

## **School Libraries Supporting Wellbeing Through the Use of Bibliotherapy**

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### **Introduction**

“For avid readers who have been self-medicating with great books their entire lives, it comes as no surprise that reading books can be good for your mental health and your relationships with others.” (Dovey, 2015)

It is no coincidence that reading is the first of the three ‘Rs’ (reading, ’riting and ‘rithemtic). All other academic learning depends on one’s ability to read and the body of evidence proving that reading is good for us in innumerable ways is abundant. The literature indicates that not only does reading make us smarter, but it also improves our concentration, focus and memory; develops our communication skills and ability to empathise; reduces stress and helps us sleep better; prevents age-related cognitive decline and even makes us live longer: reading could be considered the elixir of life!

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was a heightened collective instinct to tap into therapeutic practices to counterbalance the fear of uncertainty. In this post COVID world, we are seeing an increasing number of alternative therapies being advocated and used to help people deal with their anxieties and live happier lives. Moving beyond such approaches as psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, hypnotherapy and the like, people are now practicing music therapy, art therapy, talking therapy, play therapy, sandplay therapy, pet/animal therapy ... to bring a sense of equilibrium and wellness to their lives.

The theme of this conference is *Flourishing School Libraries: Research, Policy, and Practice*. It, like so many of the post pandemic gatherings of the minds, is centred on seeking ways to recover and heal from trauma this experience wrought on so many people worldwide.

Bibliotherapy, like all the other creative therapies, has been gaining in popularity in recent times. Anyone who has ever been drawn in by a story or book and has emerged from the experience with a clearer sense of understanding about themselves, others and the world around them, will undoubtedly relate to the power of the stories. They have the potential to help us better understand and work through difficult emotions and better cope with the complexities of life.

### **The Role of the Library in Post-Pandemic World**

The school library plays a key role in literature advocacy and helping students to develop a love of reading; however, little is shared about the extent to which this aspect of the school librarian's role is valued in these digitally focused times.

We are slowly coming to understand the effects and fall out of the pandemic. What we know is that emotional well-being and mental health were big losers during this time. Current research proves that our young people have been particularly impacted by this effect. For example, the percentage of children and adolescents suffering from mental health illness during that time rose from 10-20% to 20-25% in the last two years (Decker, 2022).

In the last two decades, teachers have seen a marked recognition and focused implementation of wellbeing ideology and practices in the educational setting (Atkins, et.al, 2010). The pandemic undoubtedly fast-tracked this trend. In this post COVID world, educators recognise not only the need but the effectiveness of nurturing students and staff in ways previously not considered. Increasingly, the emotional and mental wellbeing of students and staff is believed to be a top priority. Veteran educators have not only witnessed this unprecedented trend, but have welcomed it, realising that we all benefit from this positive focus. In short, "those who feel better, can learn better" (Bates & Boren, 2019).

The school library has always played a key role in supporting the wellbeing of students and much has been written about the many ways the library is well placed to do this. In her recent book *School Libraries Supporting Literacy and Wellbeing*, Merga, (2020, pp. 191-196) identifies five key ways school libraries can support student wellbeing:

1. They can provide safe spaces
2. They provide resources for wellbeing
3. They build digital health-literacy skills
4. They support reading for pleasure
5. **They encourage healing through reading**

This fifth aspect is the lens through which this paper will examine the concept and practice of bibliotherapy.

### **What is Bibliotherapy?**

Many definitions for the term bibliotherapy exist, but the underlying agreement about its most basic meaning is ‘healing through books’. The term arose from the Greek etymology of *biblion* (books) and *therapia* (healing). In other words, the idea that people can bring about psychological healing, improve their mental wellbeing and enjoyment of life through reading and the narrative power of stories. Other terms for this approach to coping and/or healing include biblioguidance, bibliocounselling, literatherapy, book matching and reading therapy (Oluwaseye, 2017).

Of all the definitions offered by the literature, Lundsteen’s (1972) description as “getting the right book to the right child at the right time about the right problem” resonates best as a focus for educators and others whose responsibility it is to ensure the wellbeing of children and young adults.

### **History of Bibliotherapy**

Despite being in use for over 100 years, the term ‘bibliotherapy’ is a relatively new word for an old practice. Even prior to the written word and widespread literacy, humans sought solace and healing in stories. Telling stories around the campfire helped primitive man to see their problems from other perspectives (Cornett and Cornett, 1980). In Ancient Greece libraries were described as the “healing place of the soul”. Plato said that the muses gave us the arts

not for "mindless pleasure" but "as an aid to bringing our soul-circuit, when it has got out of tune, into order and harmony with itself" (Morrison, 2008). His student, Aristotle, also proclaimed the healing benefits of literature, maintaining that reading fiction was the way to treat illness.

