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Bibliotherapy & Creative Writing for Talented Disadvantaged Youth

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Abstrakt:

The paper presents a bibliotherapy programme offered for students from the special developmental class titled „János Arany Programme for Talented Disadvantaged Youth” of the Leówey Secondary School in Pécs, Hungary. The bibliotherapeutic intervention is a group work based on therapeutic reading, discussion and creative writing, focusing on the development of participants’ EQ, self-knowledge, problem solving and coping skills, creativity, aiming to improve positive self-image, adaptability, and the reduction of distress.

Keywords: *disadvantaged youth, self-development, bibliotherapy, creative writing*

Introduction

In the age of the information society mass media floods youth with virtual relationships and commons, false identities and values. There is a lack of real and valuable human interactions, reflections, and good problem solving models. It is not surprising: in our everyday life virtuality is the leading field of human interactions, people can become whatever and whenever they want. They can join and leave virtual commons with one click and push escape button in case of a conflict. As Dave Verhaagen (2010: 185-186), a clinical child and adolescent psychologist argues, there has never been a young generation that is so imbued with new technology in their daily lives than this current one, which poses unique challenges to the parents, teachers and therapist who try to educate them as a real human being. Adolescents and young adults relate through technology in unprecedented, immediate, continuous and often simultaneous ways. By high school there is no limit to their ability to use technology to get relationships, have fun and collect information. However, it happens in many cases that they stay on the Internet for hours a day, stuck between online playmates, virtual worlds and hundreds of meaningless "friendships" on Facebook, meanwhile they don't have too many real-world relationships.

In this deeply technicized environment it is hard to find, maintain and manage real human relationships, hard to find relevant information, solutions and answers, hard to learn competent attachment and problem solving, empathy and tolerance, hard to recognize and share real values and emotions. With these circumstances it is crucial to improve students' social and emotional skills, independent exploration, and support the sharing of their personal experience. Students have to be introduced into the practical knowledge of their future success through interactive works. To improve students' self-expression, their writing abilities and oral communication skills is also a very high priority.

Bibliotherapy for youth in general

The term of bibliotherapy refers to a special readers guidance to help the reader learn about and cope with social or emotional struggles and developmental needs through directed reading, no matter whether it is offered in clinical or non-clinical environment (e.g. in psychiatry or psychotherapy, or in schools, libraries, social, and correctional institutes). Bibliotherapy is based on classic psychotherapy principles of identification, inspiration and insight which leads to motivation for positive change. This can help readers gain insight into themselves by connecting with characters and values written in poems, short stories and novels. Their reading is followed up with group discussion when they can share their ideas and feelings with the help of the expression of their own subjective response to the text shaped by their identity and life-experience (HOLLAND, 1968). The aim of the therapy is to elicit change in the attitudes and behaviour of the readers to enhance their problem-solving skills, and hence increase their resourcefulness. It aims to show readers that they are not alone because the others have the same concerns or problems (HARVEY, 2010). The main goal of the therapeutic process is the positive life-change and the personal development (YALOM, 1995).

From the 1950's on, since the group therapy models proliferate, bibliotherapy was used as a frame of theme-appropriate readings to help participants deal with their problematic issues. From that time the number of international research reviews about developmental bibliotherapy aimed at youth and adolescents is increasing. The bibliotherapeutic intervention aimed at youth can be used to promote psychological well-being, to strengthen self-knowledge and to develop social and emotional skills (PARDECK, 1994). The target group of youth can be divided in many different and special subgroups like, for instance, pupils in secondary schools suffering from social disadvantages. This distinction implicates some special focuses during our bibliotherapeutic work.

Hungarian experts are in 65 years of belatedness comparing to the international publications on youth bibliotherapy. Unfortunately, we have just very few experimental or case studies supporting the use of bibliotherapy in general, not just in connection with youth target groups. Nowadays there are some changing initiatives: while bibliotherapy is well-known among librarians from the 1980's, the first scientific papers on bibliotherapy for parents, prisoners, youth, women etc. just started to be published in the Hungarian national librarian periodical titled *Library Review*.

Bibliotherapy many times is made by professionals from various fields. The Hungarian programs presented here were offered by a cooperating team of librarians, teachers and psychologists (Ildikó Sóron, Tünde Tegzes, Geraldine Ruzsthy, Zsuzsanna Kovács, Borbála Zsidai, Judit Béres). We started bibliotherapy programmes in three types of secondary schools (vocational school, technical college, grammar school for gifted children), and we published our main findings in a methodological paper (BÉRES et al., 2014). This paper focuses on the contemporary Hungarian practice of bibliotherapy for youth, with implications for the reduction of socio-emotional risks and distress of disadvantaged students. This work links bibliotherapy with intervention programs, and covers everything from selecting materials, staffing to readers advisory and planning activities. Particular attention is given to how bibliotherapy can facilitate readers to find solutions to personal problems, develop life skills and enhanced self-image.

Youth suffering from disadvantages are facing many kinds of problems related to their poor environment, they usually don't have ideal conditions supporting their healthy development neither emotionally nor from the physical or economical part. In many cases their parents are uneducated and unemployed, often very poor, many times culturally and socially peripheral people. The lack of a normal childcare, physical and emotional holding is symptomatic in the everyday life of these families, and their children are suffering from distress, depression, heavy problems of attachment and loss, negligence, violence, abuse etc.

