Enhancing the Self-Esteem of Undergraduates in a Malaysian Higher Education Institution through Bibliotherapy

Lourdunathan, J.[1], Idris, K.[2]*, Vethamani, M. E.[3] and Mokhtar, H. H.[2]

[1]UiTM Kampus Bandaraya Melaka, 110 Off Jalan Hang Tuah, Melaka Bandaraya Bersejarah, 75300 Melaka, Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
[3]School of Education, Taylor's University, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of bibliotherapy or therapeutic experience of reading young adult literature among a group of young adults in developing their self-esteem. Participants consisted of six undergraduate students pursuing a degree in a Malaysian higher education institution. The phenomenological method was employed to explore the participants' reading of young adult literature. These participants read young adult literature, and shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences on the reading phenomenon through dialogue journals. Data triangulation was carried out by analyzing and comparing findings from observations made by two informants, researcher's field notes, in-depth pre-and-post interviews. The study discovered that the undergraduates are aware of the importance of self-esteem and how their personal struggles have affected their level of self-esteem. Some of their challenges include identity crisis, lack of self-confidence and poor family relationship. The reading process has contributed to the success of developing self-esteem among the participants. Reading young adult literature has helped the participants to experience a new level of self-confidence, gain new understanding of self, feel less different, and inspired them to grow positively. Five reading characteristics contributing to the effectiveness of reading young adult literature for self-esteem emerged. The five types of reading characteristics include intentional, relational, reflective, transporting and pleasure. The findings of this study suggest that literature can be a catalyst for personal development for young adults in the Malaysian educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Bibliotherapy, which is also known as book therapy, is a concept of reading for therapeutic healing or problem-solving, and has been utilized by scholars, physicians, social workers, nurses, parents, teachers, librarians and counselors for different purposes. In bibliotherapy, books are used as a therapeutic attempt to help people of all ages with problems. Bibliotherapy found its way into the educational system during the past decade (Smith, 1998). Documentation reveals that the majority of teachers from the United States of America have begun using bibliotherapy in their classrooms. In 1996, the American Library Association defined bibliotherapy as the use of selected reading materials as a solution of personal problem through directed reading (Santhanadass, 2006). To put it another way, the idea of reading literary texts or any other suitable materials for self-development is called bibliotherapy (Mardziah, 2002; Cohen, 1992; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1990; Rubin, 1978).

In the Malaysian context, teachers should take advantage of the teaching of literature by simultaneously adopting bibliotherapy. To be specific, teachers should adopt the "reading bibliotherapy", whereby they provide a reader with the right book, one which triggers a significant and growth-producing feeling-response. In Malaysia, the teaching of literature began four decades ago and in this span of time, it has undergone various changes and development (Vethamani, 2004). Firstly, the term literature was referred to as "English literature", but now it is called "literature in English" (Vethamani, 2004). The initial years of literature teaching was geared toward studying literature (Vethamani, 2004; Hassan, 2007) rather than using it as a resource for language and personal enrichment. However, with the new literature syllabus (which is literature in English) being introduced in 1990, the purpose of studying literature was redefined. The goals include the following: 1) to develop an awareness of the value and pleasure of reading literary works in the students, 2) to appreciate and understand human relations, and 3) to appreciate different literary genres and the usage of literary devices (Vethamani, 2004). Through bibliotherapy or reading for therapeutic healing, young adults would be able to identify with characters similar to themselves in the stories, an association that helps them release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). These young adults would feel relieved that they are not the only ones facing problems.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of bibliotherapy or therapeutic experience of reading young adult literature among a group of young adults in developing their self-esteem. Most studies on young adults have indicated that the young-adult phase is indeed a critical phase in one's life (Woolfolk, 2007; Rice & Dolgin, 2008; Rathus, 2008; Hirsch & Dubois, 1991; Harter, 1990). They are said to be