Sigmund and Anna Freud began using literature in their psychoanalytic approach in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2007), but in 1916 it was the American essayist and Unitarian minister, Samuel McChord Crothers, who coined the term "bibliotherapy" when he outlined how literature could be used to help those suffering from mental illness (Brown, 1975). The concept gained traction in the academic sphere in the United States and by the 1920s, universities were offering courses in bibliotherapy.

In both World Wars I and II, bibliotherapy was used to help soldiers cope with emotional trauma caused by their battlefield experiences. Librarians were placed in military hospitals where they supported doctors and nurses by prescribing books for patients "in need of a stimulation which can come from a good book" (Books as Medicine, n.d.).

(Patient's name)	(Ward)	(Type)
MEMO FROM THE LIBRARIAN TO DR. -----		
<p>Kindly suggest the type of books and magazines suitable for this patient's reading: Scientific, religious, practical arts (woodworking, gardening, etc.), travel, history, literature (plays, poetry, etc.), textbooks (grammars, arithmetics, etc.), fiction, exciting or serious.</p> <p>Type to be avoided, -----</p>		
(Signed) -----	-----	<i>Librarian.</i> <i>Ward Surgeon.</i>

**Figure 1:** Kovacs, 1918 "Bibliotherapy: Can Books Treat Mental Health Issues?"

By 1941, the practice gained greater recognition when it was formally defined in *Dorlands Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, a well-respected medical reference book, as an accepted mental health treatment. (A Brief History, 2020). In 1966, the American Library Association accepted the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary's* definition of bibliotherapy as being "the use of selected materials as therapeutic adjuvants in medicine and psychiatry; also, guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading" (Rubin, 1979).

## **Types of Bibliotherapy**

Broadly speaking, the practice of bibliotherapy can be divided into two distinct branches:

- Clinical – used by counsellors, psychotherapists, and other mental health professionals, as an adjunct to more traditional medical or psychological therapies
- Developmental – used in the community or educational setting by lay people to help people address common life issues (Canty, 2017).

There is a clear difference between these two concepts of bibliotherapy: the former is a type of guided therapy provided by a medical or psychiatric professional; the latter is more typically used by professionals whose focus and expertise lay in the realm of books and literature. Nonetheless, the research indicates that there is a definite overlap between both categories. This paper will focus on the developmental approach to bibliotherapy and how it can be applied to the school library situation.

Providing an effective readers' advisory service has always been an essential element of successful library programmes and a proven way to promote, develop and support the reading culture in a school. Taking a bibliotherapeutic approach to the process, I would argue, is a way to boost the efficacy of the school librarian's role.

According to Wakeman (2019), the aim of developmental bibliotherapy in the school environment is “to prepare and guide young people through the issues they, or people close to them, might encounter during the normal course of adolescence, providing them with knowledge, language and skills to address these issues as early as possible, mitigating the disruption to their daily life as much as possible.”

She recognises that Young Adult fiction is “becoming more edgy” reflecting adolescents' demand for stories which deal with difficult and often controversial issues. They want to see empowered, informed characters who can develop coping strategies, participate in meaningful relationships, and build fulfilling lives despite being confronted by setbacks.

## **Benefits of Bibliotherapy**

Reading is a productive activity which can promote emotional and mental wellbeing. By sharpening the mind and increasing empathy and self-awareness, it helps us to grow emotionally and impacts behaviour. Reading can inspire us to feel energised about the

future. It creates brain activity like those a reader might have when experiencing a similar occurrence or ordeal in real life (Mar, 2018).

