



Using biography to counsel gifted young men

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From the Journal of Secondary Gifted Education. 1995 6(3) 208-19. Reprinted by permission of Prufrock Press.

Abstract

High achieving young men in secondary schools and universities face important social and emotional issues throughout their adolescence and passage into adulthood. This article focuses on four issues confronting bright young men: underachievement, self-inflicted pressure in athletics, cultural alienation, and father-son relationships. The author proposes the use of biography as a counseling strategy through which bright young men may gain helpful insights to deal with the problems they face. The article then suggests biographical works available as well as various ways professionals might use this approach to counseling.

"Every boy wants someone older than himself to whom he may go in moods of confidence and yearning. The neglect of this child's want by grown people is a fertile source of suffering."

— Henry Ward Beecher, *Eyes and Ears*

Heath

Heath signed a long, desperate sigh as he looked out the window overlooking the campus quad. Seated in his college advisor's office, Heath explained his problem to a new professor assigned to him for academic counseling. Heath explained he had been involved in rather interesting escapades with other freshman males in his dormitory and the good times had gotten him into some trouble academically. Heath had arrived at the University of Alabama in the fall from a suburban high school, having achieved a strong academic, athletic, and extra-curricular record filled with excellent grades in advanced placement courses, involvement in his high school orchestra, and a distinguished career on the varsity football, wrestling, and track teams. Heath explained to his advisor that his first semester grade point average was a pitiful 1.6, and that he was dissatisfied with courses in his major area of study. He also explained he was no longer involved in sports and had not been lifting weights, something he had done religiously throughout high school. He admitted that during high school he was much busier with an active athletic and extra-curricular schedule, which had forced him to manage his time wisely and required him to set aside time for rigorous studying. Overwhelmed by his rather lackluster beginning as a college student, he turned to his advisor for help.

The university professor listened attentively to Heath and then reached for a book from his office collection. He suggested that Heath read the biography of Bart Conner, in which the Olympic gymnast shared his philosophy of sports training and how he had managed to keep athletics and academics in perspective throughout high school and college. Heath became intrigued with the discussion about the Olympic champion's biographical work, and he promised to read it. The two men agreed they would meet again soon to discuss the book.

Jamal

Jamal spent one day each week at a regional resource center in Alabama where he was provided a program of educational enrichment experiences for high ability students. Jamal enjoyed the camaraderie of his sixth grade peers in the gifted and talented program. With them, he was comfortable discussing Shakespearean plays, painting original examples of surrealism, conducting research for debates on emotionally charged topics, performing on his electronic keyboard, and excelling on the baseball diamond at recess. During that one day each week, Jamal was excited about the wide array of opportunities offered to him by his G/T resource-room teacher. Jamal was the only African-American student in the classroom, yet he appeared not to notice, for this charismatic, multi-talented teenager had the respect of teachers and the adulation of his peers. Although Jamal's parents were delighted with his involvement in the enrichment program, during a parent-teacher conference, his mother expressed concern for her son when she stated, "He enjoys his time here, but he is going to have trouble with his own people some day."

Jamal's teacher was upset by his mother's remark, and in hopes of providing Jamal support in dealing with the issue of being "alone within a culture," she began to accumulate a collection of biographies for the G/T resource room. Included in the collection were a number of powerful biographies and autobiographies of gifted African-Americans who faced adversity in their lives. His teacher hoped to have Jamal read the biographies to discover insights which might help him address the cultural alienation his parents believed he might eventually face with his peers.

Adam

Adam and several of his junior high friends sat in their counselor's office looking rather grim. Events in the gymnasium the previous afternoon had been upsetting for Adam and his peers, and together they were called to the office at the request of their

counselor. The school's coach had announced the results of the basketball team tryouts; Adam and his friends had not made the team and were disappointed and angry. The basketball coach was concerned about how the boys would handle their disappointment and had requested the assistance of the counselor. Once the boys were settled, the counselor picked up a worn copy of a paperback and began to read the following passage to the group of young men who felt so let down:

For about two weeks, every boy who had tried out for the basketball team knew what day the cut list was going to go up. We knew that it was going to be posted in the gym, in the morning. So that morning we all went in there, and the list was up. I had a friend — his name was Leroy Smith — and we went in to look at the list together.