caught between two phases of life – they are no longer children; they are not yet adults. They are inundated with numerous challenges. If these obstacles are not addressed or overcome successfully, it may result in long-term shifts of losses in self-esteem. This in return will have adverse effects on academic performance, careers, relationships and self-image (Rogers, 1986; Sternberg & Williams, 2002; Benson *et al*., 2004; Arnett, 2004; Rice & Dolgin, 2008). Literature on education psychology and adolescent's development have also pointed out clearly that low self-esteem, not only has serious consequences on the psychological and psychosocial aspects of an individual, but it also seriously impairs academic achievement (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008; Harter, 1999; Leondari, 1998; Hirsch & Dubois, 1991; Covington, 1989; Schrank & Engels, 1981). Bibliotherapy, which is a therapeutic endeavor, may offer understanding, questioning, and explanation, as well as articulating hope and comfort, thus helping young adults with low self-esteem. This study suggests bibliotherapy or reading literature as an alternative approach to raise students' self-esteem.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions used in this study.

1. How does a group of Malaysian young adults perceive self-esteem?

2. To what extent does reading of young adult literature help in developing self-esteem among these young adults?

3. What reading characteristics emerged as contributing towards the development of self-esteem among the participants?

4. How do these young adults describe the experience of reading young adult literature to develop their self-esteem?

READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Anyone who is interested in doing research in the area of reading literature for personal growth would be influenced by the reader-response theory. Louise Rosenblatt, who developed the reader-response theory, believes that meaning occurs when there is a transaction experience between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1995; Bushman & Bushman, 1997). The theory involves any approach to teaching literature that has the ability to encourage students to respond to literature on a personal level. Reader response aims at increasing the readers' ability to achieve a full, meaningful reading of a text and to widen the personal context of emotions and ideas into which the response will be incorporated. It is an approach which empowers the readers to partake in an active reading process and take responsibility for much of their literary experience.

According to Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning and each reader "brings to it his/her own complex perceptions and reactions" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 27). Every reader brings to each reading encounter those feelings and experiences she holds within; thus, each new encounter with a work of literature creates a new experience

(Rosenblatt, 1995). When the whole personality becomes involved in the literary experience, it allows for the release of feelings, and subsequently creates catharsis and insight and this process is called bibliotherapy (Shrodes, 1949). Hence, reading literature for problem solving or personal development (bibliotherapy) needs meaningful transaction of both reader and text (reader-response).

Rosenblatt's reader-response theory provides a theoretical base for students to personally respond to reading material (Bushman & Bushman, 1997). She believes that reading without responding or reading without transacting with the text meaningfully, will not bring about the kind of affect one might want to experience. Thus, the relationship between the reader and the text gives an opportunity for the reader to be actively involved in the reading process. Readers are to take responsibility for their literary experience. As this study aimed at discovering the reading experience of a group of young adults for the development of self-esteem, the researcher was aware of the need to incorporate the reader-response element into the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today's young adults are said to differ significantly from the individuals from 30 to 40 years ago (Rathus, 2008). Present young adults face issues such as eating disorders, alcohol, drugs, peer pressure, and physical and psychological safety concerns which previous generations might not have confronted as young adults (Bucher

& Manning, 2006). According to Erik Erickson's stages of human development enumerated in 1950, a young adult is a person between the ages of 19 and 40 and he describes this phase as a stage whereby young adults encounter a number of issues (Boeree, 2006; Fetso & McClure, 2005). Erikson stated that the major problem faced by this group is the formulation, or reformulation of personal identity while expectations from various groups in the society may at time clash and these conflicts may have an effect on their self-esteem (Rathus, 2008; Rice & Dolgin, 2007; Woolfolk, 2007; Bucher & Manning, 2006). Rogers (1986) also pointed out that people in the young adulthood phase of life (18 – 25 years-old) are beginning to form adult lives and structure themselves for this new life-style. Although they go through an exciting phase, it can be stressful at times as they are too old to be considered adolescents but are not quite old enough to be adults. Thus, they struggle to find their place in the adult world because of the dreams they are trying to fold out for their future, along with the new responsibilities of adulthood. At this point in their lives, they need to learn to accept who they are and self-esteem can make a world of difference (Santrock, 1999; Rogers, 1986).

