

# A Systematic Review on Bibliotherapy and Its Effectiveness in Psychotherapeutic Dimension

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**Abstract.** This review began with the current educational background and mainly focused on emotional education. Noting the pressure exerted on human beings from the development of various industries as well as the needs of society, it associated the popular topics of education and stress coping with mental health, and examined bibliotherapy as a correlative item between them. Bibliotherapy is a type of creative art therapy that uses reading materials as a medium for psychotherapy and has similar concepts to other psychotherapies, including transference, countertransference, potential space, and the capability to play. This paper explained and analyzed bibliotherapy following the logic from the definition, purpose, advantage, and therapeutic principle, to its effectiveness, and hoped to provide an introduction to bibliotherapy for the general public by doing a systematic literature review. The research suggested that bibliotherapy as a low-cost, effective and timely (saving waiting time) method can be broadly promoted, but the specific choice of books needed to be considered individually for each person's own circumstances.

**Keywords:** Bibliotherapy; reading therapy; mental health; psychological treatment; therapeutic pr

## 1. Introduction

It was deemed that human social development hinges on education [1]. With the current trend towards globalization of education, the range of comparative innovations in educational thinking and policies between countries and regions is constantly expanding, and it is this trend and the urgent demand for talent in all fields of specialization that has led to increasingly fierce competition between individuals. Modern education requires that educational institutions, represented by schools, produce well-rounded students to meet the needs of society at this stage, and to adapt to the pace of development of modern society. Zhou indicated that in the process of emphasizing the development of economic construction, most of the schools and colleges put a one-sided emphasis on rational and cognitive education in the training, thus neglecting the importance of emotional education in the education process, which leads to emotional desertification of students (e.g., lack of empathy, lack of respect and concerns for others, being unable to deal with interpersonal relationships, etc.) [2]. However, education does not just serve for economy. Education aims to help students become lifelong learners and effective citizens, and historically, educators have been highly attentive to the fact that social and emotional learning is the foundation and crucial component for learning and developing self-reflection, responsibility, caring, cooperation, and effective problem-solving [3]. Also, the understanding of the importance of these capabilities has been enhanced through these decades, and the knowledge of how to integrate them effectively into the academic environment and practical research has been deepened as well [3].

Hills mentioned that understanding own and others' emotions is a crucial front step in building relationality and mental well-being [4]. Besides, it was acknowledged that both of them are greatly influenced by the development of social and emotional skills [5]. Emotional Education, also known as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), is a new and popular trend which refers to the learning process in which individuals are able to recognize and manage their emotions, cognition and respond to the emotional states of different people in different environments [6]. According to Elias et al., SEL is defined as the process of becoming adept at recognizing and managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, making responsible decisions, understanding others' perspectives, and building and

maintaining relationships, including self-awareness, social-awareness, self management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making [6, 7]. Lin pointed out that through literature education (e.g., literature appreciation; reading) which provides both clear research concepts and direct research objects for emotional education, students can gain access to others' experiences and enhance their creativity, flexibility, sensitivity, empathy, and compassion towards other human beings [8]. The role of reading materials has traditionally been crucial for both instructional and guidance aspects of the educational process. In actuality, its significance extends beyond the realm of education, as evidence has shown that it also shows importance in fostering social flexibility in people, lessening the likelihood of violent conflicts, improving personal qualities, and fostering harmony in society [7, 8].

Education itself is a topic of great interest, and the times and society have brought education and students, being the subjects of education, to the forefront of research and discussion. Nevertheless, students are not the only ones who are challenged. The diversity of the educational environment resulting from the matching and mixing of students from different cultural backgrounds and with different learning abilities has led to educators and school librarians being pushed to go beyond the traditional scope of teaching and learning and to demand higher standards from them as well [9]. Furthermore, the focus on education and society's emphasis on scores have led to a surge in stress among adolescents, and both external and internal pressure (e.g., high-stakes examinations, parental expectations, social and sexual relationship, etc.) affect their lives at both individual and social level [10]. Despite the fact that most young people make an effort to try different coping strategies to handle stress and problems, there are still some who are unsure how to release when faced with stress [11]. When stress is more than people can handle, it can have an adverse effect on the physical and mental health of the people under stress. Taking into account the above background information and the increasing use of books as a therapeutic method of reading in recent years, and considering the impact of literature education on students' values shaping and mental health, this paper is expected to link emotional education and mental health, and to do a systematic literature review, exploring the conception, unique characteristics and effectiveness of bibliotherapy.