We stood there and looked for our names. If your name was on the list, you were still on the team. If your name wasn't on the list, you were cut. Leroy's name was on the list. He made it. Mine wasn't on the list. I looked and looked for my name. It was almost as if I thought that if I didn't stop looking, it would be there.

I went through the day numb. I sat through my classes. I had to wait until after school to go home. That's when I hurried to my house and closed the door of my room and I cried so hard. It was all I wanted — to play on that team.

My mother was at work, so I waited until she got home, and then I told her. She knew before I said anything that something was wrong, and I told her I had been cut from the team. When you tell your mom something like that the tears start again, and the two of you have an aftercry together. (Greene, 1992, pp.44-45)

The counselor sat back in his chair and slowly revealed the cover of his paperback. The sports biography by Bob Greene entitled *Hang time* had provided the young men with the powerful scenario of Michael Jordan's disappointment over being eliminated from his high school basketball team. Adam sat there stunned as the counselor went on to read from the biography where Jordan further described how he had approached his high school coach and requested that he ride along on the team's bus to the tournaments with the players. The coach had agreed that Jordan could travel with the team if he agreed to carry the players' uniforms!

Adam and his friends found it difficult to believe that a sports idol like Michael Jordan had faced the exact sequence of events during his high school career that now confronted them. The young men seated around their counselor slowly began to divulge their stories of the previous evening when they shared the news with their families. With the help of the counselor, they were able to verbalize their feelings of hurt, frustration, and disappointment. The counselor and basketball coach were both aware of the high expectation the parents of these young men had for their sons. Living in an athletically oriented community, they had dealt with many young athletes who were hard on themselves and understood that what these disappointed athletes faced at home might create problems for the young men. Together, the counselor and the boys agreed they would meet regularly for a number of group discussions. The counselor mentioned he had a collection of sports biographies he wanted to share with them, and he explained that by sharing the frustrations of other athletes, he would help them better understand their feelings and cope with their situation.

Steven

As a young Cub Scout, Steven admired the horizon and saw azure skies that were a more vivid blue than those seen by his friends on the camping trip. Steven was intensely emotional and he knew it. Viewing *Lassie Come Home* had been a traumatic experience for Steven. The touching movie about a young boy and his dog had a powerful effect upon Steven, and his parents described hours of subsequent sleepless nights as they sat in Steven's bedroom to console their son, who continued to cry over the plot of the movie.

Because of his heightened sensitivity, Steven had faced difficulties throughout elementary school and junior high and finally found comfort in the classroom of a supportive high school English teacher who required his students to keep a journal. Through this journal, Steven and his teacher corresponded regularly via the assigned reflective journal writing. As Steven became more comfortable with this process, he let his teacher read several poems he had written, and his teacher provided Steven with encouragement to continue pursuing his craft. Many of Steven's poems revealed that Steven felt he had never bonded with his father. He was longing for a relationship with his dad, whom he admired, but from whom he felt estranged. Through their journal correspondence, Steven's teacher suggested that Steven read several biographies of gifted men who had also dealt with this feeling of paternal estrangement. Together, the highly sensitive poet and his teacher explored these works and continued to correspond about Steven's father-son relationship.

