



5th International Conference on Information Science

Royale Chulan, Penang, Malaysia, 19-21 Sep 2022
Organised by Faculty of Information Management, UiTM, Malaysia

Exploring Affective Bibliotherapy Features in Children's Literature for Emotional Healing and Growth

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Abstract

Recent developments in psychology have rekindled interest in the therapeutic potential of literature. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein many children lack access to conventional psychological assistance, bibliotherapy emerges as a viable aid for addressing personal issues. However, not all children's books are suitable for this purpose, necessitating meticulous scrutiny to ascertain suitable therapeutic reading materials. Through qualitative examination, this study scrutinized the affective bibliotherapy approach within fiction and illustrated books, unveiling three essential bibliotherapy attributes in children's literature. Comprehensive examples are offered for each feature, aiming to enrich future bibliotherapy research and application.

Keywords: Affective bibliotherapy, children's literature, bibliotherapy, emotional wellbeing

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8iS12.5001>

1.0 Introduction

Traumatic events, such as bereavement or abandonment, have the potential to exert a significant impact on an individual's emotional and psychological well-being, particularly in the case of children. Children often struggle to grasp the appropriate emotional responses to such circumstances, and individuals may employ diverse coping mechanisms. While these coping strategies may not necessarily be erroneous, they can prove detrimental if not subject to careful observation and assessment.

Children's emotional well-being is as crucial as physical well-being, but mental health policies in Malaysia are not fully implemented or widely understood. Emotional neglect is often dismissed as daily stress that will go away, but emotional health is crucial for children's mental, psychological, and cognitive development and physical health (Suhaila, 2018). Ignoring emotional and mental illnesses can lead to difficulties in social settings, cognitive disorders, and long-lasting trauma.

Based on a survey by the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) (2019), it has been recorded that 424,000 children in Malaysia have mental illness, and one-fourth of adults are battling with functional difficulties. The survey also discovered that almost 1 out of 10 youngsters between the ages of 10 to 15 years suffer from mental health problems. It was also found that a percentage of 8.4 female children experience mental illness (NHMS, 2019).

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Recent developments in psychology have led to a renewed interest in the benefits of books as a form of healing. This technique has been used and practiced for a long time and is not a newly coined term (Stanley, 1999). Children are also prone to develop mental illnesses at a young age, and books have been proven to be a significant medium in therapy sessions. This therapy method is known as bibliotherapy (De Vries, 2017), which is the therapeutic use of books in treating diseases or personal issues (Stanley, 1999). In other words, it uses books to assist people in problem-solving (Aiex, 1993).

Bibliotherapy is suitable for all age groups, with only the reading level and features of the materials differing. Caregivers must first identify the client's problems before selecting appropriate reading materials. Bibliotherapy is helpful for students facing difficult living situations (Ackerson et al., 1998). Bibliotherapy allows children to engage with characters in books and gain insights, helping them overcome emotional stress related to real-life issues. Literature selection plays a significant role in the therapeutic benefits of bibliotherapy (De Vries, 2017)

The participation of psychologists and therapists in the practice of bibliotherapy has resulted in the separation of the two primary schools of thought in bibliotherapy: cognitive bibliotherapy and affective bibliotherapy. Shechtman, Z. (2009) stated that Affective bibliotherapy strategies improved therapy and empathy. It uses fiction or picture books for children with mental health issues, but requires a therapist or professional helper like counselors, psychologists, teachers, or librarians. This paper aims to seek a deeper understanding of the potential of children's literature as a tool for emotional well-being with an emphasis on the application of affective bibliotherapy in children's literature as a tool for supporting children with mental health issues in Malaysia.

The objectives of this paper are twofold: firstly, to pinpoint features within children's literature that have the potential to foster emotional healing and growth through affective bibliotherapy, and secondly, to construct a comprehensive framework delineating bibliotherapy features specific to children's literature, aimed at facilitating emotional healing and growth.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Bibliotherapy

The concept of using books to accelerate healing processes as a therapeutic approach has been found in many psychological treatment approaches. This technique is known as "bibliotherapy", or book therapy for mental health. Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic method that supports mental health by using literature (poems, novels, creative writing, and so on) to assist in navigating psychological, emotional, and social issues. It involves the use of books to help children cope with changes, emotional problems, or mental problems (Pardeck, 1994).

The American Library Association defines bibliotherapy as "the use of books and other resources as an auxiliary therapy in the treatment of mental, emotional, and social illnesses through a directed reading program." (Gomes Mujica, 2012; Varela 2018). According to several sources (Afolayan, 1992; Bernstein, 1989; Myracle, 1995; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1998), Samuel Crothers first coined the term 'bibliotherapy' in 1916 (Atlantic et al., 1916, p. 291). The concept of using books to affect a change in a person's thinking and behavior has been around for decades. Crothers coined the term when he discussed a technique of prescribing books to patients who need help understanding their problems, and he labelled the technique as "bibliotherapy" (Myracle, 1995).