In the past twenty-five years, literature specially written for and about young people has emerged. Brown and Stephens (1995) define young adult literature as "books written specifically for and about youth" (p. 6). Stories are written for the young adult audience. They are about the lives of

the young adults, experiences, aspirations, and problems of young people. Bucher and Manning (2006) define young adult literature as the "literature in prose and verse that has excellence of form or expression" (p. 8). It is said that the traditional beginning point for the concept of young adult literature was Hinton's 'The Outsiders', published in 1967 (Hastings, 2005). This development took place in realistic fiction, both contemporary and historical, although today the genre of fantasy also has distinct young adult works. Young adult literature primarily explores the social institutions and conventions that shape adolescent lives and address specific problems and concerns particular to this age group (Bucher & Manning, 2006). Although young adult literature can be used to refer to books that are written or marketed for young adults, which may also include works that are originally meant for adults but have appeal to and are read by young adults (Brown & Stephens, 1995).

Bucher and Manning (2006) identified certain qualities that young adult literature should possess. Young adult literature should not only reflect the age and development of young adults but also address their reading abilities, thinking levels, and interest levels. It should deal with contemporary issues, problems and experiences with the characters that young adults can relate to. Young adult literature serves multiple purposes (Bucher & Manning, 2006). Broadly put, it teaches young adults about people and the world around them, demonstrates the range of human emotions and allows them to experience by reading quality literature.

Young adult literature reveals the realities of life, provides vicarious experiences and most importantly, provides pleasure reading.

Considering the qualities of young adult literature and its contributions to the development of self-esteem, young adult literature should be taught in the classroom. According to Nuccio (1997), the value of creating a classroom and educational environment that promotes positive self-esteem in students is evident. Firstly, since learning experience can be challenging, students with higher self-esteem would be able to cope with stress (Woolfolk, 2008). Students with higher self-esteem are also considered to be better equipped to cope with the adversity and diversity in the school place, as well as in other areas of their lives (Rice & Dolgin, 2008). They would also be able to develop and sustain relationships and are usually attracted to other students who have positive self value. Conversely, students with low self-esteem will most probably seek low self-esteem peers. Nuccio (1997), Rice and Dolgin (2008), and Woolfolk (2008) have all pointed out that students with high self-esteem are more confident in confronting obstacles and conflicts, and they are better able to solve problems. Since young adulthood is described as a challenging phase in life, possessing high self-esteem would help young adults face these obstacles confidently. They are more resilient to problems and failures. When faced with adversities, their self-esteem serves as a powerful coping mechanism (Rathus, 2008), while students with the low self-esteem on

the other hand, generally regard problems as grounds for quitting.

Malhi and Reasoner (2001) emphasized that self-esteem is opened to internal and external influences and thus it can vary according to one's experiences and feelings. They, however, claimed that self-esteem can be learned and enhanced over a period of time. In a study conducted with students at the W. J. Maxey Training School for boys in the United States, where the students were given paperback books to read, they showed significant gains over a control group on measures of self-esteem (Cornett, 2003). Although the study shows a positive correlation between reading and self-esteem among students, there are controversies surrounding the issue of whether self-esteem needs to be developed in the first place. For example, Kohn (1994) raises the issue of whether schools should try to help students to feel better about themselves.

Another controversy surrounding the issue of self-esteem is the association between self-esteem and academic achievement. Lawrence (2000) stated that there is a positive correlation between how people value themselves and the level of their academic attainments. When a student feels good about himself or herself, he or she will achieve more academically and vice-versa. However, there are other studies which although confirmed a positive association between self-esteem and academic achievement, the size of the relationship is not very significant. In a careful review of 128 studies related to this topic by Kohn (1994), it was found that the average correlation was in the range of .21 to .26, which means the differences in self-esteem can account for only about four to seven percent of variation in academic performance, or vice versa.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework explains, whether graphically or narratively, the main variables involved in a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It also describes the relationship of these constructs. The following diagram illustrates the conceptual framework of this study (see Fig.1).