Books as Counseling Tools

Heath, Jamal, Adam, and Steven were fortunate to have caring teachers and counselors who attempted to meet their affective needs through a practical strategy. Sharing carefully chosen biographies to help bright young men face developmental challenges is a technique educators and counselors have used for years. Books have long been recognized as valuable, effective



tools to help young people solve their personal problems, and to develop skills for success in life. Books have been useful in helping young people develop a positive self-concept, and when properly used, can change attitudes, values, thinking, and personality (Frasier & McCannon, 1981). Using books in this way attempts to promote mental and emotional health by using reading materials to fulfill needs and to help young men develop into productive, emotionally healthy adults (Shepherd & Iles, 1976). This counseling technique for helping people deal with their problems through literature is referred to as bibliotherapy, and because it is a developing discipline, empirical evidence of its effectiveness is limited (Riordan & Wilson, 1989; Schlichter & Burke, 1994). While proponents of bibliotherapy techniques should be cautious in the claims they make for the benefits of this approach, there is substantial evidence to suggest that bibliotherapy is effective with youngsters of above-average ability (Baruth & Phillips, 1976; Schrank & Engels, 1981); therefore, educators involved in gifted and talented education have recommended this strategy (Adderholdt-Elliott & Eller, 1989; Flack & Lamb, 1984; Frasier & McCannon, 1981; Hébert, 1991; Schlichter & Burke, 1994). More specifically, Flack (1993), Piirto (1992), and Adderholdt-Elliott and Eller (1989) have proposed that encounters with strong selections from the biographical or autobiographical genres can have positive effects on gifted students. Flack (1993) has noted the critical importance of *identification* young people can find in both biography and autobiography. "Identification occurs when young readers discover that they are not singularly alone in either their dreams and aspirations or their loneliness, frustrations, and disappointments" (Flack, 1993, p.9).

The bibliotherapeutic process consists of three components or stages: identification, catharsis, and insight (Lenkowsky, 1987). In the case of the biographical genre, identification with the person whose life story is being told and with situations or events in that person's life would enable a young man reading the biography to see his problem from a different perspective and gain inspiration and catharsis — "tension relief." Such tension release would allow the reader to gain insight into his own motivations and actions and allow for a positive change in attitude and behavior (Lenkowsky, 1987). Since reading appeals to the imagination, guided reading of biographies provides an interaction between the reader and the life story being told, which can be less threatening to a young man than a direct confrontation (Halsted, 1988). This vicarious experience provides the opportunity to try various approaches to a problem without real life consequences should a wrong decision be made (Frasier & McCannon, 1981).

Intelligent young men have a need for introspection; however, as societal expectations continue to demand that males restrict their emotionality, the struggle to get young men to express their emotions freely will also continue (Scher, 1981). If teachers and counselors are to assist young men in dealing with introspection and emotionality, they must create supportive environments where this can occur. Reading may become an integral part of such a supportive environment. Therefore, using biographies with bright young men can be especially effective since boys have trouble defining and verbalizing their feelings and may be better able to solve their own problems through a third-person approach (Hébert, 1991). The person whose life story is being shared through biography may serve as a role model for intelligent young men and assist them in reflecting upon issues that require analyzing a problem situation in a safe environment. The use of biographies with young men is also consistent with what they enjoy reading. Studies of adolescent book selection have indicated that reading preferences of boys change as they grow older, with young men selecting less fiction and more non-fiction in the middle and high school years (Langerman, 1990).

Guided reading of biographies and autobiographies requires a meaningful follow-up in discussion. To simply read a good biography, whether individually, in small groups or with an entire class, is not bibliotherapy. It is very important that gifted young men become involved in discussions, counseling, and follow-up techniques such as role-playing and creative problem solving (Hébert, 1991). A bibliotherapy program through biography can become the basis of solid introspection for gifted students when presented in this manner. From the self-knowledge gained from the experience, the trust for meaningful relationships may develop. In addition, the discussion follow-ups provide points of adult modeling and interpersonal contact that may be invaluable for intelligent young men.

Suggested Biographies and Autobiographies to Address the Issues

Fortunately, many successful men have shared their lives. The biography sections of bookstores are filled with the stories of the most gifted men in contemporary American society, and they have much to offer our brightest young men. The following suggested biographical works are readily available.