Summarising the research on the use of bibliotherapy to address social and emotional challenges in the school environment, Henny and Weckworth (2012) constructed the following comprehensive table:

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Main Findings</b>	<b>Literature</b>
Developing problem- solving skills	Through direct discussion of topics that might otherwise be avoided, students are given the opportunity to engage in problem-solving skills.	Forgan (2002)
	Students are given the opportunity to brainstorm additional ideas to help deal with difficult experiences and often learn that there is more than one solution to a problem.	Rozalski et al. (2010) Iaquinta and Hipsky (2006)
Developing coping skills	Bibliotherapy assists students in identifying both internal and external resources.	Nicholson and Pearson (2003)
	Bibliotherapy also appears to help students develop coping skills that can be used in future situations by providing them with knowledge and skills about the problem.	Cook et al. (2006)
	Bibliotherapy in and of itself can serve as a coping strategy.	Catalano (2008) Prater et al. (2006)
Developing social and emotional competence	Bibliotherapy can help students develop the ability to manage their emotions, develop empathy for others, make responsible decisions, and take responsibility for their actions.	Zins and Elias (2007) Durlak et al. (2011)
	Social and emotional competence significantly improves students' relationships, performance in school, and general health and well-being.	Zins and Elias (2007) Durlak et al. (2011)
Improvement of academic performance	Bibliotherapy may help students cope with difficult situations and redirect their attention to the academic environment.	Heath et al. (2005)

	Repeated exposure to text often helps improve vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.	Iaquinta and Hipsky (2006)
	Bibliotherapy may increase interest in reading for recreational purposes, providing more opportunities for struggling students to develop reading skills.	Prater et al. (2006)

**Table 1:** *Henney, Summer Rene, and Stephanie Ann Weckworth. (2012)*

### **The Value of a Metaphoric View of Bibliotherapy**

A key concept to understanding the effectiveness of bibliotherapy can be found in Rosenblatt's (2005) assertion that Literature provides a "living through" not just a "knowledge about" the human experience.

Bishop's (1990) simile "books as windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors" accelerated the discussion around the need to develop diverse library collections. It pushes for representation of all cultures and ethnicities in a collection such that students can not only see themselves in the books they are reading, but those who are different. Thus, enabling them to build empathy by developing their understanding of other people, cultures, and ways of living.

The use of a bibliotherapeutic approach to promoting reading in the library leverages the progress we are making in this area and deepens our students' awareness of what it means to have a diverse, equitable and inclusive school environment.

"This power of books ... provides readers with opportunities to see characters who might be experiencing the same anxiety, fear, or event, and help the reader begin to cope. Children who may not experience these events can begin to develop empathy towards others as they peer through the story window. Through reading and read-alouds, children can engage in books and begin to cope with their emotions and difficult experiences, while increasing their capacity to empathize with others." (Wheatley, 2020, p. 9)

## Limitations of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy, however, is not a panacea and cannot be considered as a cure for all kinds of emotional and mental issues. It should not be used as a substitute for long-term therapeutic interventions by mental health professionals (Wakeman, 2019). Nonetheless, when implemented properly in the educational environment, it can be both a preventative and supportive strategy for children and adolescents dealing with the day-to-day stresses of life and can be used as an effective adjunct to other treatments and wellbeing programmes.

Proper implementation in this context is, in large part, about meeting the students where they are. For example, a student who is not a strong reader or has not yet come to enjoy reading, is unlikely to embrace bibliotherapy as a coping mechanism. However, this might be a good opportunity to promote the use of audiobooks as a low friction means to access relatable narratives.

Other situations where care must be taken, include when a student is in the middle of a trauma and may be feeling emotionally ‘numb.’ In these circumstances they may be understandably unable to relate to the narrative or be ready to face or deal with the issue they are experiencing. Difficulties could also arise if the student projects their own misguided motives onto a character or story, thus reinforcing incorrect or unhelpful beliefs (Gladding and Gladding, 1991). Pardeck (1991) cautions that books, fiction, or nonfiction, can cause a reader to develop unrealistic expectations about resolutions for the issues. Doll and Doll (1975, p. 63) identified the possible negative impact that modelling of a character’s maladaptive behaviour might have on a student and warned about the potential bibliotherapy has for “unleashing intense emotions and uncontrolled behaviors”.

This reinforces Lundsteen’s (1972) four-part concept of bibliotherapy in the school library as being the process of “getting the right **book** to the right **child** at the right time about the right **problem**”. However, it also highlights the limitations of the school librarian’s role in supporting students to navigate challenges which will, at times, be beyond their qualifications and expertise. In these instances, a clinical approach to bibliotherapy and/or other therapies will often be required. However, in the initial stages of establishing a bibliotherapy programme in the school environment, a librarian might start by calling the process



biblioguidance and begin the process collaborating with the school counsellors to strengthen the effectiveness of approach.

