

Sylvia Goldman

Children's Literature

Dr. Smith

12 October 2025

Bibliotherapy Final: ADHD and other invisible disabilities

Description of Topic

For this bibliotherapy project, I chose the theme of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADHD is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions among school-aged children, affecting approximately 3–5% of that population (Zambo, 2006). Children with ADHD are often characterized as energetic, impulsive, creative, and highly curious—but they may struggle with sustained attention, impulse control, and social interactions. In educational settings, these challenges can lead to frustration, isolation, and a sense of inadequacy for both students and their teachers.

Understanding ADHD through children's literature allows young readers, both with and without ADHD, to see themselves and others with empathy and accuracy. The purpose of this project is to explore how picture books can help children recognize their own strengths, develop self-awareness, and foster an inclusive classroom culture.

Background Information

Children with ADHD experience difficulties focusing, organizing tasks, and controlling impulses. These behaviors often lead to classroom disruptions and negative social interactions (Zambo, 2006). Teachers may focus on behavioral issues rather than students' strengths,

reinforcing negative self-concepts. According to Bandura's social learning theory, children learn by observing and modeling behaviors; thus, picture books that depict relatable characters with ADHD provide opportunities for positive modeling and reflection (Zambo, 2006).

Zambo (2006) emphasizes that using picture books in read-aloud sessions can enhance self-understanding for students with ADHD, helping them to connect emotionally and cognitively with characters who face similar challenges. When children see characters like themselves overcoming obstacles or learning self-regulation strategies, they develop self-efficacy, believing that they, too, can succeed. Picture books also serve as safe spaces for emotional exploration and can spark meaningful dialogue between teachers and students about behavior, attention, and self-acceptance.

Bibliotherapy and Classroom Application

Bibliotherapy, as described in the assignment, is the practice of using literature to help students process emotions, experiences, and challenges in constructive ways. For students with ADHD, bibliotherapy can normalize their experiences, provide coping strategies, and strengthen their self-image. Zambo (2006) demonstrates that read-alouds can be adapted to meet the needs of students with ADHD by using short sessions, structured environments, and interactive discussions.

The picture books selected for this project each highlight a different dimension of ADHD or related neurodiversity. Together, they demonstrate how literature can help children recognize both the difficulties and the strengths that accompany attentional differences.

Positive Self-Identity and Acceptance

Books like *Just Ask!* (Sotomayor, 2019) and *Wish in a Tree* (Hunt, 2022) celebrate diversity and difference. Sotomayor's work emphasizes that everyone has something that makes them unique, while Hunt's story reframes distractibility as creativity. These books reflect Zambo's (2006) notion that children benefit from seeing characters who resemble themselves, as this strengthens self-efficacy through identification.

Emotional Regulation and Mindfulness

My Thoughts Are Clouds (Heard, 2021) and *My Mouth Is a Volcano!* (Cook, 2005) provide tools for emotional control and self-awareness. They connect to Zambo's (2006) finding that multisensory, short, and emotionally engaging read-alouds help ADHD learners reflect on their feelings and behaviors.

Overcoming Academic Challenges

Polacco's *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (1998) and *The Junkyard Wonders* (2010) show the transformative role of supportive educators in helping students navigate learning differences. These texts resonate with Zambo's (2006) discussion of bibliotherapy's therapeutic function, helping children cope with frustration while emphasizing growth and perseverance.

Self-Reflection and Peer Understanding

Books like *My Quiet Place* (Mikai, 2023) and *That Always Happens Sometimes* (Frank, 2020) explore overstimulation and focus, illustrating how environments and relationships affect emotional well-being. Reading these stories aloud can help neurotypical peers build empathy and patience toward classmates who process the world differently.

Together, these books reinforce the message that differences are not deficits. They provide students with ADHD both recognition and representation, and they give their peers a lens for understanding behaviors often misinterpreted as misbehavior.

Reflection and Personal Learning

Through this project, I gained a deeper understanding of how literature can support children's emotional and cognitive growth. Before engaging in this assignment, I had never encountered many books that centered on or explained ADHD like the books I found recently. Even though I have known about my ADHD for 13 years, it made me feel so happy and seen to read these books. I teared up many times while reading them. If I had these books as a kid, they would have helped me so much. Even if none of them provided coping mechanisms or helpful tools (which many of them did), just to have the representation of other kids with ADHD would have put me at ease.

Zambo (2006) taught me that bibliotherapy is not about diagnosing or fixing children. It's about helping them understand themselves and see their potential through stories. Reading these picture books reminded me that when kids see characters like themselves being understood, valued, and successful, they feel empowered to navigate their own challenges and not be afraid to ask for help.