The biography suggested to address Heath's struggle with decision-making while adjusting to college life was Bart Conner's (1985) *Winning the Gold*. In *Winning the Gold*, the Olympic gymnast related his special program of task-setting and goal-achieving that allowed him to achieve success. He shared with his reader what he learned from his coaches, his teammates, and his family in more than 17 years of intense gymnastic competition. Throughout his book, Conner shared his story of coming up through the ranks, from his adolescence to his years as an Olympic champion, and in his discussion he described the agonies

and joys of a life dedicated to excellence. *Winning the Gold* is an inspirational story of an all-American athlete who faced disappointment and adversity when he was injured, as well as the story of a bright young man with a common sense approach to goal-setting and problem solving. His work is filled with practical advice such as this example of a shared personal insight as he explained a problem solving strategy:

This technique for solving problems is pretty straightforward. Just ask yourself a few simple questions: What do I want? What actions are necessary for getting it? What is the most logical and most direct sequence in which these actions must occur? What people can help me? How can I accomplish step one?

Initially, it's hard to identify something that you truly want. Your priorities can become confused amid all of the choices and opportunities available to you. That's why it's so important for you to explore as many possibilities as you can. Obviously, gymnastics became a major goal for me, but I had tried many sports and activities before I made that decision. Finally, you must evaluate the worthiness of your goal. For me, gymnastics met the moral standards my parents had taught me — it was enjoyable, it was beneficial to me, and it didn't hurt anyone else. (p. 25)

Bart Conner's biography offers readers a philosophy of life which should be presented to bright young men who struggle with decision making and goal-setting. Through his biography, readers realize that Conner's compulsion is for life, not sport. Gymnastics is simply the method he chose to express a positive and determined joy of accomplishment. By reading this biography, bright young men can learn the techniques of discipline and the joy of accomplishing at their highest potential.

The books found in the classroom collection of Jamal's G/T teacher included biographies of gifted African-American males who offered hope to Jamal and others who may face cultural alienation while growing up. Brent Staples' (1994) *Parallel Times: Growing Up in Black and White* is an evocative memoir of a nationally known journalist. The oldest of nine children, Staples grew up in a small industrial town near Philadelphia. A scholarship to a local college and then another to graduate school pulled him out of his family circle. While away in school, the industries that supported his hometown failed, and drug dealing rushed in to fill the economic void. News of arrests and violent deaths among Brent's childhood friends underscored the precariousness of his place in a world of mostly white achievers. His brother's early death in the world of cocaine caused Staples to mature early. Through his biographical work, he offered his readers vivid portraits of family and values that supported him, as he faced the pain of entering a predominantly white world, and of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the black world in which he lived.

Benjamin Carson's (1990) *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* is the biography of Dr. Benjamin Carson, a medical doctor who gained worldwide recognition for his role in the first successful separation of Siamese twins. His story is that of a young man raised in inner-city Detroit by a single parent. He was a young man with a future that did not look bright for he lacked motivation, and had poor grades and a temper that threatened to put him in prison. Yet his mother had a vision for her son and managed to convince him that he could make something of his life, even if his environment provided a different picture. A relentless belief in his own capabilities and a strong determination to succeed catapulted him from dismal grades to the top of his class and eventually his medical career. Carson won a full scholarship to Yale University and graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School. At the age of 33 he became director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, MD. His inspirational story described his extraordinary fight to beat the odds and his incredible mindset that drove him to take risks. What makes Carson's story remarkable is his compassion, modesty, and sensitivity.

Carl Rowan's (1991) *Breaking Barriers* also offers bright young men a gusty, moving biography of one of the most respected journalists on the Washington scene, who has served as a pioneer in many struggles for the disadvantaged. In his memoir, Rowan unfolded the fascinating story of how he rose from abject poverty to a life at the forefront of power and social change. During World War II, Rowan became one of the first 15 black Navy officers in what was considered a daring experiment to integrate the military. Following his career in the Navy, Rowan became one of the first black reporters employed by a major metropolitan newspaper, and his stories about the Jim Crow South in the 1950s stunned the nation. In the biographical *Breaking Barriers*, Rowan offers a powerful, eye-opening account of America's history of racial change and provided bright young men with the inspiration needed to remain true to self.