## **2. Methodology**

For this systematic literature review, the academic database Google Scholar was mainly employed. The following search phrases were used: pressure, literature appreciation, emotional education, SEL (Social and Emotional Learning), coping strategies, bibliotherapy, reading therapy and book therapy. Also, other research was found in supplemental sources such as Science Direct, JSTOR, PubMed and Web of Science, and the integration of these resulted in a more comprehensive literature analysis. Studies were included if they: (i) mentioned reading therapy, book therapy or bibliotherapy, (ii) discussed specific effects of bibliotherapy, (iii) were empirical research or supported by data. This paper does not impose a mandatory and strict requirement on the publication date of the literature, but it is preferable for articles published after 2000.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Definition, Purpose and Advantage of Bibliotherapy**

The dominance of cognitive-behavioral therapies in psychology is evident in reality, thus the attention paid to bibliotherapy is not surprising [12]. Bibliotherapy, also known as book therapy, reading therapy, poetry therapy etc., is deemed as a creative arts therapy or an integrative psychotherapeutic channel, that involves storytelling or reading of specific texts [13]. It utilizes the relationship between the individual and the book (or poetry, literature, and other vehicles in the form of words) as its therapy, and this bibliotherapeutic is unique in that it is structured around a triangle model of therapist-texts-patient [14]. Rottenberg believed that bibliotherapy employs similar concepts to other psychotherapeutic treatments, including transference, countertransference, potential space, and the capability to play [14]. Besides, bibliotherapy, being seen as a form of self-management therapy, using structured material as a basis for self-improvement or help patients to alleviate the effect of

negative emotions (e.g., pain, depression, sadness, inferiority, guilt, loneliness, etc.), is often used as an adjunct to individual or group psychotherapy [15]. The purpose of bibliotherapy is varied, with the most common being to enhance personal awareness and cognition, and reinforce specific therapeutic concepts or strategies, and thus to motivate the subject to develop or change their lifestyles in a positive direction [16].

According to Jacobs, the advantages of bibliotherapy include i) its proven empirical support for many problems, ii) low cost, iii) widespread availability and applicability without clear scope limitations across psychological disorders and symptom severity, and iv) potential to reach individuals and groups who would otherwise be assigned to waiting lists or not have access to traditional psychotherapy [15, 17, 18]. Jacobs pointed out that bibliotherapy as a psychotherapeutic method can lead to a more personalized therapeutic process, allowing readers themselves to be more self-aware and take their own responsibilities to solve their problems, in other words, they can adjust and control the pace of the therapy to match their own reality at any given time [17]. Also, bibliotherapy eliminates the sense of shame that may discourage or prevent patients from seeking traditional psychological healing which is often viewed as private [17]. In addition, it is able to better provide assistance to low-symptomatic populations or be used as a preventive intervention (e.g., provide guidance for future stages of school-aged adolescents by offering information on what to anticipate and examples of what others have done in similar conditions;) to manage the exacerbation of symptoms in a stepped-cared model [17, 19].

### **3.2. Theoretical Therapeutic Principle of Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy is being observed and followed in the fields of education and psychology, especially due to the fact that in the reading process, individuals in every moment of empathy with the characters or plot of the book will get insightful ideas from it, and the more they connect themselves with the book, the stronger the emotional bond between them will be, which can help them realize that they are not the only one experiencing similar conditions or worse, and thus achieve emotional catharsis in order to release negative feelings [20]. Canty attributed the working (therapeutic) principle of bibliotherapy to the power and value of reading itself. It was thought that the process of reading is akin to the process of thinking that allows one to intuitively understand and empathize with the characters in books [21]. Bibliotherapy is different from reading in the traditional sense, it is the process of reading with a therapeutic purpose, rather than just reading and enjoying [22]. It can be beneficial for almost everyone, as they are all likely to come across similar situations in their lives. Sridhar and Vaughn indicated the experiential elements worth noting in bibliotherapy are identification (being able to identify the main character and event, e.g., the protagonist should be of a similar age to the reader, exhibit similar behaviours and be confronted with events that the reader can recognize), involvement (emotional resonating with the main character or storyline, literary work has the ability to alter the way readers perceive things when they emotionally invested in it) and insight (offering opportunities for readers to analyze characters and their conditions, developing opinions regarding characters' behaviour, and creating or developing their own skills of solving problems through exploring new effective methods) [23]. Thus, based on these analyses and studies, it was considered that the essence of the therapeutic principle of bibliotherapy is understanding and empathy.