According to De Vries, et. al. (2017), the bibliotherapy process has four major components: assessment, selection, implementation, and evaluation. To begin, therapists will assess the child's readiness to address the trauma as well as the types of stressful incidents the child has had. (De Vries et al, 2017). This is enormously important for selecting appropriate literature for children. The selection process comprises of choosing appropriate stories, activities, and questions to utilize with the children. (De Vries et al., 2017). The stories chosen must be realistic, represent the child's history and beliefs, and give positive coping techniques for the young person to learn via the bibliotherapy process. (De Vries et al., 2017). The stories are shared with the students throughout the implementation stage. Conversations, guided reading, discussion of questions, and closing are all part of this therapeutic process (De Vries et al., 2017).

2.2 Bibliotherapy and Children

Bibliotherapy is a beneficial approach for children to learn problem-solving skills and gain insight into alternative solutions. Through reading, children can identify with characters and learn from their experiences. Bibliotherapy can also help children become emotionally involved in a story and gain insights and realizations. For successful bibliotherapy, children need to identify characters facing similar problems and become emotionally invested in their stories. The effectiveness of bibliotherapy is dependent on the suitability of the reading materials used (Kramer 1999, Pardeck 1990)

2.3 The Suitability of Children's Literature

Bibliotherapy experts believe that the most important thing in this therapy is the book selection. Books chosen by the practitioner should have literary merit which means poorly written books with stereotyped characters and simplistic answers to complex questions is probably worse than not reading anything at all and can leave children with a negative view of literature. Reading quality literature, however, can be beneficial to children, even outside the context of bibliotherapy (White, 1989).

Anderson's (2013) definition of children's literature is the most detailed and realistic, stating that children's literature includes all books written for children, except works such as comic books, joke books, cartoon books, and non-fiction works such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference materials that are not meant to be read from front to back.

Mitchell (2002) added that excellent children's literature has relatable characters and settings, and a clear, engaging writing style. Books provide a safe way for children to explore emotions, ideas, and social norms while learning about their world.

2.4 Affective Bibliotherapy

Most available children's literature related to bibliotherapy aims at affective bibliotherapy (Gladding, 2005). In the method of identification, affective bibliotherapy uses fiction and other high-quality literature to help readers connect to emotional memories and human circumstances. (Schechtman, 2009). The basic premise of affective bibliotherapy is that people use defense mechanisms to shield themselves from pain, such as suppression. Individuals become separated from their thoughts, unconscious of their true feelings, and therefore are unable to overcome their issues constructively when such defenses are activated often. Stories help offer insight into personal problems (Forgan, 2002) through creating a safe distance, indirectly bringing the child and adolescent to the edge of threatening and threatening issues that may be too painful to face directly.

Unlike cognitive bibliotherapy, affective bibliotherapy is based on psychodynamic theories, some of which can be traced back to Sigmund and Anna Freud. The basic premise of affective bibliotherapy is that people use defense mechanisms to shield themselves from pain, such as repression.

Other beliefs of affective bibliotherapy are that identifying, exploring, and reflecting on emotions are essential components of the therapeutic process (Greenberg, 2010). Individuals are subjected to a wide variety of feelings as they identify with fictional characters, many of which they recognize in themselves, allowing them to reconnect with their own emotions. The vividness of human life, personalities, events, and challenges presented in literature enhances the experience.

In affective bibliotherapy, literature for children, such as picture books, poetry, fiction, and novels is often used by therapists, professional helpers, parents, teachers, and librarians to help children facing life difficulties. Therefore, the book itself may allow modifying bad experiences and turning them into positive understandings through identification with fictional characters.

3.0 Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, a theoretical framework has been developed (Figure 1). The conceptual framework for this research centers around using children's literature to facilitate emotional healing and growth through affective bibliotherapy. Affective bibliotherapy involves using literature to evoke emotional responses in readers, intending to facilitate personal growth and healing. To explore this approach, the study focuses on three critical features of bibliotherapy: empathy and connection, characters, and safety of text.

