The paper presents a bibliotherapy program offered for students from the special class „János Arany Program for Talented Youth” (AJTP) of the Leőwey Klára Secondary School in Pécs. The bibliotherapeutic intervention is a group work based on therapeutic reading, discussion and writing, focusing on the development of participants’ EQ, self-knowledge, problem solving skills, creativity, the improvement of positive self-image, adaptability, and the reduction of distress.

Keywords: youth, self-knowledge, bibliotherapy, creative writing

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. (VERHAAGEN, 2010) It is not surprising: in our everyday life virtuality is the leading field of human interactions, and people can become whatever 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 therapists who try to educate them as normal human beings. 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, stucked 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 trainings. To improve students’ self-expression, their writing abilities and oral communication skills has 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 (McCULLISS – CHAMBERLAIN, 2013:13-15), 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 classical psychotherapy principles of identification, inspira-
tion and insight which leads to motivation for positive change. This can help readers gain insight into themselves by connecting with characters and values appearing in poems, short stories and novels. Their reading is followed up with group discussion and facilitated by the bibliotherapist’s and group mates’ questions and reflections. Group members 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 behavior 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 positive life-change and personal development (YALOM, 1995).

From the 1950’s, 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 has been 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 have been 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. were published in the Hungarian national librarian periodical titled Library Review.

Bibliotherapy is made by professionals from various fields. The Hungarian programs mentioned here were offered by a cooperating team of librarians, teachers and psychologists (Ildikó Sóron, Tünde Tegzes, Geraldine Ruszthy, Zsuzsanna Kovács, Borbála Zsidai, Judit Béres). We started bibliotherapy programs 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 all areas of 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 conditions deriving from low socio-economical status 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 or isolated people. The lack of a supportive childcare, physical and emotional holding is symptomatic in the everyday life of these families, and their children are suffering from distress, depression, problems of attachment and loss, neglect, violence, abuse, etc. (MAYER, 2006:10-11) The significant part of the students from AJTP classes can be characterized by the aforementioned disadvantages. Many of them come from families where education is not valued, so these talented children have no chance to study and get into higher education. The other part of the AJTP students come from poor or deprived rural areas and their families wouldn’t be able to finance their studies without the state support (FUSZEK – POLONKAI, 2007). The most important aim of schools working with disadvantaged youth is the compensation of disadvantages and students’ empowerment for a more successful social integration (MAYER, 2006). Bibliotherapy could be 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 also supports students’ cognitive skills and critical thinking in terms of deeper self-knowledge and the recognition of positive and negative behavioral patterns. The bibliotherapist aims to discover their self-experiences in an intimate, warm, and non-directive professional frame, whilst students have to be accompanied and facilitated along their associations and meaning-making processes as equal partners.

At the beginning of our group work students usually fill out personality tests related to their motivation, self-image, and the level of distress. The Psychology Department of the University of Debrecen developed tests especially for AJTP students. These tests lead to a deeper understanding of students’ personality and the actual problems of their everyday life which has a key importance when the bibliotherapist (facilitator) 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 bibliotherapy (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 values the therapy focuses 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 adequate 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. Considering the choice of the adequate 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 all are indispensable for a successful and productive life. Lower level aims are the promotion of reading books, and the improvement of communication, thinking and aesthetical 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 runs for one-and-half hours, when the group facilitator starts reading aloud and stops at intervals to discuss the text, including the readers’ personal response.
Bibliotherapy with the AJTP class of Pécs

