

The Developmental Impact of Bibliotherapy on Juvenile Detainees (2012-2019)

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Thesis Book

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### 1. The Scientific Objectives and Structure of the Dissertation

In my dissertation, I summarize the experiences of developmental work carried out through bibliotherapy with juvenile detainees. Through specific examples, I describe the framework, methods, unique challenges, and outcomes of working with this target group. I explain the reasons for selecting poems and song lyrics that facilitate general personality development, and I provide examples of games and tasks that help with attunement and self-awareness development. Additionally, I showcase the effects of applying group methods and the outcomes of these processes. By presenting the experiences gained over eight years of work, my aim is to examine the method-specific and method-independent impact factors of bibliotherapy from an educational science perspective, focusing on the resocialization and general personality development of the target group. Given that during the eight years discussed, there were no experience-based publications available in Hungary on this topic, my dissertation also serves as the first large-scale attempt to present developmental work in art therapy, specifically bibliotherapy, with detainees. The experiential material presented in this dissertation could serve as a starting point for further empirical research, as well as provide literature and methodological tools for professionals (such as those working in corrections, social workers, and bibliotherapists) who are or plan to work with this target group.

One of the substantive questions in the sociology of education is the mutual influence between society and schools. How much can education shape individuals? How can schools transmit societal values? What impact do they have on reducing inequalities? In my dissertation, I aimed to explore how non-formal education and learning can manifest and exert influence within the correctional system, considering that bibliotherapy groups, based on the interdisciplinary method of literature therapy, can also be seen as a form of non-formal education. When applying indirect educational methods, the educator assigns tasks to the community, and through the community's norms, values, and behaviors, exerts influence on the individual. This influence is not direct; instead, it considers the characteristics of the target group, thus guiding the process in an indirect manner.

The incorporation of bibliotherapy into prison programs is based on the recognition that an inmate's perceptual abilities may be a key factor in their social failures. Every sociotherapy and art therapy session aims to "sensitize" the participants, with the hope of improving the partially or completely missing skills and abilities necessary for a socially acceptable lifestyle and a healthy personality. If an inmate learns to view the problems and opportunities around them in a differentiated way, their perceptual, cognitive, and social skills can undergo significant changes. Group sessions can assist in this transformation process: while we acknowledge that we cannot perform miracles with these lost individuals, as it is unlikely that an entire personality can be fully changed, the emphasis within the personality structure can be realigned. This realignment may be sufficient to develop the individual's capacity for normal life and to foster a focus on socially accepted goals and a future orientation, as well as the development of assertiveness.

My dissertation is based on the personal and professional experience I gained as a librarian, bibliotherapist, and volunteer through my self-designed and led bibliotherapy sessions conducted with inmates at the Regional Juvenile Correctional Facility in Pécs and the Baranya County Correctional Facility, from July 2012 to March 2020. Unfortunately, I was unable to carry out my original research plans, partly due to COVID-19 and partly because the Juvenile Correctional Facility in Pécs was closed around the same time the virus began spreading..

## **2. Theses and Results**

In my thesis, I seek to answer whether the correctional system could be a suitable setting for a comprehensive developmental bibliotherapy program, and if so, what working methods would be the most effective for this specific target group. What role does civil and volunteer work play in a closed institution? Is it possible to shape and develop the previously learned socialization patterns of juvenile detainees? The role of the prison staff and reintegration officers is indisputable; however, how much does the attitude of the leader of the

bibliotherapy group influence the participants' approach to the work conducted within the group?

I will also discuss the positioning of bibliotherapy within the current Hungarian scientific context, its close relationships with other fields of study, and its overall role in the development of self-awareness.

This thesis also explores the trends operating within the correctional system related to developments and reintegration efforts, how various programs can be implemented, and their effectiveness (both in Hungary and in international examples).

According to my hypothesis, participation in long-term bibliotherapy group sessions helps develop the social, communication, and empathetic skills of the group members (in this case, the detainees), as well as aids in overriding entrenched behavioral patterns. These changes contribute to the reintegration efforts articulated in the aforementioned project.

Given the topic of the dissertation, it is challenging to apply a measurement tool that can adequately represent the progress and changes achieved over the eight years, especially since I had to alter my original plans due to COVID-19. Therefore, my work does not originate from traditional library science or educational research fields; it lies at the intersection of literary studies, sociology of education, art psychology, prison pedagogy, and Romani studies. This is a specialized, empirical study, and in approaching and analyzing it, I have tried to review the theoretical and methodological background of developmental bibliotherapy, as well as its interdisciplinary connections.

The research aims to be both exploratory and descriptive. I seek to explore and bring closer the relationship between bibliotherapy and the correctional system, as well as between bibliotherapy and inmates. I then aim to analyze and present the cases, individuals, and phenomena observed, and to showcase the results of the eight years of work experienced at the institution through case studies and interviews. Over the years, I have written an award-winning OTDK (National Scientific Students' Associations Conference) paper, a thesis, and numerous studies based on my experiences in prison, which I have listed in detail in the References section.

The methodology is closest to action research, a research method aimed at solving practical problems through the combined application of research and action. In action research, the researchers are not merely observers but actively participate in the process and collaborate with community members or participants. Action research is particularly useful in fields like education, community development, or workplace improvement, where the goal is not only to expand knowledge but also to achieve concrete changes.

My findings confirm the legitimacy of integrating bibliotherapy into the correctional system, particularly for juveniles, whose personalities are somewhat easier to reshape. Many of the goals outlined by myself and in the literature were achieved, such as fostering tolerance and empathy, sparking interest, and improving communication skills. However, my effort to promote reading was not fully realized, as many of the participants first need to overcome functional illiteracy, which is a much more complex challenge. This is difficult to address within the framework of a bibliotherapy session. However, if a participant becomes sufficiently motivated during the program, they may develop a desire to improve themselves in this area as well or seek external assistance for their development.

A critical point is the extent and duration of the impact of the new perspectives introduced during the sessions on the participants' personalities, which depends on numerous factors. These include the type of session, the individual characteristics of the participants, and how well they integrate the acquired knowledge and experiences into their daily lives.

I aimed to ensure that the sessions encouraged deeper, reflective work among participants and provided opportunities for processing their own experiences, thereby striving for a more lasting impact. To reinforce this effect, the sessions were interactive and offered practical methods for applying new perspectives, thus better supporting the participants' personality changes. Active participation and practical application can be key to achieving lasting effects.

The question of time is also important: Immediate impacts are often observed right after the sessions, especially when participants leave with enthusiasm and new insights. This happened

relatively frequently, with these new effects accompanying the inmates back to their cells, where they could partially share them with their cellmates.

The establishment and consolidation of new habits typically require several weeks or months of continuous practice. The perspectives introduced during the sessions often become part of the personality during this period. These changes were observed in group members who were able to participate in the sessions for at least six months without significant interruptions.

New perspectives that successfully integrate into participants' lives and personalities can last for years. However, if these new perspectives are not supported by further experiences or consciously practiced, their impact may fade over time.

I believe that bibliotherapy, like many other art and sociotherapy methods, could play a significant role in the prison system. There is also a clear demand for such educational and developmental programs in other institutions that care for individuals in special life situations, such as social care homes.