Bibliotherapy Library for High School TAG Students

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Research and History: Why Bibliotherapy?

- “Quality literature involving gifted characters should be available to gifted children and adolescents to encourage reflection about their feelings, concerns, and interests. These books can help students gain insights into their own lives and identify with others. Librarians know that children frequently seek books about "kids like me." However, because the development of key characters who are gifted is not typical in most books, help is needed to locate books with gifted characters” (Kingore, bertiekingore.com).

- Books selected for a TAG bibliotherapy program should contain “…well-developed characters who display gifted behaviors; and the stories include thought-provoking problem situations, issues, or personal needs with which gifted students can identify” (Kingore, bertiekingore.com).

- Books chosen for the program should also “…exemplify multiple kinds of giftedness including academic/intellectual, performing arts, creativity, specific subject areas, leadership, and psychomotor. It is significant that the characters displaying giftedness in these books represent diverse ethnic populations and a broad span of socioeconomic levels. Thus, these characters model that gifted potentials exist and require nurturing in every population” (Kingore, bertiekingore.com).
The TAG Situation at Forest Grove High School

- Forest Grove High School has a total of 75 TAG students:
  - 26 TAG-Academic Math
  - 12 TAG-Academic Reading
  - 27 TAG-Intellectually Gifted
  - 10 TAG-Potential
- TAG students have separate advisory program, but there is otherwise no formal TAG program in the high school
The Lost TAG Generation: High School Students

• In general, TAG pull-out and enrichment programs seem to end at 8th grade, and TAG high school students are given options of honors or Advanced Placement classes, but no other options. However, these classes may not meet all–or any–of a TAG student’s needs.

• Teenage TAG students have different emotional and social needs and problems than do elementary school age students, yet they are rarely supported.

• A TAG student who felt accepted and even loved in elementary or middle school programs may not automatically have the same feeling in high school, particularly without support systems.
Bibliotherapy Can Help

• The helpful effects of bibliotherapy (seeing one’s own talents and weaknesses modeled in another, discussing how one is perceived and how one can behave, understanding one’s nature as a gifted individual, understanding choices, etc.) can continue into high school and beyond.

• However, book lists focusing on TAG students generally present books of interest to students through 4th grade or 6th grade, and, rarely, through 8th grade.
Books and Teens

• Teen book lists, when they appear, focus on romance, problem, or reality books, and are generally designed to entice the reluctant adolescent reader. These lists generally do not include books about gifted people and their experiences. Many of the are also high-interest/low-level books which do not appeal to gifted teenagers.

• High school age TAG students are at a reading middle ground. They may have adult reading levels—even very high adult reading levels—but they do not share adult interests. (What 15 year old wants to read a book about a middle-aged man having a crisis, no matter how lauded the author may be?)
My Plan

• In order to rectify this situation, I have created a “TAG teen” reading list, including a variety of genres which appeal to teens, and which focuses on books which have characters who have a variety of gifts and struggles.

• Books have been selected through personal knowledge, recommendations from others, and research into gifted program recommendations, ALA recommendations, local library recommendations, and a variety of “top books for teens” compendia from booksellers.

• As these books are designed to appeal to young adults, rather than younger adolescents or children, some of the books contain subject matter or language which would make them inappropriate for young children, regardless of their reading skills.
My Plan at Forest Grove High School

- Forest Grove High School has a special Advisory program for TAG students at each grade level, and I will provide my information to the instructors of those students.

- I will set up a display of TAG Teen books in the library as well, with as many of the books as we currently possess. Budget restrictions mean that additional acquisitions need to wait until next year.

- I will work with our district’s curriculum coordinator and TAG coordinator to provide the information on the TAG section of the district’s web page.

- Hopefully, in the future, our school can set up more formal reading groups so that the full benefit of the bibliotherapy can be achieved. Even without group reading and organized discussions, I think gifted teens can enjoy and benefit from these books.
An Introduction for the Reading Group

- Once the actual formal reading group is established next year, I will start the students off with two pieces designed to spark discussion and interest.

- The first is the short story “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut. I will guide students in discussion about equality vs. equity, the perceptions of the gifted, how students themselves may feel “shackled” and “weighted down” and how they may choose to act in response.

