

# VARIOUS ASPECTS OF USING BIBLIOTHERAPY IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION

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**Abstract:** *Bibliotherapy represents the planned use of literary texts and devices to encourage awareness and processing of emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal problems in individuals with different types of psychosocial distress. As a part of expressive arts-therapies, it includes precisely formulated goals, basic stages, and methodology that are described in this paper. In addition, an overview of recent scientific research on this topic is provided in order to gain insights on the most commonly used approaches, methodologies, and outcomes obtained, as well as the effectiveness of bibliotherapy. Based on our evaluation, we concluded that the use of bibliotherapy is an appropriate complementary approach in educational settings, for children with special needs, as well as for maintaining mental health. Considering the limitations of bibliotherapy, we emphasise the need for further research with the aim of improving practical models and assessment tools. Bibliotherapy can be a promising part of a multimodal educational and rehabilitation approach that recognises the power of language arts, which simultaneously supports both realistic and transcendental aspects of human existence.*

**Keywords:** *bibliotherapy, education, rehabilitation, efficiency, limitations*

## INTRODUCTION

Bibliotherapy is a modality of expressive arts-therapies that involves the planned use of reading material (prose, poetry, fairy tales, myths, legends) and literary devices (metaphors, comparisons, allegories, rhymes, rhythms) in therapy in order to encourage awareness and processing of various emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal problems in individuals with different types of psychosocial distress (Aiex, 1993).

Although the term “bibliotherapy” was introduced in 1916 by Samuel Crothers, the use of literary text for healing dates back to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome (Afolayan, 1992). For example, Hippocrates and Galen emphasised the therapeutic role of reciting and listening to poetry. References to the use of reading therapy have also appeared in the 8th century in Baghdad, where sick individuals were advised to read the Koran day and night (Martinec, 2015). Similarly,

until the 19th century, it was recommended that religious texts be read in prisons and psychiatric hospitals in Europe (Beatty, 1962). The first publication on the therapeutic role of literature was published in the mid-19th century by Dr. John Minson Galt, a psychiatrist who worked at a psychiatric hospital in Virginia, USA. In addition, the American Medical Association founded the first Council for Bibliotherapy in 1939.

The influence of literary text on the spiritual and moral aspects of human existence has also been discussed by many artists and philosophers. For example, Aristotle introduced the concept of *catharsis* (from the Greek word “kátharsis” meaning purification and clarification) in his work, *Politics* (Book VIII), and associated it with the experience of art, especially poetry, music, and tragedy. The cathartic influence of poetry has also been emphasised by Hindu and Buddhist poets (Martinec, 2015). Moreover, various approaches in philosophy have highlighted aesthetic experiences and judgment

based on literary text, especially at the level of receptivity, reflection, and emotional response. According to Jauss (1978), catharsis is a fundamental aesthetic experience in which the viewer is separated from practical interests and their own affective networks during the process of art reception, whilst life themes that would refine the experience of the human mind and soul arise. Similarly, by introducing the term “*transcendental intersubjectivity*”, Hussler tried to emphasise the process of overcoming personal experience through transcendence, which supports the destruction of the old and the creation of new patterns of interpersonal relationships (Zahavi, 2001). Within the framework of psychoanalytic theory, Freud also emphasised the use of literature and other artistic approaches to reveal repressed content in the human mind (Walsh, 2013). Bibliotherapy is one among the contemporary approaches that allows individuals to connect with problems, discover other people’s experiences, and consider different courses of action in order to resolve conflict situations (Jack & Ronan, 2008).

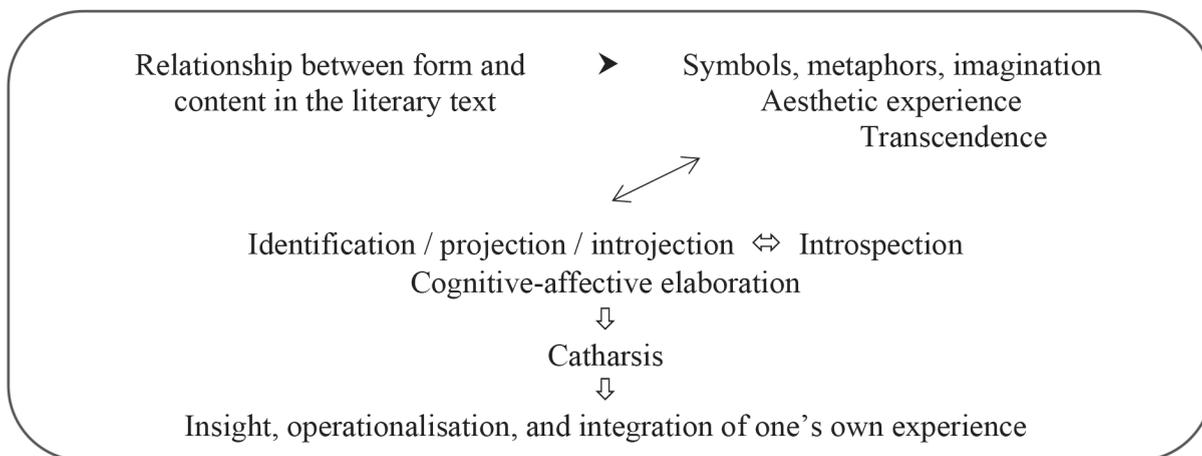
### Psychological determinants in bibliotherapy