Gordan Parks' (1990) *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* is an invigorating work in which Gordan Parks, photographer, film director, poet, writer, and composer, reflected on his dramatic life, from his poor Kansas origins to his professional triumphs in America and abroad. Barely able to quell his rage at the racism he endured each day, Parks turned his anger and loneliness into a creative force. Through five decades of American life, Parks broke one racial barrier after another, when he became a government photographer for the Farm Security Administration and later for *Vogue* and *Life*, and then a film director in Hollywood. His photographs and paintings have been exhibited throughout the world, and his ballet, *Martin*, for which he wrote the music and libretto, premiered in 1990. *Voices in the Mirror* is the consummate self-portrait of the artist in America, for Parks' life has been a struggle first to survive, then to overcome, then at last to create. Gordon Parks offered young men his



autobiography, which should expand their view of life's potential and deepen their faith in the human spirit. He spoke to young men like Jamal in Alabama and others when he said:

I've been given several names — Mr. Dreamer, Mr. Striver, and occasionally Mr. Success. I've tried on all three for size. The first two fit rather well; the third still has a slight feel of discomfort. Success is filled with the agony of how and why — in the flesh, nerves and conscience. It takes you down a lonely road and you feel, at time, that you are traveling it alone. You can only keep walking. During the loneliness you get to know who you are. Then you face the choice — of holding on to everybody's friendship, or losing the one you have made with yourself. (p. 342)

Adam was not the first teenager ever to be cut from a junior high basketball team, yet to Adam and his friends who joined him in the counselor's office, the disappointment consumed them. In selecting sports biographies for the young men, the counselor was careful to select biographies in which the athlete honestly described himself as a human being with faults, frailties, and frustrations. Rather than read each entire biography with the group, the counselor selected key passages to use in prompting discussion amongst the group members who had experienced the painful cut from the basketball team. By exploring the selected passages together and discussing their feelings about their similar situations, the counselor hoped the young men would be able to resolve their lack of success and would be kinder to themselves.

Along with Bob Greene's work on Michael Jordan, many other biographies of gifted athletes offer new insightful views to young men who place tremendous pressure upon themselves to succeed in athletics. Adam's counselor discovered Larry Bird's (1989) *Drive: The Story of My Life*. In this autobiography, Bird explained that he did not view himself as the basketball player of his family; instead, his older brother was the family superstar:

If anybody in our family appeared to be heading for a career in basketball, it was my brother Mark. It certainly wasn't me. I had little interest in basketball before I was thirteen or so. The first time I ever went to see a high school game was when my brother Mark played his last game.... It was a real close game and Mark wound up being fouled. He had to make some big free throws. I was so scared we were going to get beat, but we won. There were tears streaming down my face and I remember thinking, "What's wrong with me?" This is what I've been missing my whole life by not going to these games. I was just so proud that Mark was my brother. One of my fondest memories is that after the big game, Mark was my hero and when we were all riding back to school on the bus, Mark sat next to me. Everyone wanted Mark to sit next to them, but he came right over next to me. He made me feel so good when he did that. (pp. 18-19)

In Tony Dorsett's (1989) autobiography of his professional career in football entitled *Running Tough: Memoirs of a Football Maverick*, Dorsett provided young men with the surprising disclosure of his adolescent years as the non-athlete of his family. Bright young men who are feeling discouraged by their lack of stellar success in athletics may feel better when they hear what Dorsett felt as a young man:

By the time I was in elementary school, football had already become a tradition in the Dorsett family. My older brothers were outstanding junior and senior high school football players...I was actually a scared kind of kid, afraid of football, afraid of getting hurt. I remember when I was about ten or eleven, boys would come around calling my little sister Sheree to play football with them, and I'd complain, "Mom, that old girl's out there playing with them boys." It bothered me that they picked her to play with instead of me. (p. 7)