- The second piece is the DVD Russell Simmons Presents: Brave New Voices. This presentation chronicles the progress of several groups of teens preparing for and competing in the national youth slam poetry competition. The passion and talent of these gifted young men and women, many of whom have no other outlet for their gifts, is very inspiring, and a good spark for the joy of language, words, and stories. However, these teens do not censor themselves, and the language and subject matter will require special district and parental permission in order for the film to be shown.
Because of the disconnection between gifted students’ adult reading levels and their personal growth and interests, many turn to fantasy and science fiction as reading material of choice in these years.

A large subsection of both fantasy and science fiction works focus on characters who have unusual gifts, often unrecognized by those around them. These gifts turn out to be essential in a quest for good. Many students can identify with a character who has powers/gifts/talents beyond the norm and who feels frustrated and unacknowledged by those around him or her. Students can also vicariously enjoy the power and responsibility that these gifts allow the characters ultimately to wield; power that is quite often absent in their own lives.

“Many gifted children have a strong moral code and are deeply concerned about the justice, fairness -- and issues of right and wrong” (giftsforlearning.com)
Graphic Novels

- Graphic novels are very popular with teens, and many have extremely complex worlds and deal with intense issues. They are not to be confused with the comic books of old! Excellent examples exist in both fiction and nonfiction.

- Not all TAG students love to read, and many who did love to read as children have turned away from reading as teenagers. Graphic novels can provide a way back in to literature.

- TAG students who are deeply artistic and not necessarily deeply verbal will appreciate another way to access the information about gifted individuals. Biographical graphic novels, in particular, include characters to whom these teens can connect.
The Minority Gifted

- Obviously, not all gifted students are middle class white kids, and TAG programs nationally are working very hard to identify TAG students from the minority, second language, lower socioeconomic, and special needs populations.

- These students, even more than others, need to find a mirror into their own lives. Unlike the mainstream white middle class students, even a TAG program may not allow them to find others who share their culture, language, lifestyle, and individual challenges.

- Books can fill these gaps!
Adult Books with Teen Appeal

- Many adult novels, particularly ones published in recent years, focus on gifted children and gifted youth, and many are books with high interest for teens, especially TAG teens.

- However, one must note that these are books published for a literate adult reading public, so there is no author or editor filter for “appropriate” material for younger readers.
Young Adult Books for the Gifted

• Young adult books are targeted specifically to middle and high school age readers, and do include topics of interest to them. Not all YA books are simplistic reads or center on simplistic topics. Some of the books feature complex plots and gifted characters.

• It is important to remember that high school TAG programs include 9th graders as well as 12th graders, and their interests and needs widely differ. Some YA books are targeted to young teens, some to older ones.

• High school students also have very diverse backgrounds. Some may have lived difficult lives, and even the 9th graders in these situations have knowledge and life experiences well beyond their years. However, due to asynchronous development and different family structures, many TAG 9th graders are still fairly innocent and prefer reading choices which are more aligned with younger students than with older students and adults. In addition, subject area compaction and grade acceleration may result in the presence of students in the high school TAG program of students who are actually chronologically younger.

• TAG libraries and bibliotherapy programs must incorporate both ends of the spectrum.
The Classics

- Whether from personal interest in a time period, a desire to prepare further for college, or a family culture that instructs students to avoid the moral ambiguities of much contemporary fiction, many students prefer the classics.

- In my district, many parents prefer that their students have no exposure to works of literature including any sexual content, profanity (even mild profanity), or blasphemy. These “G-rated” families must be respected, and their TAG students also need appropriate choices.

- Care must be taken when selecting the classics, as many feature spunky characters, which is not interchangeable with gifted ones. However, careful selection reveals many selections featuring gifted children or adults.
Many excellent biographies exist, and should be selected by and for gifted teens based on their personal interests. A biography recounting the struggles and triumphs of one gifted individual may only be inspiring to a student based on interest in the subject’s field of expertise.

Biographies can be very valuable for individuals, but may be less useful as group reading material specifically because of the diverse nature of the subjects.
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