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Elena Spirovska

South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7860-9076>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elena Spirovska Tevdovska.

Email: e.spirovska@seeu.edu.mk



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Bibliotherapy - The Healing Power of Literature in Our Classrooms

Elena Spirovska

Abstract

This article will attempt to examine the notion of bibliotherapy, history of bibliotherapy and the impact of bibliotherapy in an educational setting. Bibliotherapy is defined as usage of literary texts to enhance emotional, psychological, and social well-being. As such, bibliotherapy has recently emerged as a powerful tool to promote mindfulness and enhance stress free environment in a contemporary educational setting. This article will provide the theoretical background of the concept of bibliotherapy and will explore the potential of literature in supporting students' mental health, their personal development, and overall well-being. Furthermore, the article will provide insight and suggestions regarding relevant texts and strategies to implement bibliotherapy in classrooms and the potential to create opportunities for self-reflection, empathy, and effective strategies for dealing with various personal challenges. The paper highlights the benefits of bibliotherapy and examines the potential drawbacks, emphasizing its ability to improve emotional literacy and create a beneficial environment for students to explore difficult emotions and situations.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, well-being, personal challenges, strategies, literature.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the theory and practices which serve as foundations of bibliotherapy. The history of bibliotherapy and first notions related to it will be looked into more depth. In addition, different types of bibliotherapy will be examined, as well as their exploitability in classroom settings for the purpose of enhancing the well-being of our students. The recommendations will focus on texts and practices which are age suitable and relevant for the target population and the emotional challenges emerging from the described context, including peer pressure, bullying (cyber bullying included), substance abuse and issues arising from poor communication.

Bibliotherapy – History, Definition, Types

History of Bibliotherapy

The article will attempt to examine the origins of bibliotherapy and the definitions provided throughout the development of different strategies included in bibliotherapy. The ancient Egyptians inscribed the phrase *“Healing place for the soul”* above the entrance of the sacred library in the tomb complex of Ramses II at Thebes, signifying an early recognition of the therapeutic potential of books. Although bibliotherapy emerged relatively recently as tool in classroom management, Elsenman and Harper (2016) state the following regarding the history of bibliography “Historically, bibliotherapy dates back to the 1930s when librarians began compiling lists of written material that helped individuals modify their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors for therapeutic purposes.” (p. 1).

On the other hand, Myracle, L. (1995), pinpoints the beginning of the 1920s as a decade when bibliotherapy was conceptualized, stating that “...the early twentieth century is a logical starting point for the study of bibliotherapy because it was at this time that a flurry of attention was directed toward adolescents as a rapidly growing reading public.”

As a result, a number of literary texts from the literary canon, as well as other less “serious” texts – as seen by the society, stories and texts, emerged on the market targeting adolescents. At the time, the influence of the “less serious” literary works was a source of worry for parents and educators. In response, sets of guidelines and book lists were created, with the purpose of helping the parents select the content that their children can consume safely. As Myracle (1995) states: “Here is

how you can mold your child. These are the books that will change children's behavior and enable them to be productive members of society." This intentional use of reading for the promotion of mental and emotional health is commonly known as bibliography.

Definitions and Setting

There are several definitions of bibliography in past and current literature. According to Afolayan, J. A. (1992, p. 138-139), the notion of bibliotherapy can be defined as follows: "The term bibliotherapy, also referred to as bibliocounseling, is a method by which children and adolescents undergoing emotional stress, anxiety or maladjustment, may seek therapy through readings of selected books in which main characters are experiencing problems the same as or similar to those of the readers." However, in order to distinguish bibliotherapy from reading, Lin et al. (2024, p.735) state the following: "Bibliotherapy is different from reading in the traditional sense; it is the process of reading with a therapeutic purpose, rather than just reading and enjoying."

We can define the term bibliotherapy as the use of novels, poetry or stories, with the purpose of helping individuals to cope with their emotional issues and psychological and social challenges. By engaging with carefully selected literary works, individuals can identify their emotions and experiences and develop coping strategies. Although bibliotherapy can be used in various settings, including educational and rehabilitation settings, the classroom is one of the most obvious and beneficial.

The practice of bibliotherapy is underpinned by several psychological and educational theories. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory highlights literature's role in helping children navigate identity, belonging, and emotional conflicts. Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning emphasises the observation of fictional characters, which consequently encourages students to model and imitate constructive behaviours. Cognitive-behavioural frameworks emphasize that reading and discussing stories can improve and even reshape poorly adapted thinking and even facilitate the development of healthier coping strategies (Heath et al., 2005). The theoretical works listed provide arguments in favour of bibliotherapy's role in classrooms. It has to be emphasised that bibliotherapy is not as seen as a clinical intervention but as developmental bibliotherapy (Gladding & Gladding, 1991), which facilitates the coping mechanisms for everyday challenges including conflicts and dealing with conflicts, problems with self-esteem and cultural and societal adaptation.