A sports biography of an Olympic track and field champion offers young athletes another example of an outstanding athlete whose adolescent years were filled with frustration and self-doubt. Carl Lewis's (1990) *Inside Track: My Professional Life in Amateur Track and Field* provided readers with his reflections on his early years with his brothers and sister, who seemed to overshadow young Carl. He described his situation with his siblings as he wrote:

Carol started competing in any event she wanted to try, and she was amazingly good, bigger than most boys her age and much more talented than most, including me. I started to learn what I could about track, but I was a very slow starter, too small, too shy, and too overshadowed by Carol for anyone to notice me. (p. 19)

Carol was the ultimate tomboy, no long dress, ponytail, and pocketbook for her. She was big for her age and full of the competitive spirit she saw in Mack and Cleve. Mack was doing very well in track by now and Cleve was the best soccer player in the area. I was small for my age, the runt of the family, the nonathlete, and my father wondered if that was the way it would always be. He figured that little Carl must have gotten the nonathletic genes in the family. (p. 20)

Another enlightening sports biography for young athletes who drive themselves to excel in sports is Carl Yastrzemski's (1990) *Yaz: Baseball, the Wall and Me*. In his story, the hall of fame baseball superstar divulged how he truly never enjoyed the game because of his extreme intensity and his inability to leave the game behind. In his autobiography, Yastrzemski revealed that his intensity led him to contemplate suicide. He explained:

That's why I never enjoyed it. That's right, never truly enjoyed something after the moment had passed. I was so intense about the game. I never even relaxed on a good day after the game ended. If I was 3 for 4 and won the game with a home run, I say to myself, "That's it. It's over," as soon as I stepped into that clubhouse. I'd replay it just a little. Okay, you did everything right today. Now who's pitching tomorrow? And fifteen minutes after the game was over, I'd start worrying about tomorrow.

Worse, if I went 0 for 4, my stomach would be knotted up, especially if I could have done something to help the club win. I'd sit back in my chair, put my feet up against the locker, and sit there for twenty minutes — not moving, just thinking. All of a sudden, I'd kick the locker. I'd be sick inside. There were times after a bad game that I'd sit in front of my locker with such dark thoughts that I'd think about jumping off the Mystic River Bridge. (p. 55)

Sports biographies supply counselors and concerned educators with ample opportunities to enlighten bright young men about the reality of the sports world by examining it together through the eyes of those who have faced self-doubt and numerous obstacles in achieving success. The passages presented above are just a sampling of a few stories shared by great athletes. A school counselor or teacher could provide bright young men many healthy hours of therapeutic discussion with focused questions centered on the feelings expressed by the athletic heroes in their autobiographies.

Steven's story reflects a common problem for gifted young men, for there often exists a barrier to genuine emotional contact between fathers and sons (Elium & Elium, 1992). Sometimes they succeed in making a connection, but fathers frequently live on the perimeters of their families' lives. Elium & Elium (1992) indicated that "the strength of a boy's alliances with male mentors greatly affects his transition in manhood. Vital to his maturity is the presence of other adult males. The stories he hears and the lives he observes will sink deeply and become subconscious models for what he will seek to become" (p. 25). In the case of Steven, the sensitive young man who yearned for a stronger relationship with his father, his male mentor offered Rod McKuen's (1976) *Finding My Father: One Man's Search for Identity* as a source of solace. Knowing that Steven appreciated poetry, he believed the sensitive young man would benefit from the poet's autobiography in which he shared a poignant, strikingly personal account of his lifelong search for the father he never knew. *Finding My Father* is more than the inspiring story of his quest for his father; it is the warmly nostalgic account of a lonely boy's coming of age and his search for self. Interwoven throughout the book are many of McKuen's songs and thought-provoking poems, which may also serve as catharsis for bright, young men.