In this chapter we focus on the tasks and the texts we used in our bibliotherapy program offered for students from the AJTP class of the Leőwey Secondary School in Pécs. The general pedagogical program of AJTP originally contains a kind of psychological modul, in which bibliotherapy might be a suitable and effective working form for personal development. The other criterium, which differentiates these participants from other youth involved in bibliotherapy programs, is that they are students with good cognitive competences living with social and emotional disadvantages. This duality shapes the aims of the therapy, while students’ skills allow us to plan a more complex and deep cognitive and emotional work. Bibliotherapy can help cognitive students to learn new strategies for dealing with their social and emotional issues, and supports their empowerment, that is to break out of disadvantages and work out opportunities based on their understanding. Whilst working together in a bibliotherapy group, students learn about themselves and understand that they are not alone, but others have been sharing – and had shared – 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 to 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, the bibliotherapy group 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 scores from 1 to 5 refer to students’ opinion about the applied texts (whether they liked or disliked the certain reading), whilst scores in the second column refer to the therapeutic effectiveness evaluated by the bibliotherapist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Active techniques</th>
<th>Reception, pupils opinion</th>
<th>Therapeutic effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>holding and caring in human relationships,</td>
<td>János Pilinszky: Secrets of our religion</td>
<td>write 5 characteristics as you see yourself + 5 as others probably see you</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>patience, values</td>
<td>(Advent)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>self-confidence, giftedness, emotional</td>
<td>The wings of Lotilko (Tunguz tale)</td>
<td>Ágnes Ágai’s adolescent poems; write a similar poem about yourself</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>resources, courage, empowerment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>dreams, plans for the future, carrier</td>
<td>Frigyes Karinthy: Meeting with a young</td>
<td>write recommendations for the 8–9 years younger yourself</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>planning</td>
<td>man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>pop icons, youth subcultures and trends,</td>
<td>Krisztina Tóth: The Soul is Megabody</td>
<td>play with association cards and celeb photos</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>positive self-image</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>love, partnerships, sharing</td>
<td>Dániel Varró: Heart dessert</td>
<td>write a similar advertisement about yourself as Virág Erdős’ Liar tale</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happiness, carrier, successful life, self</td>
<td>Sándor Márai: Herbarium; Sándor Weöres:</td>
<td>feedback questionnaire</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>criticism</td>
<td>Towards completeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Contents and evaluation of the bibliotherapeutic process

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 motivations, express feelings, externalise selfhood, reduce loneliness, frustration, and distress.

The therapeutic application of creative 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 conducted controlled clinical research on the effectiveness of reading and writing with traumatised children and youth (Pennebaker, 1997). 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 that people suffer from. Pennebaker worked with emotionally disturbed young people. They 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 they wrote about it. Pennebaker pointed out that this process of reading and writing can transform youngsters’ ideas about 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 can be connected to the outside world through books (Pennebaker, 1997).

Achievements and feedbacks

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

- 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 age: the age gap between participants can make harder the work together (e.g. significant difference between pupils aged 15-18 in assertivity and the realisation of personal behavioural patterns).
- There is a need for a differentiation according to the state of competences, from reading to cope with more complex meaning-making process. – Students have not been socialized for non-formal, interactive and reflective learning: it is hard to express themselves and share their 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 were interested in their personal opinion and feelings. The group leader bibliotherapist usually have got feedback questionnaires from the participants who reflect to the most important effects supporting their personal change and development. According to participant students’ 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 the opportunity to share 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, needs) and fostered the realization of the need for improving problem-solving, communication and social skills.

The group created a warm, positive and supportive emotional atmosphere for students who tend to lack this basic „holding” in their families and primary attachments.

As outlined previously, our bibliotherapy program affected a number of emotional and cognitive changes in the readers. Emotional changes can be described as the development of empathy, positive attitudes, more realistic self-image, tolerance, respect, and acceptance of others, through a directed examination of moral values and constructive behavior. The most important cognitive changes can be described as giving insight into human behavior and motivations, understanding of different perspectives and the universality of problems, increasing capacity for self-evaluation, and showing alternative solutions in problem solving.

This program wouldn’t have existed without the cooperation between the Győző Csorba County Library and the school. The library offered a volunteer bibliotherapist and a half-year-long program, and the school was open for it realizing how alternative methods can support their students’ personal growth. There is a strong need for bibliotherapy in schools, as students’ and teachers’ positive feedbacks proved it. And it is available for everybody.

References