A literary text is a unique combination of form (lexis) and content (logos), as well as structure and meaning, experience and expression, and a reflection of the value system in a particular socio-cultural context. Given that it is an integrated stimulus, a literary text can evoke different psychological responses in an individual (Fig. 1).

According to Jauss (1978), a literary text can indirectly and spontaneously awaken memories in the reader, the contents of which are then altered, corrected, or merely reproduced: it can also point to multiple possibilities and open up pathways for future experiences. The value of bibliotherapy lies in the fact that it is based on symbols and metaphors that stimulate the process of imagination, where coping with conflicting states, individuals, or situations can be less constrained and less painful (Myers, 1998). Similarly, an appropriate literary text can enliven aesthetic experiences that sustain intrinsic motivation and openness to new perspectives while perceiving and solving problems. The process of identification also plays a key role in this interaction: clients often identify themselves in a literary character or recognise the similarity between characters and individuals in their social environment. An important element of identification is that it can provide relief and awareness that other people also face similar problems. Therefore, clients can share their pain, reduce feelings of hopelessness, and/or discover different role models, ideals, and examples to follow (Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Hebert & Kent, 2000).

In a complex interaction with a literary text, the process of projection is also encouraged and can be experienced as a “*vicarious expression of traits*” during which clients have the opportunity to reflect and share their attitudes, feelings, and

Figure 1. Basic responses of individual when interacting with a literary text



ideas (Silverberg, 2008). This act is an easier and less frightening way to discover a particular part of one's identity, since it is attached to the character(s) portrayed in the text. In the next phase of the therapeutic process, there is a need for the clients to achieve a separation from the characters and situations (i.e., from intermediary objects; Lutovac & Kaasila, 2020). Sometimes the reverse occurs through the process of introjection, where the client adopts or unconsciously takes over the thoughts, solutions, and beliefs of the character(s) in the literary text.

Along the way, a catharsis may occur as a process of releasing the client from strong conscious or repressed emotions, tensions, and conflicts. Sometimes it is accompanied by various reactions such as regret, empathy, sadness, anger, fear, laughter, and crying, as well as followed by a state of revitalisation, calm, comfort, and psychophysical homeostasis. Finally, according to Martinec (2015), *insight* is perhaps the most important element of bibliotherapy. Its value lies in the fact that by observing their own reactions to a particular text, clients become aware of the problem, which helps them solve it more easily and face new life challenges. In fact, insight is a critical approach through which we recognise and thoroughly evaluate our own attitudes and actions. Insight can also elicit humility and self-criticism, which are sometimes necessary to initiate change or further learning. The depth and complexity of these insights typically depends on the defined goals and approaches, as well as the age, needs, and motivation of the client.

## GOALS, BASIC STAGES, AND APPROACHES IN BIBLIOTHERAPY

Bibliotherapy can have many different goals that are defined according to the specific needs and problems of the clients (Abdulah, 2008). In general, some goals promote the process of introspection and self-assessment, while others aim to gain a better understanding of the specific motivation of human behaviour and mitigate egocentrism by drawing attention to the reactions of others. Finally, these goals should be directed to defining coping strategies and constructive plans

of action for the purpose of problem solving. The goals of bibliotherapy are typically determined by the person's existential experiences and directed to the following areas: (a) moral context (understanding of moral principles, concept of good and bad, principle of causality), (b) intrapersonal experiences (self-awareness, introspection, self-perception, body image), (c) interpersonal relationships (understanding of one's own interpersonal reactions and that of others, intimacy, attachments, avoidance, shame), and (d) current traumatic experiences (Zhang & Wu, 2012; McCarty & Hynes-Berry, 2019).

Although bibliotherapy is a creative process with respect to its methodology, some basic stages that typically arise from each other should be followed (Pardeck, 1993; Hebert & Kent, 2000). In general, bibliotherapy involves the following stages:

1. Assessment of the client's particular needs and/or problems
2. Appropriate selection of the literary text
3. Incubation
4. Insight and interpretation (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of particular issues highlighted by the client)
5. Discussion of the problem
6. Problem solving.

