiction and non-fiction books on topics that would help students with their social and emotional wellbeing. There is something very empowering about a student discovering a book which is relevant to them, in which they learn something new about themselves or in relation to others. Reading also helps students develop the language to express themselves on personal issues.

At St Benedict's, students are very well supported in their personal, social, and health issues, with weekly, whole school timetabled PSHE lessons covering a broad range of themes and topics. I realised that the library could play an essential role in supporting these lessons, either by providing a weekly relevant bibliotherapy book list on the taught topic or by allowing individuals or groups of students to visit the library to access the bibliotherapy collection. This was important because, whilst we in the library know of the vital role the library can play in supporting students' mental wellbeing, many staff and students do not. I saw that integrating the library's bibliotherapy

collection into the PSHE curriculum was one of the best ways to raise the profile of the library and ensure that the whole school community would understand and engage with it. This project would also help to ensure that the senior leadership team viewed the library as an integral part of a student's education, rather than a voluntary aside.

I was also keen to promote the library as a welcoming, supportive space and saw the bibliotherapy collection as a key way to do this. Whilst classroom teaching often only allows for more traditional, formal, teacher-led learning, the library can provide an informal, relaxed space for students to quietly explore topics individually, without peer pressure or assessment. By positioning the bibliotherapy collection in the library, I hoped to engage a wide range of students, providing a sanctuary and familiar space for them as they progressed through the school.

My first step in creating the collection was to identify the main topics taught in the PSHE programme to ensure that the books directly correlated to the lessons. These included self-esteem, stress and anxiety, friendships and bullying, parent/child relationships, identity, body image and relationships. There were also many others topics, for example, online safety and digital citizenship, rights and responsibilities, careers and ambitions, fitness, cooking and healthy eating. I decided that I would not include the broader physical health and economic topic areas covered as it would make the collection too wide ranging. Once I'd limited the collection to selected key social and emotional topics, I began my research on the internet, identifying potential books. I also investigated mental health charities and organisations, and their national campaigns on social media, which provided many useful resources and book lists.

Once I had the lists of books on the various topics, our catalogue was searched to check whether we already held the titles. The books that we didn't hold I ordered, assigning a sizeable amount of our budget to ensure we could really develop the

bibliotherapy collection. Fiction books were catalogued with relevant keywords added to their records such as PSHE, wellbeing and mental health. The non-fiction titles were classified according to their Dewey number and I created a new 'location' for these books in the relevant catalogue field, differentiating them from the main non-fiction book collection.

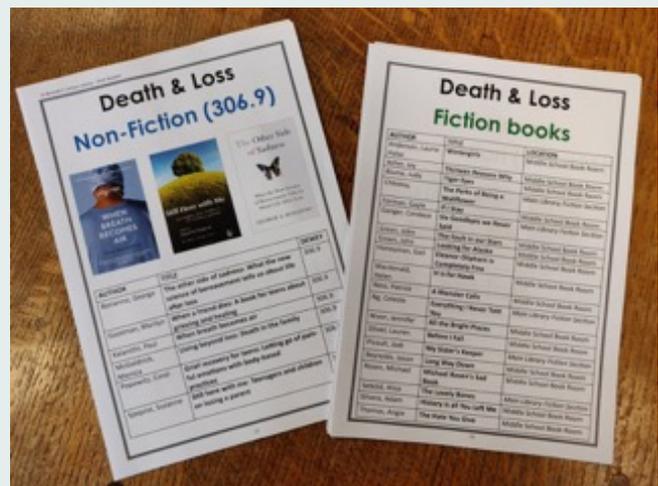
One issue I encountered when adding books to the lists was that many of them, particularly the fiction titles, covered numerous social and emotional issues in one story. In these cases, I added the titles to multiple lists to ensure the students had the best chance of coming across a relevant title for their needs. Also when cataloguing the books, all the possible keywords were included to ensure relevant book titles appeared in a student's search results list.

I realised that the collection needed to be positioned in an easily accessible space, away from the library checkout counter, to ensure students didn't feel they were being watched or judged in their selection. I decided upon our 'Middle School Book Room', a well-used, bright, modern space full of fiction, including comfy seating and beanbags to relax and read.