The most important aim of schools working with disadvantaged youth is the compensation of disadvantages and the empowerment of them for a more successful social integration. Bibliotherapy is one of those cross-curricular extra activities which can join schools' pedagogical program for supporting disadvantaged youth.

During the process of the bibliotherapeutic work participants are conditioned to cope with the prospect of their social disadvantages through a group therapy based on reading, talking and creative activities. Comparing to the goals of bibliotherapy for youth in general, in this special case bibliotherapy focuses on the development of participants' EQ (the ability to understand, sort out and manage emotions) and positive self-image, aims to empower them with the facilitation of self-responsibility in self-help activities, fosters positive life-change with the achievement of more opportunities, and the realisation of personal strengths and weaknesses from the viewpoint of a future career and a successful personal life. Bibliotherapy supports also students' cognitive skills and critical thinking to become better in self-knowledge and to realise positive and negative behavioural patterns. The facilitator aims to discover their self-experiences in a private, warm, non-directive professional frame, whilst students have to be led along their associations and meaning-making processes in a very democratic way.

At the beginning of our group work students usually fill out personality tests related to their motivation, self-image, and the level of distress. This leads to a deeper understanding of their personality and the actual problems of their everyday life which has a key importance when the bibliotherapist plans the focus of the therapeutic process, chooses the aims and the adequate readings.

The effectiveness of bibliotherapy aiming at children and youth usually derives from the combination of receptive and active techniques (DOLL, 1978). *Receptive* means working through the reading, reception and discussion of various authors' texts (poetry, short stories,

parts of novels), meanwhile *active* techniques (e.g. expressive writing, situation plays, designing, painting, collage, playing on instruments, theatre etc.) foster the self-expression and support sharing emotions, ideas through the process of making something (MCCULLISS & CHAMBERLAIN, 2013: 30-31).

The selection of readings suitable for bibliotherapeutic work is based on how the certain text contains values the therapy is focusing on. Factors including age and cognitive ability and needs must be taken into account when considering bibliotherapy. It is also important to understand participants' social/emotional challenges. The right text fosters common thinking and discussion about the topic, guides its reader to a deeper understanding of him- or herself, and it can develop directly his or her self-knowledge, social and emotional skills. When considering books, many articles deal with selection criteria. Goddard (2011) suggests to deal with some potentials hidden in the text related to the followings:

1. Motivating and challenging experiences;
2. Suitability to age, ability, and maturity;
3. Elicits response;
4. Range of literacy structures;
5. Proper use of language;
6. Broadens understanding of diversity;
7. Develops sensitivity and understanding.

From the viewpoint of readers' guidance and development, we distinguish higher level and lower level therapeutic aims. In the case of our target group higher level aims are the development of EQ, self-knowledge, problem solving skills, the improvement of positive self-image and adaptability, and the solution of distress which are indispensable for a successful and productive life. Lower level aims are the promotion of reading books, and the improvement of communication, thinking and aesthetic skills. During the half-year-long therapy (which is the minimum length for an efficient work, and long lasting psychological change) the group work usually run for one-and-half hours, when the group facilitator starts reading aloud and stops at intervals to discuss the text, including personal response.

Bibliotherapy with talented, disadvantaged youth from Pécs

In this chapter we focus on the tasks and texts used in our bibliotherapy programme offered for pupils from the special class titled „János Arany Programme for Talented Disadvantaged Youth” of the Leőwey Secondary School in Pécs, Hungary. The general developmental programme of this special class contains a kind of psychological module, in which bibliotherapy seems to be a suitable and effective non-formal working form for personal development. The other criterion which differs these participants from other youth involved in bibliotherapy programmes, is that they are gifted students living with social and emotional disadvantages. This duality shapes the aims of the therapy, while students better skills allows us to plan a more complex and deep cognitive and emotional work.

Bibliotherapy can help gifted students to learn new strategies for dealing with their social and emotional issues, and supports their empowerment, meaning breaking out of disadvantages and working out opportunities based on giftedness. Whilst working together in a bibliotherapy group, students learn about themselves and understand that they are not alone, but others have - and have had - the same concerns or problems. This can expose them to new ways of thinking about and seeing the world around them, and helps them gain insight into themselves by connecting or identifying with a character in a book who is similar to them or who has similar obstacles to overcome. (FISHER, 2009)

As I mentioned before, we worked through the combination of receptive and active techniques. *Table 1* demonstrates the selection of materials and the variety of several topics and active tasks. The points from 1 to 5 refer to students' opinion about the applied texts (whether they liked or disliked the certain reading), whilst points in the second column refer to the therapeutic effectiveness evaluated by the group facilitator.

