

Honors Thesis Proposal

Working Title:

How to Live Happily Ever After: Analyzing the Potential of Middle-Grade Fantasy Novels for use in Resilience Bibliotherapy

Project Purpose:

The purpose of this thesis study is to explore the potential efficacy of secondary readers' (grades 3-7) use of fantasy novels in expanding their social and emotional learning skills. Specifically, I am seeking to understand whether five Newbery award winning fantasy stories demonstrate evidence of within-novel scenarios as a resource for building at-risk students' resilience through an approach called bibliotherapy.

Project Importance:

Students ages 8-12 face increasingly difficult challenges due to high-risk situations and mental health concerns. All across the board, research shows that significant proportions of students this age experience bullying, traumatic events, and mental health challenges. Many students who have experienced significant adversity, or "at-risk" students, struggle to overcome challenges and focus on academic, social, and other key areas of development. An important factor in students' ability to cope with challenges and be academically successful is resilience. When students are resilient, they can better persevere through adversity and cope well in the face of challenges (Zhu, et al., 2022). Educators and school psychologists use a variety of strategies to help students build resilience, including bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy is defined as "the therapeutic use of carefully chosen stories intended to support children as they adjust to risks that threaten their optimal development" (Theron et al., 2017, para. 3). While many non-fiction books have been used in bibliotherapy, fiction novels remain a largely unexplored resource in the field of bibliotherapy (Prater et al., 2006).

The results from my research could provide a valuable resource for educators and clinicians seeking to build resilience in secondary readers (grades 3-7), especially at-risk students. Scenarios of resilience portrayed by characters in fantasy novels provide examples for teachers and clinicians to help students build resilience through bibliotherapy.

Project Overview:

I have experienced firsthand the difficulties of learning to cope with adversity as a child, as my mother struggled with serious physical and mental illnesses for the majority of my childhood. In my coursework as an Elementary Education major, I have done further research into the academic and social challenges faced by children who have experienced traumatic events or other kinds of adversity. Students cannot easily learn or progress at school when the adversity they face overcomes their coping abilities and they experience toxic stress (Souers &

Hall, 2016). While doing research for a class on different ways to help struggling students cope, I was introduced to the practice of bibliotherapy and was immediately fascinated. In my own personal experiences as an avid reader, as well as in experiences working with students in classrooms and school resource rooms, I have discovered that books can have a powerful influence on their reader. As I did more research on the process and results of bibliotherapy, my thesis question began to emerge. My goal is to provide additional resources for classroom teachers and other educators interested in implementing bibliotherapeutic practices with students to build greater resilience. By analyzing fantasy books that have won the Newbery Award in the past 20 years, I will provide unique insights regarding the potential of middle-grade fantasy novels to be used in resilience bibliotherapy.

Why resilience?

Bibliotherapy has proven to be effective for helping children develop in many ways, but I have chosen resilience as my focus because of the vital role resilience plays in the lives of children who face adversity. Research has consistently shown that more than 90% of adults have experienced at least one lifetime traumatic event, and many have experienced more (Souers & Hall, 2016). One study reported that more than two thirds of children reported at least 1 traumatic event by age 16 (SAMSHA, 2022). The impact that these numerous traumatic events have on children leads to shockingly high instances of childhood mental illness and suicidality, and resilience is the key to helping children who have experienced trauma and other adversity to still achieve positive outcomes in their lives (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2020).

Book Criteria and Selection

The use of fantasy novels in bibliotherapy is largely unexplored despite the popularity of fantasy novels for secondary readers (students ages 8-12) (Prater et al., 2006). I have selected five books to code for instances of resilience, using the criteria of middle-grade fantasy novels that have won the Newbery Award in the past 20 years. These books are: *When You Trap a Tiger* by Tae Keller (2020), *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* by Kelly Barnhill (2017), *Flora & Ulysses* by Kate DiCamillo (2014), *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman (2009), and *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo (2004). The Newbery Award is an award given to books that show excellence in a large range of categories, so using Newbery winners ensures that the books will be high quality writing and involve meaningful and relevant themes (American Library Association, n.d.).