As an educator, I will try my best to intentionally incorporate books like these into my future classroom. Read-aloud sessions will have opportunities for movement, discussion, and reflection. I also would love to use activities like creating "wonderful lists" or "quiet places" to reinforce self-recognition and self-compassion. In the end, this project reaffirmed that literature is one of the most powerful tools for empathy, healing, and growth in the classroom.

References

Zambo, D. M. (2006). Learning from picture book characters in readaloud sessions for students with ADHD. *Teaching Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(4), Article 4.

1. Title: Just Ask!		
Author: Sonia Sotomayor	Grade Level: 2-5	Publisher: Philomel Books/Penguin Random House
<p>Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points): The first main character is the author, Sonia. She has diabetes and wishes that other kids would ask her about it. Then, Rafael, who has asthma and uses an inhaler. Anthony uses a wheelchair. Madison is blind and uses a guide dog to get places. Arturo is also blind, and he uses a cane. Vijay is deaf and uses sign language to communicate. Bianca has dyslexia. Jordan has autism and likes dinosaurs. Tiana also has autism, but doesn't talk. Anh speaks with a stutter. Julia has Tourette's syndrome. Manuel has ADHD. Nolan is allergic to nuts. Grace has Down syndrome. Each character is introduced one page at a time. The book ends with Sonia again, talking about how it's wonderful how different everyone is, and that even if a disability is invisible, that doesn't mean it isn't real.</p> <p>List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If you had a page in this book, what would it say? 2. Activity: create your own page in the book (illustrations, your name, things you enjoy doing/talking about, and of course, something that makes you unique!) 3. This will be good for kids with and without disabilities. Kids with disabilities will get the opportunity to celebrate their disability, and kids without disabilities will understand that their peers aren't very different from them at all. Everyone has something that makes them unique. 		

1. Title: My Wandering Dreaming Mind		
Author: Merriam Sarcia Saunders	Grade Level: 3	Publisher: Magination Press
<p>Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points): Main character Sadie daydreams a lot, spacing out, and has a hard time focusing. She has a very creative imagination, too. She forgets a lot, and it impacts her relationship with her parents, friends, and teachers. She also forgets to do her chores and homework. "Some people</p>		

think I'm not smart, but it's just easy to make mistakes when my mind whirls too far away lands." This book is great for showing inattentive ADHD as opposed to hyperactive ADHD (which is often what people think of first).

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. What are some examples of things you forget to do or space out on?
2. How can we think about those examples and reframe them as positives? (distracted, curious, make mistakes → risk taking, etc.)
3. Activity: make a jar to fill with positive qualities you have! Take one out when you're feeling down to remind yourself how awesome you are!

1. Title: My Thoughts Are Clouds: Poems for Mindfulness

Author: Georgia Heard

Grade Level: 3-4

Publisher: Macmillan Publishers

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
A collection of poems for kids. The poems help kids label their emotions and feelings. It provides them with the language to harness and understand themselves.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Activity: write your own poems! How do you feel when you're outside vs. inside? What do you notice in the clouds? What do you feel, smell, see, taste, hear?

1. Title: My Mouth Is a Volcano!

Author: Julia Cook

Grade Level: K-3

Publisher: National Center for Youth Issues

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
The main character is Louis. He talks a lot, and the book explains the struggle of not interrupting others as they talk! Things like this are nearly impossible for many ADHD havers to control. It's important to build empathy for others in order to see them more clearly. It also gives a strategy for people who struggle with interrupting. Take a deep breath and blow your words out through your nose.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. What are some ways you stop yourself from interrupting people?
2. Do you ever feel like Louis, like your words are going to explode from a volcano?

3. How does it make you feel when someone interrupts you?

1. Title: The Junkyard Wonders

Author: Patricia Polacco

Grade Level: 3-5

Publisher: Philomel Books/Penguin
Random House

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
It's Trisha's first day of school in a new school. She has dyslexia and is placed in the "junkyard" class with other students who are different in one way or another. The teacher is very kind and tells the students that they are geniuses and supports them. The friend she had made before the school year started didn't let her sit with her at lunch. Trisha becomes good friends with 3 kids in her class. One day, a mean boy ran up to them and tried to rip their "junkyard wonders" pins off their shirts, and was horrible to them. Jody (because he is very tall) came and protected them. The teacher brings them to a junkyard and shows the class how many possibilities there are in there. Jody, the leader of the project to fix the plane, died one night. They were going to launch the plane from the roof for the science fair, but the bully overheard them and told the Principal, and he wouldn't allow it. Gibbie's dad agreed to be with them at the launch, so the principal allowed it. They launched the plane, and it was a huge success.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Has anyone ever treated you unkindly because of a difference? How did you handle it?
2. What message do you think Patricia Polacco wanted to tell readers with this book?
3. Why did Mrs. Peterson want the students to memorize the definition of a genius?
4. What questions would you want to ask the background characters in the story?