Table 1. Contents & evaluation of the bibliotherapeutic process

Topic	Text	Active techniques	Reception, pupils opinion	Therapeutic effectiveness
holding and caring in human relationships, love, patience, values	János Pilinszky: Secrets of our religion (Advent)	Petra Finy: I introduce myself; write 5 characteristics as you see yourself + 5 as Others probably see you	4	4
self-confidence, giftedness, emotional sources, courage, empowerment	The wings of Lotilko (Tunguz tale)	read Ágnes Ágai's adolescent poems, write a similar poem about yourself	4	5
dreams, plans for the future, carrier planning	Frigyes Karinthy: Meeting with a young man	write recommendations for the 8-9 years younger yourself	5	5
supportive/destructive relationships (family, love, friendships), expression of emotions, coping strategies	Ervin Lázár: The girl closed in a hat	write similar letters in sms like Dániel Varró in Heart dessert	4	5
pop icons, celebs, youth subcultures and trends, positive/negative self-image	Krisztina Tóth: The Soul is Megabody	write a similar advertisement about yourself as Virág Erdős in Liar tale	5	4
happiness, carrier, successful life, self-criticism, empowerment	Sándor Márai: Herbarium (About happiness); Sándor Weöres: Towards completeness (The source – Mirrors facing)	evaluation with association cards, feedback questionnaire	4	5

As it can be seen, creative writing played a very important role in our therapeutic work. We usually applied warm-up identity plays from the collections of Ágnes Samu (2004) and Robert Fisher (2000), and we often used humorous and ironic model texts from Hungarian poets (e.g. Ágnes Ágai, Dániel Varró, János Lackfi, Virág Erdős, Petra Finy), asking students to write similar, strong messages about themselves. This helped them to understand human motivations, express feelings, externalise selfhood, reduce loneliness, frustration and distress.

The therapeutic application of writing has strong roots in the Western practice of bibliotherapy. The most well-known expert of the field is James W. Pennebaker, a psychologist specialising in language and cognition, who has conducted controlled clinical research on the effectiveness of reading and writing with traumatised children and youth. Pennebaker called his method as *expressive emotions therapy (EET)*. According to Pennebaker's definition, EET helps people to confront deep, personal issues, promoting physical health and subjective well-being. This methodology is based on the application of a powerful and deeply personal writing

(*expressive writing*), a tool to 'translate' into language those traumatic, disturbing emotional experiences people suffer from. Pennebaker worked with emotionally disturbed young people. They have read a strong text aloud together, and after that they talked about it with the facilitator and trusted community members. The group discussed characters and subjects that concern their own lives, and then written about it. Pennebaker pointed out that this process of reading and writing can transform youngsters' ideas of themselves and their future lives. This expressive therapy improves young participants' externalisation of selfhood, so they can exist more comfortable in the world while feeling their internal being has connected to the outside world through books. (PENNEBAKER, 1997).

Outcomes and feedbacks

The bibliotherapist has to follow what readers learned or gained from reading and discussion. Regarding the main outcomes of our group work, we can divide them in two parts. The first one summarizes the opinion of the group leader:

- The aesthetic value of the applied text doesn't correlate directly with the therapeutic effectiveness: many times high quality classic literature was not too effective, or participants didn't like the most effective texts' style and content
- There is a need for a differentiation according to the age group: the age gap between participants can make harder the work together (e.g. big differences between pupils aged 15-18 in assertivity and realisation of personal behavioural patterns)
- There is a need for a differentiation according to the intellectual skills: students from vocational school and technical college needed easier texts, while gifted students from grammar school could cope with more complex meaning-making processes because of their better verbalisation and thinking skills.
- Students are not socialized for non-formal, interactive and reflective learning: it is hard to express themselves and share their own feelings, ideas or judgements.

The main benefits of bibliotherapy can be described qualitatively through participants' feedback as they appreciated the support of our personal and interactive environment where we all were interested in their personal opinion and feelings. The group leader bibliotherapist usually have got feedback questionnaires from participants who reflect to the most important effects supporting their personal change and development. According to their opinion:

- The group supported them with the „sense of universality”. They felt they are not alone suffering from disadvantages, and learnt how others solve similar problems. They had opportunity to share strong feelings, personal readings and arguments.
- The group supported the deeper understanding of Others' different ways of thinking, their motivations and reasons behind their communication, verbal and non-verbal reflections (the group worked as a mirror and a puffer).
- The group supported the deeper understanding of themselves (weaknesses and strengths, lacks) and fostered the realisation of the needed development of problem-solving, communication & social skills.
- The group created a warm, positive and supportive emotional atmosphere for students who are lacking this basic „holding” in their families and primary attachments.

As outlined previously, our bibliotherapy programme affected a number of emotional and cognitive changes in the readers. Emotional changes can be described as the development of empathy, positive attitudes and self-image, tolerance, respect, and acceptance of others, through a directed examination of moral values and socially accepted behaviour. The most important cognitive changes can be described as giving insight into human behaviour and

motivations, understanding of different perspectives and the universality of problems, increasing capacity for self-evaluation, and showing alternative solutions in problem solving.

This programme wouldn't exist without the cooperation between the Győző Csorba County Library and the school. The library offered a volunteer bibliotherapist and a half-year-long programme, whilst the school was open for it realizing how alternative methods can support their students' personal growth. There is a strong need for bibliotherapy as a non-formal developmental tool in schools. And it is available for everybody.

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