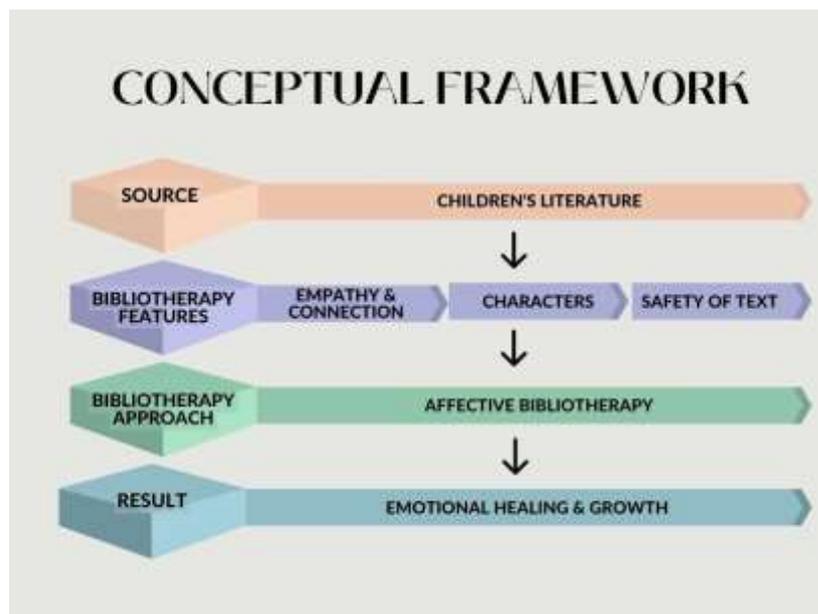


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

1. Empathy and connection refer to the ability of children's literature to create a sense of emotional connection between the reader and the story. This connection is essential for affective bibliotherapy, as it allows the reader to identify with the characters and their struggles. Through this connection, the reader is better able to understand their own emotions and experiences and develop a greater sense of empathy for others.
2. Characters are another critical feature of bibliotherapy. In the context of children's literature, characters can serve as powerful role models for readers, demonstrating healthy ways of coping with difficult emotions and experiences. Through these characters, readers can learn valuable lessons about emotional regulation, resilience, and personal growth (Layne, 2016). If

readers cannot relate to the characters or find the book inaccessible or uninteresting, they may lose interest and fail to engage with the book's therapeutic potential. As such, authors must carefully craft characters and situations that are relatable to children, encouraging them to connect with the text and facilitating their emotional growth and development.

3. Finally, the safety of text is an essential component of bibliotherapy, particularly for children. The study explores how children's literature can provide a safe space for readers to explore difficult emotions and experiences (Sullivan & Johnson, 2014). This safety is crucial for allowing readers to feel comfortable enough to engage with the text, and to facilitate emotional healing and growth (Greenwood, 2017).

By exploring these features of bibliotherapy and their impact on emotional healing and growth, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the potential of children's literature as a tool for emotional wellbeing. Through this research, we hope to provide insights into how we can use literature to support children's emotional health and resilience and promote positive outcomes for children struggling with difficult emotions and experiences.

4.0 Research Methodology

The research paradigm in this study is an interpretivism paradigm that emphasizes on human interaction with phenomena in human daily lives and suggests a qualitative approach to social research. The researchers conduct case study research to explore the bibliotherapy features of children's literature and to examine whether Malaysian children's literature meets the required features. This research employs an inductive rather than a deductive approach, starting with research questions and aims and objectives that need to be achieved during the research process.

Therefore, for this research, the data collection method is document analysis, which comprises literature ranging from the year 2017 to 2022 from the area of psychology, librarianship, children's literature, and child development, as well as children's books. For this study, the researchers focus only on children's books which can be found in libraries, bookshops, and personal collections. Only literature for readers aged 7-11 is used in this study due to their ability to read and understand the language well and still interested in children's fiction excluding comics, non-fiction books, and novels. Children's literature for ages 12 and up is not selected because the content is more novel-like, and the children's tastes vary from those of younger children. Only selected local books published in Bahasa Melayu and English language are used in this study and for investigation purposes.

The document analysis is performed through interpretation by the researchers to find meaning around the selected bibliotherapy features. The analysis process of these documents incorporates coding contents to find themes that emerged to become findings for this research.

5.0 Scope and Limitation

This study examines affective bibliotherapy features in children's literature, focusing on its potential for emotional healing and growth. It analyzes three main features: empathy and connection, characters, and text safety. However, it does not discuss clinical aspects of bibliotherapy or interventions. Other approaches to bibliotherapy involve trained professionals and have effectively treated psychological issues. Despite its limitations, the study highlights the potential of literature for emotional growth and resilience in children. This can be useful for educators, librarians, caregivers, parents, and children.

6.0 Findings and Discussion

Several features in children's literature for emotional healing and growth have been identified from the literary and book analysis. This paper will discuss three main features. Bibliotherapy experts emphasize the importance of selecting literature with literary merit. Poorly written books with stereotypical characters and simplistic answers to complex questions can harm children. On the other hand, reading quality literature can benefit children, even outside the context of bibliotherapy (White, 1989).