Wang and Fu believed that there is more than one principle of bibliotherapy, and they have identified the distinct but intrinsically related principles of bibliotherapy from different perspectives and disciplines, and have illustrated from four disciplinary perspectives: i) phylogeny, ii) psychology, iii) physiology and iv) psychophysiology [24]. The logic of phylogeny is that if a thing initially occurs because of some reasons or motivations, then it will remain in its original nature thereafter and will always function in the service of them [22, 24]. To ascribe this logic to bibliotherapy, if literature occurs for therapeutic purposes, then reading itself has therapeutic benefits. According to Li's viewpoint, the creation of literary and artistic works is the sublimation of the psychological needs of the repressed, for instance, writers expect to escape the danger of mental insanity through writing

while readers take these works as objects that can be used as an outlet or emotional support, especially when these desires or senses cannot be realized with practical actions in reality [25].

The therapeutic principle of bibliotherapy at the psychological level has been distilled into five points, including resonance (psychological), catharsis (purgation), equilibrium, suggestion and insight [24]. The theory of resonance refers to the fact that readers always tend to form a vision of expectation in their minds through reading first, and then consciously or unconsciously check or compare the traits (e.g., personalities, experience, emotions) of the characters in the work with their own, and when similarities are found, they tend to feel a strong sense of identity and empathy, so as to gain support in terms of emotion [24, 26]. Regarding catharsis (purgation), Freud linked it to psychoanalysis and believed that it is a crucial factor in alleviating distressing symptoms [27]. And Shen connected bibliotherapy with catharsis, pointing out that bibliotherapy can be understood in a way similar to hypnosis, that when readers experience fear or grief in a set situation, their inner anxieties can be directed outwardly, thus cleansing their negative emotions by putting themselves into the role, and catharsis is often accompanied by some form of recovery manifestations, e.g., shouting, yelling, tearing, etc. [26]. By controlling the flow of psychic energy and cathexis, ID indicates its place in the creation, thus avoiding the fear caused by ego and the stress caused by superego, and catharsis achieves the release of overloaded inhibitions and the return of the reader to the previous state of harmony [26]. Cognitive equilibrium, as a state of balance between individuals' mental framework and the environment, can be understood interchangeably due to its similarity to catharsis [28]. Both of them are applicable to tragic works, which mainly use the misfortunes of characters in the book to hedge against their own negativity and achieve therapeutic purposes by reversing or shedding the negativity, and the cathartic and equilibrating effect of the work is enhanced by its tragicity, but the tragicity also needs to be kept within reasonable limits [24]. Suggestion, being a psychological process by which a person guides their own or others' desired thoughts, senses and behaviours, is often used as a therapeutic method in psychotherapy [29]. Reading is both other-suggestive and self-suggestive, it is other-suggestive because in most cases, the reading material is provided and written by others, and it is self-suggestive due to the factors that i) the reading material is sometimes chosen by the readers themselves, ii) the readers reveal their own tendencies and attitudes during the process of counselling and communication, so that even the materials recommended by others actually refer to the readers' self-tendencies, and iii) it is up to the readers to decide whether their interpretive perspective will be negative or positive is up to the readers [24]. However, it should be noted that, for people with serious reverse psychology, conventional hints may not be able to play a good role, and at this time you can consider reverse suggestions to influence the patients' emotions. Shen believed that the content of literature causes the externalization of readers' inner conflicts and the psychological activities of people lead to the internalization of the emotional content of literary works, and input it as a part of readers' overall behaviour, and this integration produces insight [26]. Insight is seen as a deeper level of thinking and questioning after the reader has experienced resonance and catharsis, but not all readings can bring about the feeling of comprehension, nor can all people reach the realm of insight [24, 30]. The stages mentioned above do not apply to everyone and will vary according to the individuals' own situations (e.g., the ability of literature appreciation), with some people stopping at resonance and others at catharsis.