Another biography with a powerful father-son relationship interwoven as a theme throughout is Dan Rather's (1991) *I Remember*. *I Remember* is the story of how Danny Rather, an impish young boy, became Dan Rather, the compelling anchorman behind the CBS news desk. Throughout his autobiography of growing up in Texas, Rather provided his reader with a close examination of his relationship with his father, Irvin "Rags" Rather, a rugged oil pipeliner whose life's commandments for young Dan were "Up from the ditch" and "Rathers never quit." Throughout his nostalgic biography, Rather offered his reader a vivid description of the father-son relationship he shared with a strong yet loving man who helped to mold Rather into the gifted individual he is today. *I Remember* provides bright, sensitive young men with a story of a father and son who respected and loved each other. Through his work, Rather offered bright, adolescent boys a story through which they may better understand their distant fathers.

Another source of biographical material which focuses strictly on father-son relationship is a collection of biographical memoirs which explores the powerful reactions sons have toward their father, from the time they call him "Daddy" through the rebellious adolescence and then years of adult reflection and reconciliation. Ralph Keyes' (1992) work entitled *Sons on Father: A Book of Men's Writings* offered bright, sensitive young men an opportunity to probe into the lives of other men who attempted to better understand each other and developed a stronger masculine bond between father and son. Since so many sensitive and intelligent young men have intense feelings about their fathers and these feelings seldom get expressed, the collection of biographical vignettes Ralph Keyes compiled should serve as a model for sons and their fathers in expressing their feelings for each other.

Strategies for Using Biographies with Gifted Young Men

As presented in the previous scenarios, teachers and counselors who use biographies as a counseling tool with bright young men have a variety of options to consider. In the case of Heath, his college advisor prescribed a particular book with intentions of following up in a cathartic discussion with the student. Jamal's teacher offered a classroom collection of biographies hoping that Jamal might self-select a biographical work, read it, identify with the subject and discover a quiet reassurance. Adam and his peers were fortunate to have a counselor who organized a discussion group with a simple plan of sharing passages from a collection of biographies all focused on a problematic issue (See Figure 1). Steven's teacher was able to provide help for the sensitive young man as he shared his thoughts and feelings concerning his father-son relationship in his reflective journal.



Figure 1

GROUP BIBLIOTHERAPY SESSION USING BIOGRAPHY

I. Sports Biographies:

Bradshaw, Terry (1989). *Looking Deep*. New York: Contemporary Books.

Greene, Bob (1992). *Hang time: Days and dreams with Michael Jordan*. New York: Doubleday.

Lewis, Carl (1990). *Inside track: My professional life in amateur track and field*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

II. Themes/Key Concepts:

Celebrity athletes faced failure during adolescence.

Many athletes have dealt with self-doubt and great disappointments.

It is impossible to reach perfection in athletics

Athletes remind us to demand only reachable goals of ourselves and to enjoy the sport.

III. Introductory Activity:

As a group, attempt to define the following terms: frustration, failure, and disappointment

IV. Selected Passages/Quotations to be Used in Discussions

Quote from Terry Bradshaw's *Looking Deep*

The coach had picked only one kid out of the seventh grade to play on the junior high team, and it wasn't me. So I joined a Pop Warner League that year with the rest of the rejects. At least they let me play quarterback. The next year, 1961, we moved again; I changed junior high schools and tired out for the Oak Terrace team as an eighth grader. But my luck didn't change: all my buddies go uniforms except me. I can't tell you how much that hurt. I was devastated. Of all the kids there, I felt I was the most committed — the only one who had run laps all summer, thrown the football every day, and was totally focused on making the team. All the rest of the thirteen-year-olds were chasing girls. I was chasing my dream to someday be a quarterback in the NFL. The coach, obviously unaware that he was screwing up my plans, explained that he was sorry he couldn't assign a uniform to everyone. (Bradshaw, 1989, p. 5)

Quote from Carl Lewis' *Inside Track: My Professional Life in Amateur Track and Field*