Types and Varieties of Bibliotherapy

Different types of bibliotherapy can be classified, according to the goal or the setting of bibliotherapy which define the approaches. Martinec et al. (2022) defines the use of *cognitive and affective bibliotherapy*. According to Martinec et al. (2022), the goal of the cognitive bibliotherapy is learning. Thus, it can be used in various fields of education. This type of bibliotherapy can be performed through a selection of various literary texts, including non-fiction and self-help books. The contact with the therapist is not of primary importance. Instead, a selected literary text is used to help the individual solve an issue or cope with a specific challenge. On the other hand, affective bibliotherapy involves using texts in order to elicit or stimulate emotions or experiences, in the process of making connections with literary characters or situations. Martinec et al. (2022, p. 90), specifies that: “The assumption is that connection with the character(s) in the literary text can lead to comparison and then separation. In the separation phase, the focus is on one’s own characteristics, insights, and possible courses of action.

Yontz-Orlando (2017) divides the area of bibliotherapy into three major fields. The first category is *self-help*. The implementation of this category involves non-fiction books (including self-help literature) given to the patients or learners. After reading the material, the patients and advisors usually have a feedback session. This approach doesn’t involve a significant level of interpersonal interaction.

Creative bibliotherapy involves writing fiction. This approach encourages the patient or the learner to write a poem, a scene or a short story. The bibliotherapist reads the patient’s work and provides feedback and observations

Informal bibliotherapy is a model of bibliotherapy which focuses on reading circles and groups. Library displays and involves an extensive and dynamic cooperation between the therapists and patients. Yontz-Orlando (2017) provides information regarding the success rate of the above listed models of bibliotherapy. According to the article, the models are successful, with the informal model yielding the best results.

Fanner & Urquhart (2008), suggest using bibliotherapy to treat an array of conditions. Those conditions include alcohol dependence, self-harm, panic disorder, sexual dysfunction, underdeveloped social skills and unipolar depression.

Bibliotherapy can be implemented by an array of professionals and in diverse settings. The settings include schools, libraries and medical institutions. The

professional who can carry out bibliotherapy include teachers, educators, psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists.

Bibliotherapy in a Classroom Setting

Bibliotherapy can be defined as an effective and powerful therapeutic approach which can enable adults, teenagers and younger population to cope more effectively with challenging situations and improve their psychological well-being.

Bibliotherapy and narratives are powerful tools in a classroom setting, having therapeutic values which can be used by educators, educational psychologists and teachers. What are the implications and contexts of implementation of bibliotherapy in classrooms? Sapra (2019, p. 818) analyses the therapeutic benefits of bibliotherapy and the use of bibliotherapy in a classroom, stating the following: “The narrative can be woven into a story for children, which gives a sense of identity and direction to the child.”

There is a wide array of techniques to be used in bibliotherapy implementation. The initial step is to identify the problem to be solved and the text to be used, which is followed by reading and analysis of the text. It is important to select materials to ensure they are appropriate and not worsening the condition or trauma. The selected texts should align with students’ interests, age and reading proficiency. The topics should be relatable and provide potential for discussions and debates. A discussion and a dialogue can be used to facilitate the processing of the material and identifying potential solutions, as well as relating to real life situation experienced. It is important to foster an open and free of prejudice discussion environment, which can facilitate the therapeutic benefits. Extension activities which build on bibliotherapy gains are essential, since they encourage students’ creativity, personal growth and introspection. Journals and reflections, art projects including multimedia and multimodal expression (text, visual arts related to the text themes), as well as drama and role play activities, advance the benefits of bibliotherapy.

Classroom Applications: Case Studies

Development of Emotional Intelligence

Sullivan & Strang (2012) case study focuses on students with socio-emotional difficulties which are frequently associated with aggression. Bibliotherapy is used as a way to promote skills and cognitive strengths.

Dealing with Grief and Loss

Shechtman (2009) conducted a group bibliotherapy program in Israel with adolescents dealing with grief and aggression as consequence. By engaging with literary texts and stories about loss, students experienced liberation from these feelings and developed healthier coping mechanisms with grief. Teachers noted improvements in classroom climate and peer empathy.