Wang and Fu mainly used Lamarckism to explain the embodiment of physiology in the therapeutic principles of bibliotherapy [24]. According to Lamarckism's use and disuse theory, in the process of reading, human is constantly utilizing their brains to think and comprehend, so the process of reading itself is a form of brain exercise [31]. Reading provides a sustained state of information stimulation that can encourage the brain to play cognitive and brain functions more frequently, maintain the smooth circulation of blood in the head while actively improving and enhancing the brain function, strengthening the heart and brain at the same time to develop intelligence and so on [24]. Besides, for therapeutic principles in psychophysiology, Wang and Fu mainly referred this to as physiological aesthetics [24]. Some scholars viewed the aesthetic experience as a beneficial and rewarding process for human's body and considered that there is a link between aesthetic experience and pleasure and

happiness [32]. Previous studies have demonstrated that artistic appreciation can promote physical health and mental well-being as well as serve as a therapeutic aid for multiple populations since aesthetic experience enhances the ability to perceive objects [32, 33].

### **3.3. Effectiveness of Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy incorporates the basic and core ideas of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and offers exercises and activities intended to assist readers/patients in overcoming negatively unpleasant emotions [34]. Instead of merely imparting and inputting information and ideas into the brain, it guides and motivates readers to question and challenge harmful and useless beliefs and actions via the use of books, leading to better self-management. Shen mentioned that reading literature, especially escapist literature, can be a much more effective way of treating and relieving anxiety and depression than swallowing tablets or using other physiotherapy treatments, without worrying about the possible side effects caused by drugs [26]. According to McNaughton's point of view, brief nonpharmacologic interventions, including bibliotherapy, have been shown to be effective in reducing depressive symptoms and improving clinical functioning in the context of self-administered treatments [35]. Bibliotherapy is more cost-effective than other treatments, and by comparing it with traditional counselling, it reduces the impact of stigma and creates a sense of empowerment for patients which can be seen as additional benefits in the effectiveness [35, 36]. The effectiveness of self-help treatments represented by bibliotherapy should not be generalized and need to be categorized according to patients' specific symptoms, conditions and presentations. By comparing the bibliotherapy group with the waiting list group, the result from Cuijpers's meta-analysis suggested that bibliotherapy as a therapeutic method has been proven to own effectiveness and efficiency which is no less effective (even better) than individual or group therapy, but there is no significant difference between the therapeutic effects of bibliotherapy and individual or group therapy [37]. It was deemed that some targeted problems, skill deficiencies, and emotional and diagnostic issues respond well to bibliotherapy (e.g., fear, depression and sleep disturbance) while habitual disorders (e.g., smoking, alcoholism and overeating) are not amenable to intervention by bibliotherapy, and treatment outcomes are enhanced by adherence to treatment regimen [37]. Besides, Cuijpers discovered that while the effectiveness is negatively related to the duration of therapy, it is a function of the therapeutic period being confounded with the type and essence of the problem [37].