Being the loser in the family was so frustrating. Carol was very successful. Mack was all-state in track, the county record-holder in the 220-yard sprint. Cleve was an all-American in soccer. I was the runt. My father was very supportive of us all, but he always talked about Cleve being the best at this or that. People were waiting to see what Mack's little brother could do, what Cleve's little brother could do, and I couldn't do much. Every family seems to have someone who is not talented, and I thought I was the one for our family. (p.23)

Quotes from Bob Green's *Hang Time: Days and Dreams with Michael Jordan*

My heroes are and were my parents. I can't see having anyone else as my heroes. Because of the situation I'm in, I've seen a lot of what people expect in heroes. People expect their heroes to be flawless, never to make mistakes, to be happy all the time. And no one can do that. No one never makes mistakes, and no one always does everything right, and I can tell you for sure that no one is happy all the time. (Greene, 1992, p. 148)

I can admire someone's talent and respect that person, but I leave it at that. I don't think I could ever pattern my life after another person. Because each person can only be himself — there's only one of each person. As hard as you try, you're always going to be that one person. (Greene, 1992, p. 148)

Quote from Carl Lewis's *Inside Track: My Professional Life in Amateur Track and Field*

At my first Jesse Owens meets, my father introduced me to Owens, who was fifty-seven then, and took a picture of my cousin and me with him....It was a brief meeting and I was just one of hundreds of kids who met him at that meet. I did not win anything that day. But I do remember on thing Owens said to me: "Have fun." He wanted us to know that having fun was the most important thing we could do. (Lewis, 1990, p. 20)

V. Sample Discussion Questions

- When Terry Bradshaw said, "I was devastated," what did he mean? How does devastation feel? Have any of you felt that way when you were disappointed? Can you describe the feeling?
- Terry Bradshaw saw all of his friends make the team and he was left out. How would that feel? Have any of you felt that way before? Can you describe the feeling?
- Carl Lewis felt overshadowed by his brothers and sisters. Have you ever felt this way? What happened? How did you deal with those feelings?
- What do you think Michael Jordan expects of himself? How can this way of thinking be applied to your personal situation?
- What did Jordan mean when he said, "As hard as you try, you're always going to be that one person"?
- Why do you think Jesse Owens told Carl Lewis and the other young boys to "have fun"? How would you respond to this advice?

VI. Possible Follow-up Activities:

- A. Write individual letters to Carl Lewis, Terry Bradshaw or Michael Jordan about our discussion today. What will we say about how we are feeling about each other and what we've learned from being cut from a team? What will we say we learned from them?
- B. Write a poem describing how you're feeling today about sports.
- C. Write the lyrics to a song describing an athlete's frustration.
- D. Design an advertisement to sell yourself as a person with many admirable qualities.
- E. Write a pledge to be kinder to yourselves in your expectations for self and recite the pledge as a group.

Regardless of whether the book is prescribed, a collection is offered, a discussion group is formed, or a writing experience is suggested, what is most important is that the teacher/counselor be prepared to listen closely to the feeling responses of the young men. In any discussion, whether one-on-one or in a group setting, the goal of the discussion is to have the young men share their feelings and listen closely to themselves as well as each other. In a group, it is important that the young men leave the session leaving reached an awareness that others have experienced the same feelings they are facing. A group discussion should bring about the universality of experience — a feeling of “we are in this together.” For instance, the goal of Adam’s counselor was to have the disappointed athletes realize they were not alone in their feelings of frustration and disappointment. In sharing those feelings, the young athletes were provided an environment where they felt comfortable defining and verbalizing their feelings.

Dealing with counseling issues through biography has the potential to help a gifted young man develop positive attitudes about his abilities, the world around him, his relationships with others and his own uniqueness. Under the guidance of a knowledgeable and empathic teacher or counselor, a gifted young man will discover ways for attaining self-directed personal growth through biography. Through this experience with biography, he may encounter conflicts similar to his own, develop ideas that will contribute to the formation of his values, and gain insights from other intelligent men who bear a resemblance to himself and others in his world.

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