The three circles in the diagram illustrate the three important variables framing this study: reading bibliotherapy, reader-response and young adult literature. The concept of reading for self-esteem is grounded in the concept of bibliotherapy, which strongly advocates the power of reading for self-improvement. Literature suggests that bibliotherapy procedure alone would not be effective enough to create the desirable changes that an individual seeks during the process. Insights are gained from meaningful readings and for reading to become meaningful, transaction with the text is essential, as proposed by the reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995). Reader-response advocates that when readers are engaged with the stories (young adult literature), they will make connections and relate what they read to their lives and their world. The process of identification with a character or characters results in the release of feelings, which creates catharsis and insight. This process is called bibliotherapy (Shrodes, 1949).
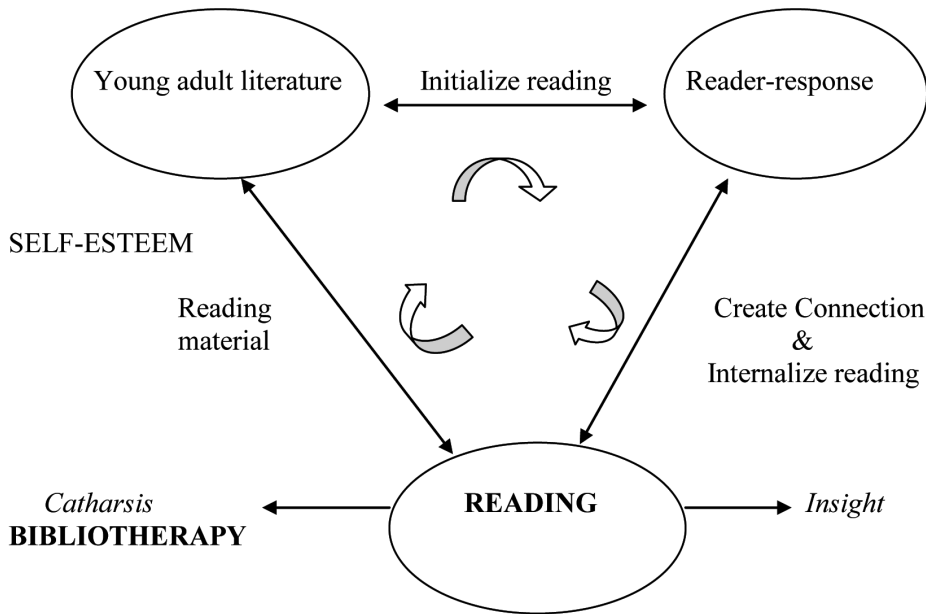
Fig.1 The Conceptual Framework

One of the ways to achieve the connection or identification is through the recommendation of suitable reading materials. How the individual responds to the plot, theme, and character can affect the bibliotherapy process. For the young adults to find reading meaningful, the choice of literature presented to them should reflect the lives and issues relevant to them. Since the participants for this study were young adults, young adult literature was deemed as most suitable. Most young adults are said to make better reading connection with young adult literature as the genre is written by and for young adults (Cole, 2009). The characters, events and struggles portrayed in the stories revolve around the lives of the young adults. Hence, making connections to reading (reader-response), which in return allowing readers to gain valuable insights,

can be obtained by recommending young adult literature for this study. The interplay among these three factors was predicted to have an impact on the self-esteem of the readers.

The process of initializing, connecting and internalizing are adapted from Brown's (1995) "young adult literature reader model." Young adult literature was used to initiate the reading process among the participants. When stories were found to be interesting and meaningful, the participants were able to connect with their readings. When readings were internalized, they were able to gain valuable insights and ideas. They were able to understand their predicaments and the world they live in. This reading experience led to the development of self-esteem. The development of self-esteem is an evolving process, indicated by the

use curved arrows. In addition, the curved arrows denoting a continuous cycle indicate that there is no beginning and end; rather, one thing follows from another.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed the phenomenological research design, which sought to understand the meaning of experiences of individuals with regard to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences and the structures of consciousness in human experiences. For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 2002). Hence, this study involved an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of the participants. In this study, the phenomenon was the reading experiences of young adult literature.

Participants - Criterion Sampling

Criterion sampling was the mode of selecting the participants of this study. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem questionnaire was used to identify students (participants) who lacked self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem questionnaire was administered to all undergraduates pursuing a degree in Bachelor of Education at University Teknologi MARA in Melaka. In order to further verify the level of self-esteem among the identified participants, a qualified counselor conducted a pre-interview session with these undergraduates. Students, who scored low or whose statements clearly indicated negative values of themselves, were invited to participate in the study. As the participants of this study were university students whose age ranged between 19 and 25, they were categorized as young adults. Through a pre-interview session, a qualified counsellor identified seven students as having serious issues with self-esteem. All these students agreed to become the participants of this study and signed the consent form. Finally, one student did not complete the study but helped by giving added insights into the self-esteem related problems faced by young adults in Malaysia.