Children's books vary in size, form, story, and language level. However, there are significant differences between children's literature and bibliotherapy books. Three main bibliotherapy features are identified from the data collection and analysis. The following sections discuss these main features, each coupled with examples:

6.1 Empathy and Connection

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the emotions and perspectives of others, encompassing cognitive perspective-taking and affective resonance (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Hein & Singer, 2021). Children can establish a connection with scenarios presented in bibliotherapy literature, facilitating their engagement with characters and personal challenges. For instance, "Do You Have a Secret?" authored by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos (2004), exemplifies a work delving into subjects like bullying and sexual assault, fostering children's empathetic growth towards characters grappling with akin circumstances. Similarly, "Mama Penat!" authored by Nurul Faedah RA, delves into the typical difficulties that mothers encounter at home, affording children an improved comprehension of their maternal struggles and enhancing their familial bonds.

6.2 Characters

In literature and storytelling, a character refers to an individual depicted within a narrative who exhibits distinct traits, behaviors, and motivations (Pfister, 2020). To foster a child's comprehension of characters' emotions and sentiments in narratives, selecting texts free from provocative elements is crucial. For instance, "*Bagaimana Acuan, Begitulah Kuhnya*" authored by Maslina Yusoff (2016), narrates the journey of a girl with curly hair as she embraces self-love and acceptance, despite facing taunts from peers. Another example is "*Terlalu Istimewa*" by Liza Shahida Ismail, which portrays poignant moments shared among friends of diverse backgrounds, underscoring the significance of relationships and camaraderie over materialistic pursuits (Yusoff, 2016; Ismail, 2022).

It is important to choose safe texts without provocative elements to encourage a child to understand the emotions and feelings of characters in stories. For example, "*Bagaimana Acuan, Begitulah Kuhnya*" by Maslina Yusoff (2016) tells the story of a girl with curly hair who learns to love and accept herself despite being teased by her friends. "*Terlalu Istimewa*" by Liza Shahida Ismail depicts sentimental moments shared between friends of different ethnicities, emphasizing the value of family and friendship over material possessions. These books can help children relate to characters and learn important life lessons.

6.3 Safety of text

The text should offer insight/cathartic relief/a solution/coping techniques that allow the child to exercise support and greater autonomy over the issue at hand (Bijal, 2021). As an example, "*Jangan Takut*" is a book published in 2017, written by Nani Menon and illustrated by Emila Yusof, that depicts a child's fear of ghosts and supernatural events. The child's mother comforts him by explaining that ghosts do not exist, but God does and encourages him to believe in God instead. This can help children, especially those from religious backgrounds, develop a more positive sense of courage, security, self-assurance, and understanding of their faith. The book "*Ke Mana Miau Pergi*" by Yusof Gajah features a housecat who becomes a stray and learns to adapt to his new situation. Children facing similar challenges, such as adapting to new environments, can find comfort in this book.

The practical implications of this study are numerous and relevant for various stakeholders involved in promoting children's emotional and mental development. Firstly, the findings suggest that society as a whole can benefit from increased exposure to children's books with bibliotherapy elements. By borrowing or purchasing more of these books, individuals can tap into the potential of literature as a means of emotional healing and growth, particularly in the case of children. As such, there is a need for greater awareness and promotion of bibliotherapy in society, with an emphasis on the availability of high-quality children's literature that incorporates these elements.

Secondly, librarians can play a critical role in facilitating access to bibliotherapy books by referring to the features identified in this study when selecting and purchasing children's books. This approach can ensure that the books available to children in libraries and bookstores are more likely to promote emotional and mental wellbeing. By doing so, librarians can help support children's emotional growth and development while also contributing to the broader goal of promoting literature as a tool for emotional healing.

Thirdly, the implications of this study extend to educators, parents, and counsellors who can use the features of bibliotherapy identified in this research as a guide for implementing bibliotherapy in children. With this knowledge, these stakeholders can better identify the key features of literature supporting children's emotional growth and development and tailor bibliotherapy interventions accordingly. Ultimately, this can lead to more effective and meaningful use of literature in promoting children's emotional and mental wellbeing.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

Collectively, the pragmatic outcomes of this investigation underscore the conceivable advantages of utilizing bibliotherapy to facilitate emotional recuperation and maturation in children. Additionally, they offer insightful direction for educators, librarians, parents, and counselors engaged in child-related contexts. Consequently, this study lays the groundwork for forthcoming research endeavors to expand upon, with the aspiration of delving deeper into this realm and augmenting the corpus of literature and insights within the domain of bibliotherapy. Furthermore, it is recommended that further explorations delve into other facets of bibliotherapy within children's literature, including aspects like book cover design, to enrich our understanding in this area.

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