Methodology

With the help of my thesis advisor, I will develop a resilience coding instrument based on the RS10 Resilience Screener for Children (The Resilience Center, 2022). The Resilience Scale for Children (RS10) is a 10-item survey that evaluates a child's capacity to respond affirmatively regardless of life experiences. This instrument is based on a child's strengths, helps identify what

is going well in a child's life, is intended to help children perceive their own distinctive aptitudes and abilities, and provides a foundation for children to build upon for resilience. (The Resilience Center, 2022). As I read each book, I will code for scenarios that instantiate resilience based on the five core elements developed in the RS10 (sense of purpose and meaning; authenticity; equanimity; self-reliance, and perseverance.) In formulating the coding instrument, I also plan to incorporate an element of resilience highlighted by Sims-Schouten and Gilbert (2022) that expands the definition of resilience to include resistance and address issues of agency and structure within systemic injustice. With this coding instrument, I will analyze resilience scenarios from the novels that involve main and supporting characters under the age of 18 years old. I will also indicate how these characters responded to the resilience scenarios. For example, one sample item from the RS10 includes: "When I get upset, I know how to calm down," I would code for a scenario in which a main or supporting character under the age of 18 demonstrated being upset and knowing how to calm down. I would also code how main or supporting characters responded to the character who was upset and demonstrated they were able to calm down. I will hire a second coder to increase validity for the coding of the resilience instances. This process will help me understand the potential the books hold for teachers and clinicians who could use them as a resource in bibliotherapy for resilience.

Thesis Committee Information and Qualifications:

Honors Coordinator: Bryant Jensen

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Research Account Number:

Dr. Cutrer-Párraga received her PhD in special education and literacy intervention from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2016. She has worked as a special education teacher, general education teacher, English-language teacher, and literary specialist. Most recently, she worked at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute as the Intervention Director for the Targeted Reading Intervention. She currently conducts qualitative research to support children's academic and social emotional needs. Dr. Cutrer-Párraga has led research many times in areas including bibliotherapy, resilience, and school-based literacy interventions for children's academic and social emotional well being. I met Dr. Cutrer-Párraga when she came

to give a guest presentation to one of my classes in the Spring of 2022. I reached out to her shortly after because of my interest in her presentation, as well as with questions about bibliotherapy related to the development of my thesis.

Faculty Reader: Tina Taylor

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Tina M. Taylor, Ed.D., is a professor and associate dean in the McKay School of Education at Brigham Young University. Dr. Taylor earned her doctoral, masters, and undergraduate degrees at Illinois State University, Utah State University, and Brigham Young University, respectively. She mainly does research related to children with disabilities and chronic conditions, as well as children's literature and bibliotherapy. Dr. Cutrer-Párraga introduced me to Dr. Taylor as another professor with experience in the field of bibliotherapy as I began to formulate my thesis ideas and move forward in developing this thesis proposal.

Project Timeline:

- **September 30, 2022:** Submit thesis proposal
- **October 14, 2022:** Thesis proposal approved
- **October 15-22, 2022:** Adapt resilience screener into coding tool, define instances to look for in books that will be coded as resilience-related.
- **October 23, 2022- January 21, 2023 :** Read books and record data, coding with the instrument derived from resilience screener. Starting with the oldest book (2004, *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo) and working up to the most recent (2020, *When You Trap a Tiger* by Tae Keller), I will read through each book and carefully code for the criteria identified in the instrument. As I read, I will also create a literature review of the books to include in my final thesis.
 - **Book 1, October 23-November 5:** *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo (272 pages)
 - **Book 2, November 6-19:** *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman (312 pages)
 - **Book 3, November 20- December 3:** *Flora & Ulysses* by Kate DiCamillo (256 pages)
 - **Book 4, December 4-17:** *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* by Kelly Barnhill (386 pages)
 - **Book 5, January 8-21:** *When You Trap a Tiger* by Tae Keller (304 pages)
- **January 21, 2023:** Data gathering and literature review of books completed.
- **January 22-February 1, 2023:** Analyze data and create thesis draft

- **February 1, 2023:** Draft of thesis reviewed with faculty advisor
- **February 2-12, 2023:** Thesis draft revisions
- **February 13, 2023:** Final draft of thesis reviewed with faculty advisor
- **February 13-16, 2023:** Final revisions completed as needed
- **February 17, 2023:** Submit finalized thesis and defense form
- **March 7, 2023:** Thesis defended
- **March 17, 2023:** Thesis Final PDF and publication

Funding:

Total funding requested: \$1120

- Expense #1- \$975, hiring a second coder for additional validity. \$13/hour for roughly 75 hours (15 per book, for five books).
- Expense #2- Children's fantasy novels
 - \$45 to purchase 5 books at approx. \$9 each
 (2020) When You Trap a Tiger by Tae Keller
 (2017) The Girl Who Drank the Moon by Kelly Barnhill
 (2014) Flora & Ulysses by Kate DiCamillo
 (2009) The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman
 (2004) The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo
- Expense #3- Licensing agreement to use the Resilience Scale for Children (RS10)
 - \$100 to purchase the resilience screener that I will use to create the coding tool for the data collection.

Culminating Experience:

Goals for publication and potential conferences at which to present

- 2023 Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association (NRMERA) Conference and publication in associated journal
- 2023 Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research (UCUR)
- 2023 MSE Mentored Research Conference

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