It is important to point out that although the success of bibliotherapy depends on the client's commitment, the therapist also plays an important role in supporting the client's efforts to move through the various stages of bibliotherapy (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). Considering the fact that bibliotherapy can be conducted both individually and in a group setting, it is also important to emphasise that the group in itself can be a great facilitator of an individual's participation and action in the therapy process.

In terms of the specific goals of the intervention, different approaches can be used. For example, the use of "cognitive" and "affective" bibliotherapy can be considered (Shechtman, 2009). Within cognitive bibliotherapy, it is recognised that the learning process is the main mechanism

through which behavioural change is accomplished and the literary text used is intended to support the client in their efforts to solve a particular problem. Generally, cognitive bibliotherapy involves minimal contact with the therapist, and can be performed via a learning process through the selection of professional literature or, more often, self-help books. In fact, in this approach, the client is expected to put in significant effort to solve the problem (Cuijpers, Donker, Straten & Anderson, 2010). In contrast, affective bibliotherapy refers to the use of a text to stimulate repressed thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Suvilehto, 2019). 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. According to Batzalel and Shechtman (2010), affective bibliotherapy is based on fiction or other high-quality literature, and the presence of a therapist is crucial. Here the role of the therapist is to guide clients through the various stages of bibliotherapy, as well as through painful, challenging, and confusing emotions. The therapist mitigates, modifies, or demystifies certain undesirable responses, and helps ensure that various pieces of information are properly understood, especially when children, adolescents, or individuals with intellectual disorders are involved in a bibliotherapy session. Since affective and cognitive bibliotherapy are focused on different kind of problems and types of literature, they cannot be used simultaneously with the same client (Shechtman, 2009). However, they can be used together in certain situations, such as when a client, who has resolved some of their emotional issues and achieved a certain level of resilience, begins to use literature appropriate for cognitive bibliotherapy to gain a foothold in the process of achieving the goals defined by affective bibliotherapy.

Other types of bibliotherapy approaches that are based on interventions, participants, and problem situations include interactive, clinical, and developmental bibliotherapy (Abdullah, 2008). All of them support the "interactive" tendency based on the premise that the client plays an active role in the

cognitive and emotional processing of various attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. In interactive bibliotherapy, it is recommended that participants engage in various activities such as group discussions, writing dialog journals, or plays that allow them to share and reflect on their experiences (Palmer, Biller, Rancourt & Teets, 1997; Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000). Clinical bibliotherapy is another useful approach for addressing severe emotional and interpersonal problems or mental disorders (Canty, 2017). On the other hand, bibliocounseling is focused on specific problem described by the client and their ability to overcome certain limitations or complications, such as those in the area of social intelligence, motivation, and improvement of learning ability (Akinola, 2014; Sari, 2019). Developmental bibliotherapy is useful for promoting personal development and maintaining mental health. This approach is particularly effective in educational settings, where different professionals can participate in selecting appropriate literature that allows children and adolescents to deal with problems or situations based on their age. In this context, bibliotherapy may have a preventive and a curative role by giving some examples of how to deal with different concerns associated with certain developmental periods or situations (Morawski & Gilbert, 2000; Hebert & Kent, 2000).

*Poetry therapy* is another interesting approach. According to the National Association for Poetry Therapy in USA, it refers to the "use of language, symbol, and story in therapeutic, education, growth, and community-building capacities. It relies upon the use of poems, stories, song lyrics, imagery, and metaphor to facilitate personal growth, healing and greater self-awareness. Bibliotherapy, narrative, journal writing, metaphor, storytelling, and ritual are all within the realm of poetry therapy." (<https://poetrytherapy.org/>). The significance of this approach is that it encourages participants to write their own stories and poems, as well as participate in journal writing and storytelling. It can be combined with guided imagery, meditation, rhythms, movement, and drawing. In this way, creativity and spontaneity are released, and clarification of thoughts and feelings is achieved. In a broader context, bibliotherapy also

includes web-therapy (McMillen, 2008; Noruzi, 2021) as well as cinema therapy. According to Wolz (2010), cinema therapy “...can be a powerful catalyst for healing and growth for anybody who is open to learning how movies affect us and to watching certain films with conscious awareness. Cinema therapy allows us to use the effect of imagery, plot, music, etc. in films on our psyche for insight, inspiration, emotional release or relief, and natural change.”

Bibliotherapy is not intended only for individuals with reading skills, but also those who are unable to read or do not want to read, because they can listen to another person read or listen to audio text. Listening to another person read also encourages attachment and positive therapeutic transference. The successful implementation of bibliotherapy depends on a larger number of parameters that include the recognition of specific problems faced by clients, their motivation, proper literary text selection, knowledge and skills of the bibliotherapist, as well as the therapeutic alliance.