Data Collection

The time taken to collect data was 5 months. Dialogue journal entries, interviews and observation by the informants were the primary tools for data collection in this study. By the end of the fourth month, data saturation was noticed in the journal entries among all the participants.

Interviews

Individual interviews (three phases) were conducted between the participants and the researcher. The three phases were pre-interview, a second interview and a post-interview. The pre-interview aimed at gaining baseline information of the participants and their perception on self-esteem. A second interview was carried out while the study was in progress and the aim of the interview was to discover initial responses to the reading of selected

books by participants. Only young adult literature written in the English language was chosen as they were easier to be found and identified. The post-interview between the researcher and the participants was carried out to obtain feedback on the reading experiences of the participants. Two experienced lecturers, who are familiar with bibliotherapy, participated as the key informants. They observed changes in the behaviour or the attitudes of the participants which indicated growth of positive self-esteem. Information from the observation of these key informants was used to support the claims made by the participants in their dialogue journals.

Data Analysis

This study used Moustakas's (1994) technique of data analysis which emphasized on the construction of individual's textural description and following its reflection, the researcher constructed an individual's structural description of the underlying dynamics of the experience. Themes that account for how thoughts and feelings connected with the phenomenon are brought to the fore. The final phase involves bringing together all the participants' individual textural description and individual structural description of the phenomenon in order to create the experiences (in terms of meanings and essences) of the group as a whole.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study consisted of the descriptions of the participants' reading experiences. The presentation of the findings

is according to the research questions stated earlier. The participants were all given pseudonyms so as to protect their identities. The participants' names are as follows: Julie (who did not complete the study), Ezzy, Nur, Ayu, Syed, Fir, and Azim.

Research Question 1

How does a group of Malaysian young adults perceive self-esteem?

The findings of this study indicate that all the participants have perceived 'self-esteem' in relation to their level of self-confidence, appearance, the ability to perform well academically, possessing certain skills, happy with life and having good relationship with family and friends. These descriptions seem to fit into Carlock (1998), Malhi and Reasonar (2001), Rice and Dolgin (2008) and Rathus's (2008) descriptions of self-esteem, whereby self-esteem is defined as a person's impression or opinion of himself or herself or the overall evaluation of oneself in either a positive or negative way. The participants' descriptions of their self-esteem include liking oneself, ability to communicate with people, ability to do tasks and involve in activities, face challenges, face consequences, and ability to face problems, set good examples, have lots of friends, and have leadership quality, good appearance and people notice you. According to Lawrence (2000), one of the common origins of low self-esteem is 'emotional deprivation'. For example, in a normal process of development, children learn from parents that they are loved. However, some unlucky children may have

parents who are unable or unwilling to show consistent love, which is usually because of their own unresolved issues. Nur and Ezzy fit into this category of individuals who are deprived of emotional stability. Thus, these children learn quite early in life that they are not loveable and consequently begin to dislike themselves. Lawrence (2000) further stressed that during the childhood stage of life, children usually believe their parents' valuation of them and if this valuation is perceived as negative, children will slowly develop low self-esteem and these 'unloved' children will eventually become 'unloved' adults. Another origin of low self-esteem according to Lawrence (2000) is distorted self-image. Nur and Ezzy seem to fit perfectly into this profile. Both have issues with their appearance and are unable to communicate with friends. They live in their own isolated world and strongly believe that they could not get along with anyone and one of the sources of this distorted 'self-image' is their strained relationship with their parents.

In summary, the participants' perception with respect to their self-esteem seems to reflect the definitions provided by the experts in this field. In this study, every participant shared an unfortunate story, reflecting that their traumatic experiences of the past, distorted self-image and emotional deprivation have affected their self-esteem. The findings of this study seem to show that these participants understand the importance of having a positive self-esteem.

Research Question 2

To what extent does reading of young adult literature help in developing self-esteem among these young adults?