In light of the research from Yuan et al. indicated that bibliotherapy is tested to be an effective therapeutic method for reducing adolescents' depressive symptoms while bibliotherapy showed less obvious effectiveness for children with anxiety [34]. This result is reached since the data analysis reveals that the effectiveness of bibliotherapy for children with anxiety symptoms is mathematically better than the control group (including wait-list control, non-treatment control, treatment as usual and psychological placebo), but it does not show a significant difference from zero, which means that there is no statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of bibliotherapy and control group by testing the mean change scores in depressive and anxiety symptoms from baseline to post-treatment and the p-value. Nevertheless, Yuan et al. noted that this conclusion is not entirely due to the purely therapeutic effectiveness of psychotherapeutic modalities [34]. The high rate of all-cause discontinuations in the process of bibliotherapy may also have an impact on the results. In fact, both all-cause discontinuations in the treatment process and patients' acceptability of the treatment modality can be seen as confounding variables which may influence the experimental results. Overall, Yuan et al. found that even though evidence showed that bibliotherapy is an effective psychotherapeutic treatment, it is not suitable for individuals who lack cognitive capabilities and self-discipline as well as some patients who use psychotherapy and expect guidance and advice from therapists, because the therapists are responsible for certain risks for them, thus reducing patients' own psychological pressure [34]. When they need to rely on independent and self-help ways, they tend to be perturbed and get upset, which affects their effectiveness. Meanwhile, bibliotherapy, as a therapeutic programme that emphasizes cognitive change, can be tough for the youth, especially children, to engage in for lacking self-control [34].

Unlike the motivations of previous studies, which are to help patients with mental disorders, addiction, incarceration and other psychological problems, the value of Monroy-Fraustro et al.'s research is clustered in the information of individual research subjects [38]. Findings suggested that autonomy and impartiality are associated with positive effects of bibliotherapy, often because bibliotherapy improves patient's capabilities of autonomy, decision-making, and problem-solving in situations where there is little or no therapist. The result showed that psychiatric patients show improvements in clinical symptoms, cognitive abilities and psychosocial functioning after participating in bibliotherapy programmes compared to those who did not get involved in the programmes, and they also found the process enjoyable, useful and interesting. Monroy-Fraustro et al. held the view that in the process of bibliotherapy, patients' roles shift to that of readers, taking on the task of examining their flaws, and this can lead to a positive effectiveness of the treatment, in particular, bibliotherapy can be considered for application in caring and improving the mental health of medical personnel during a pandemic, e.g., COVID-19 [38]. However, it is crucial to note that although the result confirmed the positive effectiveness of bibliotherapy in psychological problems and mental illness, it may not have better effectiveness than other forms of psychotherapy, the main advantage of bibliotherapy is its broad applicability [38]. Also, based on the findings, it appeared that patients need to make essential use of and develop a number of skills, including moral horizon, creativity, emotion, and fantasy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This article starts with a broad background on current education, explaining the reasons and significance of the public's keen attention to it from the perspective of the education discipline. It focuses on emotional education, introduces the necessity and value of emotional education, refines emotional education to literary education, and then puts forward literature appreciation, which is frequently mentioned in literary education, in order to make preparations for connecting the theme afterwards. Next, based on the mentioned information and background, it suggests that individuals, especially students, are facing various and a huge amount of pressure due to today's public attention and the demand from all walks of life. Although facing and coping with pressure has been a normal part of life, studies showed that there is still a part of people who have no idea how to cope with stressors correctly and reduce or reverse negative emotions efficiently, thus the number of people who have a mental illness or emotional problems is constantly increasing nowadays. Considering the factors of emotional education, stressors (pressure), coping strategies and mental health, this paper expects to focus on bibliotherapy as it relates to all four and to do a systematic literature review to elucidate what bibliotherapy is, how it works (therapeutic principle), and what its specific effectiveness are in psychotherapeutic dimension. This study can serve as background information for individuals, educators, therapists or other related agencies or departments to have a basic and accurate understanding of bibliotherapy, and use it as appropriate for their own conditions. It can be an introductory guidance to self-help, especially for those who are aware that they may have psychological problems, but are reluctant to reveal their privacy or spend too much waiting time and energy.

However, the limitations of this article cannot be ignored. The screening of the literature is more based on the author's personal tendency, and the sample size of the literature is small, thus the validity of the findings still needs to be discussed and proven in subsequent studies. Also, the author discovers that the literature on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy is more of horizontal research, comparing and analyzing the experimental group and the control group. Such a comparison, although feasible, overlooks individual differences between samples, for instance, the ability to read and literature appreciation and the extent of motivation and self-discipline may be confounding variables. Therefore, future research can do longitudinal comparative studies by considering categorizing the research subjects according to their gender, age, occupation, educational level and other elements to minimize the possible influence of others.

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