The non-fiction books were placed on a shelf in this area, in the hope that students would stumble across the collection during break or lunchtime, as well as being directed to use it in their PSHE lessons. However, I decided that the bibliotherapy fiction books should remain in the main run of fiction as I didn't want students to potentially miss the titles when browsing. A way to resolve this issue could have been to hold multiple copies of the book titles in different locations but we didn't have room for this in our library.

Once I had put the book list together, I created a 'Bibliotherapy Booklet' with a page for each topic list. I took printed copies of this booklet along to individual meetings with the two school councillors, where I garnered their thoughts on it, and whether it would be of use to them and the students who come and see them. These meetings were extremely useful, illuminating areas missing from the collection, including anger, divorce and loss.

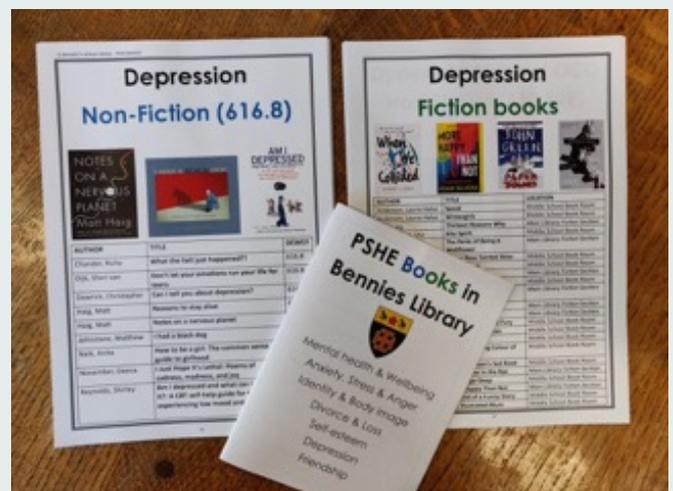


I also became aware from the meetings that many students who visit the councillors are not library users, perhaps because they are reluctant readers or struggle academically. As a result, I looked to include resources that would be more accessible to them, such as graphic novels, picture books and magazine titles; for example, the 'Heartstopper' graphic novel series by Alice Oseman, the picture book 'I had a Black Dog' by Matthew Johnstone and Teen Breathe magazine. Both councillors were very positive regarding the collection and booklet, suggesting that they could hold copies in their offices and hand out/recommend books to students who may need support with particular issues.

I also arranged a further meeting with the head of PSHE to discuss the launch of the bibliotherapy collection in PSHE lessons. We discussed the idea of providing a printed copy of the booklet to every student in school, but I thought it might be better to share the booklet electronically on our school intranet library pages, and then perhaps think about integrating the bibliotherapy lists into the official PSHE booklet in future years. The head of PSHE suggested she could integrate the scheme into lessons by adding a slide to the weekly themed PowerPoints, which would include a list of relevant book titles and provide students time to go to the library to borrow or read during the lesson or in their own time.

St Benedict School's Strategic Plan for 2020-2013 makes numerous references to the pastoral care and personal development of students, with the introduction stating that the school "seeks to offer an education which allows every pupil to flourish as an individual, with high quality pastoral care to support personal development." (St Benedict's School, 2020) This emphasis reflects the importance the school places on students' mental and wellbeing. The 'bibliotherapy' project directly supports these key aims, by providing a collection of books to help students and by supporting the PSHE classroom lessons. This ultimately ensures that the library plays a key role in supporting and promoting the schools strategic plan. Whilst we have not yet been able to assess the impact of the project, with it only launching in February and the school shutting down in March due to the Covid-19 situation, I hope to assess the collection usage through accessing borrowing figures. I also plan to carry out a survey amongst teachers teaching PSHE lessons to see if the book lists have been of use to them, and how they perceive students have understood and used the collection. I would like to carry out a student survey across the different year groups, to see if the fiction or non-fiction books have helped them with any personal or social issues. It is quite a difficult area to assess though, as improvements in mental wellbeing are often subtle, subconscious, and happen over an extended period. The bibliotherapy collection supports sensitive and emotive issues, ones that the students may be vulnerable or confused about and any questioning needs to be handled sensitively.