Given the importance of the role of the bibliotherapist, it is necessary that interested professionals from various disciplines, such as psychologists, psychotherapists, teachers, rehabilitators, and librarians obtain the appropriate educational qualifications offered by “a university or another institution whose programs meet educational and training standards established by the corresponding credentialing or certification bodies.” (<https://bibliotherapyforlibrarians.wordpress.com/training-and-certification/>). Such educational qualifications may be offered through various university postgraduate study programmes, or by professional associations, agencies, or institutes with recognised education and training standards.

Bibliotherapy has a significant history, well-defined goals and methodology, as well as different approaches adapted to various problem areas, goals, and achieved levels of therapeutic processes. Regardless of which strategy of bibliotherapy is chosen, it is important that the needs of the client are respected and that the therapist is qualified to achieve a therapeutic alliance and moderate the different elements of the bibliotherapy process. Therefore, bibliotherapy can be used

as a complementary method in the holistically defined process of education and rehabilitation.

## **SPECIFICS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF BIBLIOTHERAPY IN EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION**

This paper presents an overview of recent scientific research on the specifics and effectiveness of bibliotherapy in terms of the most commonly used approaches, methodologies, and results obtained.

### **Bibliotherapy in educational settings**

Developmental bibliotherapy (DB) has been widely implemented within educational settings in order to help children or adolescents who may have had traumatic experiences related to coping with loss or death, accepting one’s sexual orientation, dealing with parental divorce, math anxiety, fears and social anxiety, addiction, bullying, poverty, abuse, negative body image, school anxiety, and eating disorders (Catalano, 2008). Using appropriate literature, DB can provide emotional support and knowledge regarding strategies to deal with different problems. In addition, when DB is conducted in a group or in the classroom, it motivates other students to understand and empathise with those who are going through trauma and suffering. Furthermore, DB is a useful preventive method because it promotes critical thinking, problem solving abilities, and awareness of possible consequences (Silverberg, 2003; Catalano, 2008).

Developmental bibliotherapy can also be used as a tool to solve problems in the classroom. For example, if there is a child with behavioural disorders in the class, the teacher can read an appropriate text which is related to the problem, discuss it with the children, and work with them to find a solution to the problem. As a result, the child with the problem will not feel called out for his/her own behaviour and can indirectly participate in understanding and solving the problem (Škrbina, 2013).

Furthermore, bibliotherapy may be appropriate in the college setting when dealing with student distress. Riahinia and Asemi (2011) conducted a study involving 40 students with educational

stress and stratified them into three groups: those who received bibliotherapy (n = 13), those who received counselling (n = 14), and those who did not receive therapy (control group, n = 13). Using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (Lovibond, Lovibond, 1995), the authors measured stress levels before and after the students underwent eight therapy sessions. The bibliotherapy group read the novel *Majid Stories*, which is about a student who faces a series of life problems and solves them in a sympathetic way, which is sometimes funny, but always successful. After reading the text, they discussed Majid's problems and the solutions that were employed to solve them. The results showed that, compared to the control, both bibliotherapy and counselling therapy were effective in reducing the stress level of students.

Due to its complex influence, bibliotherapy may have a positive effect on the acquisition of pre-reading and reading skills, such as listening to and reading texts to enjoy and talk about them, experiencing and understanding text content, retelling stories, recognising why reading is important, handling and leafing through books and other print media, and participating in activities after listening/reading a text (Čudina-Obradović, 1996). Motivation to read or listen to the literary text can be promoted by the additional use of related media such as music, visual art expression, dramatisation, movement and dance, puppetry, creative writing, or other activities.

One interesting and innovative approach is the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.)® program, which was registered in the USA in 1999 by the Intermountain Therapy Animals Association. The mission of this program is to improve children's reading, writing, and communication skills by supporting therapeutic pairs of registered and trained dogs along with their handlers, who go to libraries, schools, health care facilities and other institutions ([http://www.therapyanimals.org/Read\\_Team\\_Steps.html](http://www.therapyanimals.org/Read_Team_Steps.html)). Reading to a dog or with the assistance of a dog is helpful because they are stimulating, relaxing, motivating, reliable, and inviting to pet and touch. Fun and relaxing reading encourages children to become more interested in this activity. It has been shown that children have

more success in reading this way: they are able to forget about their reading difficulties, understand the text better, and talk about it more easily. In such conditions, they become more confident and consequently have fewer difficulties when reading in front of their peers and others. It also strengthens socialisation and engagement in other activities (Hasimi, 2015).

Since DB is aimed at a very sensitive and demanding population of children and adolescents, special attention has been paid to defining a specific methodology for its implementation. For example, according to Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, and Johnston (2006), the following approach provides a helpful ten-step model for using DB:

1. Developing relationships, trust, and confidence with the student
2. Identifying other school personnel who may be able to provide assistance
3. Seeking support from the student's parents or guardians
4. Defining specific problems that the student is experiencing
5. Defining goals and activities
6. Selecting books that are appropriate for the situation
7. Using care and thought in introducing the student to a literary text
8. Incorporating reading activities (vocabulary, sentences, summaries, journaling)
9. Conducting post-reading activities (discussion and various creative post-reading projects)
10. Evaluating the effects of bibliotherapy.