The findings of this study indicate that reading young adult literature has created an impact on the lives of the participants although the degree of effectiveness may differ from one individual to another. For example, Ezzy identified with the characters in the stories read and experienced catharsis more than the other participants; however, her evolution in this study seemed not to be obvious. From the varied responses witnessed among the participants, it can be concluded that reading literary texts has helped most of the participants to develop their self-esteem. Looking at these positive changes among the participants, the researcher remembered Rosenblatt's (1995) description of the power of active participation in literature. She pointed out the growth that happens when readers give themselves over to another "time and place and environment…these experiences open the readers to a partnership in the wisdom of the past and the aspirations for the future" (p. 276). By vicariously experiencing the life of a character in fiction or participating in another's emotion expressed in a story, the reader may be able to bring into consciousness similar elements in his or her own nature of emotional life.

It can be concluded that all the participants possessed the desire to change. They were honest in revealing their weakness, able to objectively analyze their

true selves and most importantly undertake conscious effort to change and improve on their area of weakness. In this case, literature is merely a tool, i.e. a catalyst that helps to illuminate and share with the readers the experience of others facing similar predicaments. Whether the reader is willing to integrate insights gathered and evolve from the therapeutic process lies solely in his or her hand as seen from this study. This principle is reflected in the conceptual framework of this study. The conceptual framework portrays literature as an initiator while reader-response helps to create reading connection. Bibliotherapy, through the process of reflection/discussion, helps readers to internalize insights gained. The participants who evolved positively in this study are those who had not only experienced all the three stages in the literary reading experience but most importantly, they were willing to change. In summary, reading literary texts has helped most of the participants to develop their self-esteem, hence, gaining greater benefits in life.

Research Question 3

What reading characteristics emerged as contributing towards the development of self-esteem among the participants?

The findings of this study indicate 5 reading characteristics of the participants which have contributed to the development of their self-esteem. These are intentional reading characteristics, relational reading characteristics, reflective reading characteristics, transporting reading characteristics, and pleasure reading characteristics. Cohen's (1992) study revealed only three reading characteristics, namely, intentional, relational and transporting. However, data from this study have revealed two additional characteristics – reflective and pleasurable. Reading was intentional when the participants read purposefully, and sought out ideas from readings to understand their personal struggles and overcome problems related to self-esteem. Relational reading was discovered when the participants interacted with the characters in the story. Readers who consider reading as a private affair or something to be shared with others demonstrate relational reading characteristics (Cohen, 1992). Most of the participants kept the reading as something personal and private. Perhaps, the fear that they would be judged by others might have influenced their decision to keep this reading experience as an aspect of their private life, not to be shared with others. Two out of the six participants reported that the reading of the stories was like having a conversation with a friend. They became involved with the characters in the books.

Reflective reading characteristics were found in all the participants' journal entries when they were fully engaged with the reading. Transacting with the text, comparing their lives with those in the stories, asking questions as they were moving along the stories all indicated reflective reading characteristics. Transporting reading characteristics were revealed when the participants were transported into the world

of fiction and at times showed evidences of carrying out dialogues with the characters in the stories. In particular, two participants were found to have immersed themselves in the reading constantly and thus, transported themselves into the worlds of the characters. This sense of losing yourself in the reading or feeling as if you are part of the story usually occurs when the reader is able to engage with the reading. Rosenblatt (1995) describes this engagement with the stories as participating, identifying and sharing our conflicts and feelings. At the same time, there is a stream of responses being generated. Pleasure reading characteristics were seen when the reader treated reading as merely for information-seeking. Although most participants were either able to relate or immerse themselves in the stories they read, Syed read for pleasure. Syed found the stories entertaining but did not see much value behind those stories. Yenika-Agbaw (1997) pointed out that "pleasurable reading does not help readers identify issues raised in books, question the ideologies informing the stories or understand how all these affect readers' daily live" (p. 446). These reading characteristics affirmed the presence of two pillars supporting the foundation of this study: reader-response and bibliotherapy. In addition, the different reading characteristics derived from this study indicate the merging of reader-response and bibliotherapy. In summary, 5 reading characteristics emerged in the reading experience of the participants. These are intentional reading characteristics, relational reading characteristics, reflective reading characteristics, transporting reading characteristics and pleasure reading characteristics.

Research Question 4

How do these young adults describe the experience of reading young adult literature to develop their self-esteem?