Distinguishing between clinical bibliotherapy, developmental bibliotherapy and readers advisory services, Dali (2014) provides the following table:

<b>Practice</b>	<b>Clinical Bibliotherapy</b>	<b>Developmental Bibliotherapy</b>	<b>Readers Advisory Services</b>
Definition	Psychotherapy which relies on books to improve a person's mental and physical well-being	The use of books to help a person solve life dilemmas and problems in non-clinical settings	Suggesting books and other materials for leisure, entertainment, and self-education
Main activity	Therapy: Identifying a person's needs, which even s/he may not fully understand, and recommending some reading that s/he <i>needs</i> .		Reading advice: allowing the reader to take the lead and suggesting something that s/he <i>wants</i> .
Intended audience	Individuals with mental health issues	Mentally healthy individuals experiencing some dilemmas or problems	Mentally healthy individuals who may or may not experience dilemmas and problems now
Can be practiced by librarians?	Yes, but only as part of a multi-professional team in collaboration with therapy professionals (doctors, social workers, psychologists, etc.) BT training may be desired or required	Yes, if properly trained: alone or in collaboration with therapy professionals or educators	Yes
Builds on librarians' expertise	Reading materials and reading experience		

Can librarians suggest a book that they have not read personally?	No	No	Yes
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**Table 2:** Dali, Keren. "On Bibliotherapy." 2014

Awareness of the pitfalls of viewing reading as universally beneficial for everyone is an important consideration for school librarians and it is essential to keep these limitations in mind when making book recommendations. Recognition of the difference between common and expected issues for students, as opposed to indications that the problem/s students are facing is of a more serious nature is a vital element of taking a developmental approach to bibliotherapy. Clearly the latter would need to be referred to a mental health professional. However, this does not override the positive effect the use of bibliotherapy can have on school library patrons:

“There are risks in reading like there are in life. Yet we don't deny ourselves a bike ride because we may crash or a savory meal because we may get food poisoning. As private individuals, we take a risk because we want to have an experience. As professionals, we can open a world of reading experiences to our readers. We can give them that proverbial bike, but we can't promise them they won't crash. We can certainly recommend a suitable book, but we can't predict the outcome of reading. We can't guarantee that the book will make them feel better because we know it may do just the opposite. It is up to the reader to take risks; we can only facilitate the experience.” (Dali, 2014)

Prior to COVID bibliotherapy was given scant attention in the literature and the theory was ignored by librarians and counsellors: although in practice we know these professionals have been intuitively taking a bibliotherapeutic approach to their practice. Bibliotherapy does have its limitations and could be detrimental if used inappropriately. However, it has definite potential which should be capitalised to help students navigate their way through the stress and demands of their teenage years.

### **Understanding the Process**

Isolating all the factors which come into play in the bibliotherapeutic process would be impossible. Reading and connecting with stories is a nuanced and subtle process which is

different for every book and every reader. Nonetheless, Shrodes (1955) provides a strong basis for understanding what happens with a reader as they move through the following three fundamental stages of the process:

- Identification – The reader recognises or relates to the conflict in the story as a real situation and an acquaintance between the reader and a character or characters begins. This can then lead the reader to expand their view of themselves or reduce their sense of being different from others.
- Catharsis – Having realised they have the same or a similar problem, the reader is able to vicariously experience the conflicts and emotions contained in the story and, thus, gain insights into what might drive their own behaviour and consequently, release emotional or psychological tension, hence becoming better able to apply what they have learnt to their own issue.
- Insights – Having released the tensions by reflecting on what has happened in the story in relation to their own experience, the reader is then better placed to achieve new insights into their problem. Ideally, the narrative brings relevant issues to the surface in a way which allows the reader to achieve new insights into their problem and consider how the issues might be addressed.

### **Why the Library is an Ideal Place to Drive this Initiative**

Research shows the significant difference that a well-resourced library run by qualified staff makes to the learning outcomes and emotional wellbeing of students in a school (Lance and Kachel, 2018). The library is often described as the heart of the school. Not only is this a factor in exemplary architectural design for new schools, but it is also a metaphor which underpins what all experienced school librarians intuitively know they need to achieve if they are to be effective in their roles.

This metaphor can be extended to demonstrate how the library is well placed to pump life blood through the school. Much has been written about the importance of providing an adaptable and welcoming space for students to feel safe, valued, and respected. The nurturing and healing role an ideal school library plays makes it the perfect place to leverage the benefits of bibliotherapy.