Much of my initial inspiration for the bibliotherapy project was taken from the Reading Agency's work with public libraries and their Reading Well: Books on Prescription scheme, which supports people "to understand and manage your health and wellbeing using helpful reading." (The Reading Agency, 2020). This scheme was initially launched in joint partnership with health professionals, with GPs endorsing the books and referring their patients to selected titles, available in their local library. I was aware that as a school library we didn't have the same level of medical support or knowledge and consequently wanted to make sure that our promotion of the collection was as a supportive resource, available in correlation with other support available in school, and that the library staff would not (and of course could not) take on the role of health advisors. The Reading Well website was very useful though, including a 'Young People's Mental Health' booklist on key topics such as anxiety, worry and panic, bullying, depression, self-harm and stress. This was a brilliant starting place to begin collating lists of both fiction and non-fiction books for our own bibliotherapy book collection.



I attended a school librarian meeting at UCS Hampstead library, where we heard from a librarian who had implemented a scheme that promoted reading as a way for children to build empathy skills, recognising that books permit students to identify with different book characters and see things from new perspectives. This was an idea advocated by the 'Empathy Lab', being "the first organisation to build children's empathy, literacy and social activism through a systematic use of high quality literature" (Empathy Lab) and the Empathy Lab website had a huge range of 'Read for Empathy Book Collections' for various age groups. I also visited Oakham School library in June 2019,

where I came across a wonderful display of fiction books, celebrating 'Empathy Day'. It was from these discoveries that I was encouraged to include fiction, as well as non-fiction, in St Benedict's bibliotherapy collection.

There are numerous national awareness days and weeks that support social and emotional wellbeing, including Children's Mental Health Week in early February, Stress Awareness Month in April, Mental Health Day at the beginning of October and Anti-Bullying Week in November. To support Mental Health Day in 2019, BookTrust put together a list of titles, which were a useful selection for people of any age, with their wonderful, emotive pictures and storylines. I recognised that a bibliotherapy collection of books in our own school library would be a brilliant way to support these national awareness days and provide students with connected resources to read.

The book collection was almost complete by the beginning of February, with the majority of the books shelved and ready to be borrowed, plus copies of the booklet placed around the library. This coincided with 'Children's Mental Health Week' 2-9 February 2020, for which I created a display of books selected from the bibliotherapy collection and posters to promote the week. The display welcomed students as they entered the library and acted as a quiet launch for the bibliotherapy scheme. It resulted in some engagement with the collection, with one student keen to read the third volume of the 'Heartstopper' graphic novel by Alice Oseman and access further titles from our LGBTQ list. My ultimate goal was for the bibliotherapy scheme to be integrated into the PSHE curriculum, the book collection to be well used and, ultimately, create a better understanding amongst our school community of how the library can support their social and emotional wellbeing. I have not yet had a chance to see the scheme integrated into lessons as the school unfortunately shut down due to the Covid-19 situation in March, but will pick it up as soon as we return to school.

ADVICE

1. Don't be afraid to arrange meetings with other members of staff outside the library when developing your bibliotherapy collection, whether that is with school councillors, relevant heads of departments or members of the senior management team. This will ensure that staff feel involved in the project and develop an understanding of what you are trying to achieve, also helping to make sure that it is a success. It will also be beneficial to your project as you will learn what resources are required to support the needs of your specific school community and how the scheme can best be integrated into the school curriculum.
2. Think very carefully about where the bibliotherapy collection can be physically placed in your library – this is key to it being well used. It should ideally be in a space that students access easily and frequently, containing relaxed furniture that allows for browsing and reading, and away from the library check-out counter.
3. Don't worry too much about the Dewey numbers not dealing entirely satisfactorily with the non-fiction bibliotherapy topics. Instead, make sure you spend time cataloguing the books consistently, creating a new bibliotherapy 'location' and deciding upon a set of keywords to attach to the records, plus making sure to add in any other key themes of the book.