Emotional Regulation in Early Childhood

Cook et al. (2006) explored the role of bibliotherapy in early elementary classrooms, where picture books about emotions were an integral part of literacy lessons. Follow-up activities, including role-playing or keeping journals helped children regulating emotions. The study found bibliotherapy improved both literacy and reading comprehension as well as emotional awareness and expression.

Anxiety and Stress

Heath et al. (2005) described a school program where bibliotherapy was used with anxious students in order to facilitate emotional development through children's literature. According to the study, stories provide opportunities for children to gain insight and learn healthier ways to cope with difficulties.

Reinforcing Social Skills

Bibliotherapy reinforces social skills including empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation and ability to communicate effectively. Elley (2014), analyzing the benefits of bibliotherapy implemented in a classroom, identifies several social skills which were improved after the use of bibliotherapy. The social skills addressed by bibliotherapy in this research include interrupting each other, working well in cooperative groups, determining how the participants get on well with each other and tolerance. The research shows that bibliotherapy proved to have a powerful effect in fostering the social skills mentioned.

Positive Emotions in a Classroom Context

Arslan et al. (2022) conducted a study on 53 high school students in Mediterranean Turkey, analyzing the pre and post story reading a bibliotherapy. The study focused on positive and negative mental health indicators including depression, mindfulness, happiness and positive emotion. Results from the study by Arslan et al. indicated that story reading and bibliotherapy had major effects on mindfulness

and optimism, but no significant effect on happiness and positive emotions in a classroom context. In other words, the study participants reported more positive self-assessment of the mental state and mental health.

Challenges in Classroom Use

Despite these successes, studies also identify limitations and challenges for classroom use. Some of them can be listed as follows:

Teacher preparedness: Many educators lack training in selecting appropriate texts or guiding discussions (McCulliss, 2012). Implementation of bibliotherapy requires a certain level of preparation and skill, in addition to sensitivity and awareness of students' emotional issues. The lack of cultural sensitivity can be reflected throughout classroom practices and in the process of text selection: inappropriate or non-representative texts risk alienating students rather than supporting them. In addition, time constraints can also pose significant problems, since integrating bibliotherapy within standardized curricula can be challenging (Shechtman, 2009). Finally, there is a significant risk of triggering negative emotions: without guidance, students may feel overwhelmed by difficult themes (Heath et al., 2005).

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that bibliotherapy in the classroom can provide a number of strategies for educators for supporting students' emotional well-being, fostering empathy, and promoting self-awareness. If bibliotherapy is implemented attentively, it has a potential to create beneficial environment where literature fosters the personal growth and healing. A number of studies confirm the usefulness of bibliotherapy. A number of teaching practices enhance the success of bibliotherapy. Some will be listed here:

Text selection: a careful book selection and titles available for students is essential. Careful selection of novels or texts which include characters who successfully overcome personal and emotional issues is crucial when conducting bibliotherapy. The texts should include an array of experiences and issues relevant for the target population, which results in increased awareness of the issues and encourages engagement with the text.

Numerous teaching practices facilitate the implementation of bibliotherapy in a classroom setting. Group discussions which are based on the texts and include open ended and relevant questions promote empathy and personal responses. These activities offer opportunities for the students to observe an issue from a different point of view. Extended activities which include self-reflection and personal responses are important. Journals or reflection writing foster engagement with the text and promote awareness of challenges and issues – an individual can establish a personal connection and coping strategies. Individual or collaborative projects which include artistic expression and creativity: posters, drawings or comic books are examples of visual expression of the emotions and issues presented in the text. Role playing or creating plays involve acting out the scenes which illustrate the key moments of the text or encourage the students to present their response in similar or equal situation and their ways to cope with a specific problem.

It is important to emphasize the need for building a safe classroom environment and predictable routine with elements which will increase the learners' interest. This includes illustrative themes and possible pairing of issues, for instance working on the topics of grief and change, anxiety and perfectionism or similar pairings. In addition, it is important to remember that the teacher is not providing therapy. Instead, the teachers are teaching skills through literature and bibliotherapy.

We can conclude that bibliotherapy can be implemented in a variety of classroom contexts and activities, thus offering a significant potential for students' engagement in and outside the classroom setting. The research supports the acceptability and potential effectiveness of bibliotherapy for a number of issues including depression, anxiety, grief, bullying, and adjustment challenges, especially when adults facilitate reflection and connect stories to concrete coping and help-seeking skills. Following the procedure of a thoughtful text selection, including safe routines and simple progress checks, any teacher can use stories and other literary genre to help students feel seen, gain language and awareness necessary for their inner lives and mental health and practice healthier ways of handling emotional challenges and difficulties.

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