Although current research suggests that DB can be an appropriate preventive and therapeutic tool in educational settings, Catalano (2008) pointed out that "*it would be careless to suggest that following the above guidelines would be a safe and sufficient way to implement DB for children, without a further note of caution*". One of the basic preconditions for the successful implementation of DB is the collaboration of experts from different disciplines, such as teachers, educators, librarians, and psychologists, with the help

or under the supervision of a bibliotherapist in order to contribute to the selection and implementation of goals, basic stages, and methodologies employed during a given intervention that is defined according to the specific students' problem.

### **Bibliotherapy and children with special needs**

The positive effects of bibliotherapy can be achieved at different levels, such as cognitive, emotional, psychosocial, interpersonal, and behavioural (Silverberg, 2003). Therefore, the use of bibliotherapy could also be considered for children with special needs after taking into account their intellectual disabilities, visual and auditory impairments, physical disabilities, chronic diseases, speech and language pathology, behavioural disorders, and learning disabilities.

In the field of sensory impairments, Nowkarizi and Alemzadeh (2011) conducted a study on the effects of bibliotherapy on internalised and externalised syndromes in hearing impaired students in higher grades of an exceptional elementary school. Bibliotherapy was applied using a selected set of books, as well as CDs with sign language corresponding to these books. Using the *Child Behavior Checklist* and *Teacher's Report Form*, which is based on Achenbach's psychiatric test, the authors showed that the described program had a positive effect on reducing both internalised (anxiety/depression problems, withdrawal/depression, physical complaints) and externalised syndromes (offensive and aggressive behaviours, social problems). Previous studies have also pointed out the importance of bibliotherapy for blind students through appropriate selection of materials (Roberts, 1984), or by casting these students in a school play (Ware, 1968).

Because bibliotherapy is based on building language, communication, and social skills, studies have been conducted on the assumption that it could be a valuable method in the rehabilitation of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Fleury & Schwartz, 2017; Abraham, Owen-De Schryver & Vander Molen, 2021). Although it was previously thought that understanding fictional text is too complicated for children with

ASD (because some of them may lack the empathy or understanding of the social context or the perspective of others), studies have shown that this type of literature can be used if certain recommendations are followed. For example, the use of familiar text, as well as dialogic and repeated reading could improve the process of engagement and verbal participation (Fleury & Schwartz, 2017). In addition, facial expressions, gestures, and a different tone of voice should be used, which can help in understanding one's own emotions and attitudes, as well as that of others. One example of such a method is laminating and restructuring the pages to make them more acceptable for the active participation of readers. When a book is easier to touch and interact with, it allows children to engage both physically and mentally. In fact, it is desirable for the book to have physical objects and/or visual representations (Fleury & Hugh, 2018). Digital bibliotherapy also offers special opportunities because it allows readers with ASD to manipulate images and visual effects, resulting in an interaction with the story and features that engage the reader's senses. As a result, children's preferences are respected, which boost motivation and helps maintain their autonomy and right to self-determination during therapy (Lorah & Parnell 2017; Abraham et al., 2021). Although studies have suggested that this method is effective, further research is required to evaluate whether bibliotherapy can be considered as an evidence-based intervention for children with ASD.

Since one of the goals of bibliotherapy is to improve interpersonal interactions, previous studies have focused on learning acceptance with respect to alternative coping strategies (Shechtman, 2010). Tutian and Schechtman (2015) aimed to determine the effectiveness of counselling and bibliotherapy in a group of children who had been identified as highly aggressive, with over 50% diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Bibliotherapy was used as an adjunct therapy to counselling, and it included poems, stories, songs, and movies that addressed the characteristics of aggressive children, including high levels of anger, need for power, low empathy,

and low self-control. The authors concluded that bibliotherapy engaged children in the therapy process and it was more effective in reducing aggression than verbal therapy alone.