The role of the school librarian is multifaceted and includes being a:

- curriculum leader

- instructional partner
- research specialist
- information service provider
- reading advocate
- collection manager
- resource curator

Even before the pandemic's adverse effects on mental health, curriculum demands made it difficult to accommodate students' social, emotional, and developmental needs. Now, more than ever, educators need to reflect on their practices to provide a holistic pedagogical approach to supporting students, not just teaching them. Before learning can occur, students need to feel safe. School librarians, whose teaching is not typically constrained by marking rubrics, are well-placed to offer students guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for growth without grades!

Collaboration and the ability to develop bespoke programmes to meet specific school needs are skills school librarians have honed. By leveraging their training and expertise, school librarians can use their positions' flexible nature to ensure their relevance and effectiveness in the school setting.

As experts in the selection of information resources and collection development, school librarians can;

- collaborate with teachers to meet the social, emotional, and learning needs of the students
- connect library patrons to the most appropriate materials to meet their educational, psychological, and emotional needs

The time is right for school librarians to recognise the significant difference they can make to the socio-emotional landscape in the school environment by branching out beyond a focus on academic integrity and the love of reading. Bibliotherapy provides the perfect tool to do this.

### **Bibliotherapy in the Wider Context**

In September 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were adopted by world leaders at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit. These goals are a call to

action for all countries to promote prosperity and end poverty everywhere, while protecting the planet.

In collaboration with its partner, the International Publishers Association (IPA), in October 2018 the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) joined the effort to support the SDGs initiative by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with IPA, pledging to promote the attainment of these goals.

With the inclusion of the SDGs into many school curriculums, developing students' global awareness is being prioritised in schools. Reading, with its capacity to open students' minds about different communities and ways of life, helps students to develop empathy and understanding about people, issues, and perspectives they would be unlikely to encounter otherwise.

## Conclusions

The time worn maxim that senior school years are the happiest of your life is not consistent with the statistics. The recent pandemic has exacerbated issues of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder worldwide, but particularly with our youth.

Most professionals agree that bibliotherapy is beneficial to wellbeing and promotes an improvement in mental health. Research demonstrates that reading is a productive activity which not only sharpens the mind, but increases empathy and impacts thought processes, emotions, and behaviour. Either consciously or unconsciously, lovers of literature have been using books and stories to self-medicate for centuries.

“Sometimes it’s the story that charms; sometimes it’s the rhythm of the prose that works on the psyche, stilling or stimulating. Sometimes it’s an idea or an attitude suggested by a character in a similar quandary or jam. Either way, novels have the power to transport you into other existences, and we see the world from a different point of view. When you are engrossed in a novel, unable to tear yourself from the page, you see what a character learns. You *think* you are sitting on the sofa in your living room, but important parts of you - your thoughts, your senses, your spirit – are somewhere else entirely ... No-one comes back from such a journey quite the same.” (Berthoud & Elderkin, 2015, p. 2)

However, it is only in the last few years that a focus has been placed on how the library can operate to promote bibliotherapeutic practices as an accepted means to promote and resource mental health and wellbeing initiatives (Merga, 2022). The reason for the lack of prominence of using bibliotherapy in the educational environment is puzzling, given its proven effectiveness in helping students deal with difficult issues and deep concerns.

Care and consideration must be taken when incorporating a bibliotherapeutic aspect to the school library programme, and simplifying the practice is difficult. However, it can be argued that as well as being a natural extension to the readers' advisory service school librarians traditionally offer, it provides a focused approach to the provision of the wellbeing services for which outstanding school libraries are valued.

The literature overwhelmingly indicates that school librarians can leverage the knowledge and understanding gained from their training and experience to use bibliotherapy as a vehicle to, not only support their students' mental and emotional wellbeing, but also their cognitive and socio-emotional development. By normalising life's dilemmas and offering alternatives to deal with the problems of day-to-day life, bibliotherapy can help children and adolescents cope with issues in a fruitful, rewarding, and healthy way.

“Bibliotherapy is not a new technique; it is not a cure-all! Sensitive, constructive awareness of the written word, a practical knowledge of children's literature, a creative and flexible mind that is emphatic to the needs of pupils will allow teachers and librarians to meet *more* of the needs of *more* of the pupils. Call it whatever you want, but don't ignore the practical value of bibliotherapy.” (Shepherd and Iles, 1976)

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## Biography

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**Jane Hayes** is dedicated to life-long learning and bringing stories, books and people together. Jane Hayes, has worked for more than four decades as a teacher, librarian and senior education officer in Australia, the USA and the UAE. She is currently enjoying her eighth year as Senior School Teacher Librarian at Dulwich College, Singapore.