The findings of this study indicate a number of themes for the participants' development of self-esteem. The themes include experienced growth of positive qualities, gained new understanding of oneself, felt less isolated and different, challenged belief system, gained new ideas and friends, as well as inspired and enriched. From the inception of this study, the researcher noticed that all the participants struggled with understanding themselves and the world they live in. The participants, through the reading of young adult literature, were able to better understand themselves and the world around them. Brown and Stephens (1995) pointed out that young adult literature has the potential of fulfilling the needs of young people since it enhances self-knowledge, the knowledge of others, and the knowledge of a world view. One of the common traits which the researcher observed in all the participants was their tendency to feel different and isolated. Apparently, these individuals suffered from the fear of being different as experienced by young adults. However, every participant at one point or another mentioned that the reading experience helped them not to feel so isolated. As the participants read and shared their experience and ideas, they were shaped and reshaped as people. The

one comment that was universal for the participants who experienced a change in their belief system was, "The reading of stories really made me think of whom I am and what I have believed in thus far." These participants were experiencing what Wisenbaker (2008) described as 'the power of the story' which constructs or alters one's belief system. The participants frequently reported in the journals how the reading of stories has constantly challenged their existing belief system, such as "I realize that nobody is perfect" (Ayu), "…everyone is different" (Ayu), and "…everyone will fail one day" (Azim).

Reading is often said to expand and open our life to new ideas as well as provide an avenue for us to explore the new worlds portrayed in the stories. In this study, the participants obtained new ideas mainly from observing the characters in the stories, judging how certain crisis were resolved and finally evaluating the outcome of their struggles as portrayed in the stories. Nur wrote that she gained some ideas about herself and her world from the readings. She has learnt a lot about building relationships not only among family members but also among friends. The benefit of reading for idea was quoted by Alston (1962, as cited in Rubin, 1978), when he said that books help readers to gain greater insights into their problems and ideas with which to communicate their problems with others. Rosenblatt (1995) also stated that stories open up a new view of life or a new sense of the potentialities of human nature and thus give ideas to resolve struggles. One important concept emerging from the data

is that therapeutic reading inspired and enriched most of the participants. They professed that the reading experience gave them comfort, confidence, reassurance and hope. This finding supports Rosenblatt's (1995) reader-response theory on how reading and experiencing literature can enrich one's life. The reader-response theory empowers the readers to partake in an active reading process and the 'living-through' experience which is inherent in the literature provides a richer and meaningful reading experience. By connecting, responding and integrating insights gained from the stories, these participants experienced a new surge of positive self-esteem. Besides experiencing growth, this reading therapy seems to have indirectly inculcated the love of reading. Some of the participants stated that their love for reading has deepened. They have learnt to take reading at a deeper level and this ability seems to reflect Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (1994) opinion on how bibliotherapy is able to improve a reader's capacity to reflect and respond to reading. In summary, reading young adult literature has led to the positive development of the participants' self-esteem. To most of the participants, reading young adult literature has provided them with vicarious experiences to help them enhance their self-esteem.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the implications of this study is that reading young adult literature can be therapeutic in terms of gaining a better understanding of self and the world around

the reader. Hence, teaching and learning of literature in English in Malaysia should focus on literary competence and personal development in order to produce well-balanced students who are mentally and physically healthy. Reading young adult literature can be utilized to help the students develop their self-esteem, an aspect of self which cannot be neglected. Obviously, bibliotherapy can play a significant role in the educational setting.

The findings of this study show that reading young adult literature is a good technique for helping the participants to understand their problems with self-esteem and gain insights into their solution. Future research is needed to assess the therapeutic effectiveness of reading young adult literature for other problems, such as anger management, grief and loss, or developmental disabilities. This study has also discovered that gender plays a role in the way an individual responds to a story. The male participants rejected books which were confrontational in nature, while the female participants did not exhibit similar dislikes. Future study is needed to understand this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Bibliotherapy or therapeutic reading of young adult literature was able to help a group of Malaysian young adults to enhance their level of self-esteem. Both the reader-response and bibliotherapy elements are needed to help the readers to connect, engage and create meaningful reading, and thus leading to an enhancement of self-esteem.

This study indicates that bibliotherapy has a place in language classrooms.

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