1. Title: Thank You, Mr. Falker

Author: Patricia Polacco

Grade Level: 3-5

Publisher: Philomel Books/Penguin
Random House

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
Trisha is the main character. She has grown up in a Jewish family, and they value reading very highly; she is very eager to learn how to read in kindergarten. She then realizes that she has a hard time reading, and in first grade begins to discover her dyslexia. She is teased for it, and her teachers don't seem to know how to best help her. When her family moves to

California, she's excited to have a fresh start, but once again, she struggles to read and is bullied for it. In fifth grade, she gets a new teacher, Mr. Falker. He is young and doesn't play favorites with students. Most importantly, he stands up for Trisha and shows her how great she is. He began to help her after school in a casual setting. He made the lessons creative and eased Trisha into learning. Trisha girl is Patricia Polacco, and now she, of course, writes and illustrates books! A good takeaway from the book is that students should share with their parents and teachers when they're having a hard time with something. Hiding it is understandable, but it will make it harder for them to help you.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Have you ever had a teacher like Mr. Falker? What were they like?
2. Can you relate to Trisha's struggles in school, whether you can read or not?
3. Do you read books aloud in class? How does it make you feel?

1. Title: Wish In A Tree

Author: Linda Mullaly Hunt

Grade Level: Pre K-3

Publisher: Penguin Random House

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
 Oliver is the main character. He has a hard time sitting still and paying attention in class. Some of his classmates find him annoying, and he gets frustrated when he can't make his brain focus on his work. He feels sad and isolated, but then two classmates console him at recess. They remind him that his brain is pretty magical, and it's a great superpower to think so creatively.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Do you ever feel like Oliver?
2. Do you ever feel frustrated by people like Oliver?
3. What can we do to help people like Oliver?
4. What can we do to help ourselves when we feel frustrated by people like Oliver?

1. Title: My Whirling Twirling Motor

Author: Merriam Sarcia Saunders

Grade Level: Pre K-3

Publisher: Magination Press

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
 Charlie is the main character. His brain whirls, and he can't stop going! He accidentally interrupts his peers, throws a ball at a girl at recess, forgets his lunch, snack, and homework, and runs around at home. Once it is time to go to sleep, he feels too riled up to rest. His mom then pulls out a notebook with his "Wonderful List." It's a list of all the good things he did right each day. Instead of focusing on what Charlie got wrong, his parents highlight all the little wins he has each day. This makes him calm down, and his motor-brain slows enough for him to fall asleep.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Activity: create a wonderful list for yourself! Even if you don't have a learning disability, it's good to celebrate the little wins every day.
2. Do you ever feel like Charlie?
3. If you were Charlie, how would you feel?

1. Title: That Always Happens Sometimes

Author: Kiley Frank

Grade Level: K-3

Publisher: Knopf Books for Young Readers/Penguin Random House

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):
 Max has ADHD, and it's hard for him to stay on track with tasks. The book follows his day as he gets ready for school and misses the bus, and finally arrives at school. He has a list of things to do to get ready for school, and one at school as well, to help him stay focused. When he does the worksheet in class and doesn't get distracted, instead, his teacher gives him a wink when he hands it to her. This little gesture goes a long way, showing Max that she sees him and she's proud of him. During a group challenge, Max uses his creative thinking to create a very tall tower. Once he is home, he is homesick for school and can't wait to go back tomorrow.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Max describes a lot of relatable experiences throughout his day. Can you relate to any of them? How did you feel when that happened?
2. How is Max's perspective different than his parents' or teacher's perspective?
3. Which rules does Max have to follow, and which are unrealistic?

1. Title: My Quiet Place

Author: Monica Mikai

Grade Level: K-3

Publisher: Chronicle Books

Synopsis (main characters, plot, setting, notable plot twists or interesting points):

The main character is a girl who gets overstimulated by loud noises. The book follows her throughout a few days, showing her stress rise and fall as she is out and about in the world, and then finds her way to a quiet place. She also describes how a quiet place can be a person (in this case, her dad) who makes her feel quiet and calm. Towards the end of the book, she even makes a friend with another kid who needs some quiet time.

List of 3-5 discussion questions/entry points for students OR an activity you would have students work on alongside the text

1. Do you ever feel like the girl in this story?
2. If you have a friend who feels like the girl in this story, what are some things you can do to support them?
3. Where is your quiet place/person?
4. Do you have a quiet place/person at school?