Furthermore, the use of bibliotherapy facilitates problem solving among maladapted students (i.e., those who violate a written or unwritten social norm or school rule), reduces the amount of conflict in the classroom, as well as promotes sustained teamwork, positive group dynamics, and a more productive and enjoyable environment. For example, this type of intervention can promote understanding in situations when the class is engaged in teasing students with poor academic performance. In this case, it seems to be a challenging way to stimulate acceptance and tolerance that starts to develop in the group, and it can affect the wider social context later on. For example, Khusumadewi, Sholeha and Ifdil (2018) carried out a study about the impact of bibliotherapy on changing negative attitudes towards children with special needs in an inclusive school. Five sessions of bibliotherapy was conducted, including an overview of the activity, identification of negative assumptions, new knowledge related to the strengths and conditions of children with special needs, and evaluation of the changes achieved. In this study, bibliotherapy was used as “*humanistic education*” to broaden the perspective on the diversity of human beings. The results showed that this approach shaped a new mindset and weakened negative attitudes, leading to better socialisation and understanding of children with special needs. Similarly, Giagazoglou and Papadani (2018) conducted an intervention program using storytelling and drama techniques alluding to a small turtle with Down syndrome. This study involved 34 children in the first grade of an elementary school, and the results showed that reading aloud and theatrical play improved the awareness and acceptance of peers with disabilities. These findings may also support the idea that when children were guided to engage in the world of stories, they may change their thoughts and attitudes (Adomat, 2012; Law, Lam, Law, & Tam, 2017).

The use of literary texts can help children with special needs identify and express their emotions.

Devries and Sunden (2019) emphasised that bibliotherapy can be one of the interventions used for children who have siblings with disabilities by confronting them with emotions that they cannot articulate or emotions that can cause confusion. Strobel (2011) used bibliotherapy with six siblings of preschool children with autism who were often excluded from various services available to their parents and children with autism. The therapy program used a book called “Rules” (Lord, 2006) as a catalyst for discussion and other activities that were part of each session. The author showed that there was a statistically significant increase in their knowledge about autism after bibliotherapy, but there were no changes in family interactions. However, parents emphasised that participating siblings began to show more understanding and patience for their brothers/sisters with autism, and participants also expressed their overall satisfaction with the bibliotherapy intervention. Bibliotherapy may have a positive effect on parents who are facing various problems related to a child’s maladaptation, disability or chronic diseases, or conflict situations in the family. For example, bibliotherapy has been used to help parents of children with conduct problems (Sampaio, Enebrink, Mihalopoulos & Feldman, 2016), strong-willed children (Forehand, Merchant, Long & Garai, 2010), communication problems (Edwards & Simpson, 1986), social behaviour problems related to Down syndrome, ADHD, speech impairments, and developmental disorders (Davis Bowman, 2013), bullying risk (Gregory & Vasse, 2004), as well as externalising problem behaviours (Kierfeld & Döpfner, 2006).

A complex and comprehensive literature review was conducted by De Vries et al. (2017) to examine the outcomes of bibliotherapy in children who had undergone various types of traumatic experiences (abuse, neglect, foster care, adoption, aggression resulting from trauma, chronic illness, disability, death, bereavement, homelessness, natural disasters, parental mental illness, terrorism, and acts of societal violence). Their results suggest that there are many positive outcomes that support the assumption that bibliotherapy is a successful method for treating children and adolescents with traumatic

experiences. The positive outcomes were related to following aspects: (a) cognitive (coping skills, conflict resolution, problem solving, attitude changes, and insights about others), (b) emotional (empathy, positive attitudes and self-image, identification and expression of feelings, reduction of self-blame, and improvement of self-concept), and (c) social (new interests, personal and social adjustments, identification and utilisation of supportive adults, respect and acceptance of others). The authors also recommend the implementation of certain guidelines, such as providing therapist-specific training, the careful selection of literature (could be based, for example, on the *Bibliotherapy Evaluation Tool*; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2005), and the implementation of bibliotherapy as an adjunct intervention along with other therapies.

In addition, bibliotherapy can be used to foster spirituality. Zhang (2010) pointed out that it is often an underutilised and neglected area with respect to children with special needs. Ariela (2018) conducted a review of previous studies focused on the use of religious texts to promote spirituality in children with intellectual disabilities, and found that the most commonly used methods and interventions were: (a) the use of narratives from Scripture and/or personal narratives, (b) the use of expressive arts as auxiliary tools (drama/playback theatre, music, songs, movement, and physical activities), (c) the introduction of symbols, liturgies, and rituals (things that can be heard, seen, smelled, or touched), and (d) the insistence on building foundational personal relationships through community activities and social support. Furthermore, Dennis (2004) carried out a theatre project using "Playback Theatre" with the aim of encouraging the development and expression of spirituality in a group of people with intellectual and/or learning disabilities. The value of this approach is most evident in the fact that the participants were enabled to express their spirituality, which was simultaneously witnessed by the wider community. Each participant told their own story about certain church experiences and other participants made a movement, gesture, sound, or words that reflected the meaning of the narrated story. Over time, the performers began to create a

performance for each story that became increasingly symbolic and multi-layered. This process of abstraction and symbolic representation freed participants to openly express their feelings, such as anger or shame, and use them for further growth and change. These findings confirm the reasoning of Webster (2004), who indicated that children with intellectual disabilities are able to learn and understand in an artistic-symbolic way through narratives, with the help of attachments to the content and characters that hold their interest.

Another interesting approach in bibliotherapy could be the use of literature related to different types of disabilities (Orr, Craig, Gail, Borland, & Holland, 1997). This includes the use of biographies or fictional text that portray the lives, struggles, and perspectives of individuals with some kind of disability, disorder, or illness. According to Kurtts and Gavigan (2008), this type of literature helps individuals with disabilities realise that others have the same or similar experiences and that they are not alone. In addition, by reading this type of text, individuals without disabilities can better address the specific needs and challenges caused by functional or health deviations.

Therefore, bibliotherapy can be an acceptable therapeutic method in the field of holistic education and rehabilitation of children with special needs because it is playful, creative, spontaneous, and most importantly, there are no right or wrong answers. It leads to better self-perception and self-esteem, as well as promotes problem solving abilities. As Orr et al. (1997) stated, "*As children become adult readers, they continue to use their literary experiences to enhance their understanding of the world around them. With this understanding, they are better equipped to deal with problems, ask questions, and effect change in their world.*" Finally, since bibliotherapy is often conducted in a group setting, it can help improve social interactions and communication skills, which are very important parts of human life.

### **Bibliotherapy and mental disorders**

Based on statistical data, it can be stated that various mental disorders are beginning to be

an increasing public health and social problem (Ritchie & Roser, 2018)). Due to the complex aetiology and symptomatology of mental disorders, therapeutic approaches should include a variety of methods and techniques. Bibliotherapy can also be used as one of the complementary methods in the treatment of mental disorders, as well as in the protection of mental health (Dowrick, Billington, Robinson, Hamer & Williams, 2012). According to Beres (2018), in most cases, bibliotherapy can stimulate an individual's motivation to focus their interests and attention on something other than their illness. Thus, many different topics can be discussed such as love, values, gratitude, self-confidence, capabilities, resilience, plans, career, daydreams, family, friendships, barriers, role models, coping, grief, self-criticism, and inner resources. The reason behind the complex ways of acting is based on the bibliotherapy tendency that involves both affective and cognitive responses addressing specific concerns of individuals (Joshi, 2019).

De Vries et al. (2017) also considered the use of bibliotherapy in the form of a recreational intervention along with a variety of techniques such as planning, discussion, evaluation, visual art, dramatisation, puppetry, and creative writing. One of the other options is the use of carefully selected written material for parents to read to their children in a safe and stimulating home environment. Rapee, Abbolt and Lyneham (2006) cited findings from a randomized controlled trial showing that the use of written material for parents was not as effective as a standard psychotherapy group. However, compared to a group with no intervention at all, approximately 15% more children were free of anxiety symptoms at 12 and 24 weeks. Furthermore, Montgomery and Maunders (2015) conducted a systematic review of 46 studies on the effectiveness of creative bibliotherapy in children regarding internalising, externalising, and prosocial behaviours, as well as peer relationships, child-parent relationships, educational achievement, and reading ability. The results showed that creative bibliotherapy had a small to moderate positive effect on children's behaviour, and although no universal model of creative bibliotherapy emerged from the included

studies, in most cases, they reflected elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy.

Bibliotherapy can have significant benefits in adults with various mental disorders or distressing symptoms. Wang, Bressington, Leung, Davidson and Cheung (2020) conducted a meta-analysis and showed that bibliotherapy can have a positive impact on reducing depression, improving self-efficacy, and reducing anxiety in informal caregivers of individuals with neurocognitive disorders. There is also a large body of research that has proved that the use of bibliotherapy reduces various symptoms of depression or anxiety disorders, since it can provide immediate relief and alleviate spiritual suffering (Bailint & Magyari, 2020; Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; Cuijpers, 1997; Jones, 2002). Similar results have been reported for individuals with other mental disorders such as psychosis, addictions, panic attacks, eating disorders, dementia, or for individuals with certain acute or chronic illnesses that may cause certain mental or adaptive disorders (e.g., malignant diseases, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease) (Volpe, Torre, De Santis, Perris & Catapano, 2015; Dowrick et al. 2012, Rus, Makovec, Furlan & Smolejec, 2015; Troscianko, 2018; Brewster & McNicol, 2020; Balint & Magyary, 2020).

An interesting approach in maintaining mental well-being is to participate in a "reading circle". Pettersson (2018) found that a guided "*reading circle*" had a positive influence on short-term mental well-being, self-confidence, and social interaction in individuals with depression and anxiety disorder. Significant reasons contributing to the positive results were the adequate choice of literature (short stories and poems), the presence of a circle leader with good leadership skills, and the opportunity to be in a closed group that included the same members throughout the whole therapy program. Discussing the text was highlighted as a powerful part of each session, because interpretation was experienced as a collective act in which the perspectives of other participants deepened the individual's understanding of the text, as well as other personal concerns.

The stressful and challenging times caused by the COVID-19 pandemic can certainly be cit-

ed as an example of a condition that requires the immobilisation of psycho-emotional and spiritual strength. In this context, it is interesting to consider that reading fiction can be a transition from serious medical articles to a milder medical humanities experience. For this purpose, Stip, Ostlundh, and Aziz (2020) proposed a reading list from different cultural and historical periods that deal with illness, pandemics, quarantines, symptoms, confinement, and loneliness (e.g., writers such as Camus, Moravia, London, Le Clezio). In this case, the literary text can be an intermediary object that mitigates emotional distress by verbalising and identifying new ways of coping with the problem.

Finally, the driving role of bibliotherapy should certainly be emphasised, as observed in one of the well-known examples, *“The Vagina Monologues”* by Eve Ensler (2001), which is based on two hundred true stories of women from different age and social groups from all over the world. Since this text includes strong, witty, sharp, and insightful reflections on one’s own body and sexuality, it has initiated a cultural and sociological reversal within which a number of women began to talk about their own experiences, their pain, suffering, abuse, self-struggles, and defiance. This is a good example of how the reception of a literary text becomes a motivator for self-writing and self-expression. As Pennebaker and Smith (2016) described, expressive writing is a method of self-writing that can be used in biblio-/poetry therapy and it represents the powerful and deep flow of thoughts and feelings. According to Beres (2018), it is usually written in a free and fluent text style (sometimes without grammar, syntax, or much sense) that allows the person to “translate” traumatic or upsetting emotional experiences into words. This act helps in the process of establishing a structure when something is unstructured and/or unconscious, with the goal of gaining more control over it. Apart from expressive writing, other forms of self-writing can be used, such as poems, novels, songs, letters, journal writing, personalised mental maps, and time capsules. As a result, the creative focus is within the self, and it can help build new feelings, attitudes, and motivations for action.

## CONCLUSION

The use of bibliotherapy based on symbolic elaboration, creative self-exploration, and self-expression enables the integration of various dimensions of one’s experiences. Regardless of whether receptive bibliotherapy or self-writing is used, both approaches represent non-invasive techniques, in which the individual is at the centre of the therapeutic process and is unconstrained by reality. One of the reasons why bibliotherapy is effective may be because a carefully selected literary text can help fulfil a person’s need to feel and experience love, faith, hope, virtue, and beauty, which according to Bartel (2004) are basic human spiritual needs. The creative power of words was realized at the moment of the first human scream, laugh, and cry, expanding into more complex structures to enable the understanding and expression of the subtle manifestations of our existence. At the same time, the healing aspects of using words has been recognised as a revolutionary idea that has continued from ancient times until today. Additionally, the cognitive and gnostic nature of the literary text is considered within the framework of various religious and philosophical approaches. As Kafka (1997) pointed out: *“If the book we’re reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? ... A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.”*

The development of different scientific and humanistic disciplines has contributed to the successful application of various approaches and methods of bibliotherapy. Therefore, it is considered as a complementary method to standard and traditional therapeutic procedures. Although there are many positive aspects associated with the field of bibliotherapy, there is room for further improvement considering certain limitations. For example, the effectiveness of bibliotherapy may be limited by the unavailability of certain literature, or a client’s unwillingness to read. Furthermore, clients may be reluctant to identify with characters and situations from the text, or they may not want to discuss topics that are painful or uncomfortable for them. According to Gladding and Gladding (1991), some of these issues can be overcome by gradual emotional release

during the therapeutic process, by using related therapeutic approaches such as guided imagery, psychophysical relaxation, music, visual art, and psychodrama, and eventually through group discussions. Level of training, as well as personality and ability of the therapist may also pose a limitation. Therapists involved in bibliotherapy require adequate knowledge of appropriate literature and the client's problems. They should also know how to promote motivation, how to achieve positive transfer, and how to facilitate the transition from one stage of intervention to another. The role of a well-trained therapist is crucial, especially in affective bibliotherapy, because client's might uncover unconscious or repressed issues, or distort, misinterpret, or misunderstand information (Shechtman, 2009). Previous research has fo-

cused on the immediate or short-term effects of bibliotherapy. Therefore, future research should focus on evaluating the long-term success of this type of intervention. In addition, there is a need to develop standardized assessment in order to gain further insights regarding subgroups such as age, gender, psychosocial problems, modality, and literacy (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015).

This overview emphasises the need for further research on bibliotherapy with the aim of improving practical models and assessment tools. Thereby, bibliotherapy can become a promising part of a multimodal educational and rehabilitative approach that recognises the power of language arts and simultaneously supports both the realistic and transcendental aspects of human existence.

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