

Pioneering Emotional Well-being through Books European Case Studies

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of a practice-based model of two pan-European bibliotherapy initiatives, “Libraries of Emotions” (Creative Europe) and “Bookpower” (Erasmus+), which integrated bibliotherapeutic practices into public libraries across seven countries. Against the backdrop of a mental health crisis and the “affective turn” in library science, these projects utilized the novel “Key Emotion Indicator”(KEI)© to classify literature by emotional resonance rather than subject matter. Drawing on Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading, Bandura’s social cognitive theory, and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, the study analyzes data from over 160 participants. Self-reported findings show high levels of satisfaction and positive emotional responses (96%), suggesting that when public libraries operate as “therapeutic landscapes” using affective metadata and mediated group interaction, they may contribute to emotional literacy, social cohesion, and individual resilience.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, public libraries, emotional literacy, social prescribing, affective metadata, European cultural policy

Introduction

In an era where mental health and emotional well-being have become critical public health concerns, the role of cultural institutions is being rapidly reimagined. European public libraries, historically viewed as repositories of information, are increasingly positioning themselves as “social infrastructures” capable of addressing the isolation and anxiety prevalent in the post-pandemic landscape. This shift aligns with the broader “affective turn” in the humanities, which recognizes that the value of a text lies not only in its informational content but in the emotional transaction it facilitates between reader and world.

This paper presents the findings from two groundbreaking projects, “Libraries of Emotions” (supported by Creative Europe) and “Bookpower” (supported by Erasmus+), led by the literary agency Love for Livres in consortium with partners such as Bibliothèques Sans Frontières and Public Libraries 2030. Spanning France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Slovenia, and Lithuania, these initiatives represent a significant effort to operationalize bibliotherapy within the public sphere.

Bibliotherapy, understood broadly as the intentional use of reading to support emotional, psychological, or personal development, has a long and diverse history (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012). More recently, practitioners and researchers have explored its application beyond clinical contexts, notably within educational institutions and public libraries (Brewster, 2014; Mazza, 2022). In these settings, bibliotherapy is not positioned as treatment,

but as a preventive, reflective, and relational practice, offering individuals tools to articulate emotions, make meaning of experiences, and reconnect with themselves and others through literature.

By moving beyond clinical settings and integrating therapeutic reading into the daily life of the library, these projects propose a *scalable model for “social prescribing,”* where literature serves as a low-cost, high-impact intervention for community resilience.

Theoretical frameworks: a non-clinical, preventive model of bibliotherapy

To understand the mechanisms driving the success of these interventions, it is necessary to situate the project methodologies within established theoretical discourse. The “Libraries of Emotions” model is not merely a reading program; it is an application of three distinct psychological and pedagogical theories.

The transactional theory of reading

The project's core innovation—classifying books by emotion—is grounded in Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading response. Rosenblatt distinguishes between the “efferent” stance (reading for information to carry away) and the “aesthetic” stance (reading for the lived experience during the reading event). Traditional library catalogs (Dewey Decimal, LCSH) are designed for efferent retrieval. In contrast, the “Libraries of Emotions” validates the aesthetic stance, acknowledging that for a reader seeking comfort or catharsis, the emotional quality of the text is its most relevant attribute. This theoretical lens supports the project's use of “affective metadata” to help users navigate collections based on their internal states rather than external topics.

This emphasis on emotional literacy echoes research highlighting literature's capacity to foster identification, normalisation, and self-compassion (du Plock, 2005; Chavis, 2011). Importantly, the projects do not promote reading as a solution to emotional distress, but as a *space of encounter and reflection.*

Social cognitive theory and modeling

The “Bookpower” project, which focused on women's empowerment and vulnerable youth, draws heavily on Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Bandura posits that learning and behavioral change often occur vicariously through observing models. In bibliotherapy, fictional characters serve as symbolic models. When participants read narratives of protagonists overcoming adversity, they engage in a process of identification that enhances their own self-efficacy—the belief in their ability to exert control over their own functioning and events that affect their lives.

Sociocultural theory and mediated meaning

Finally, the group workshops utilized Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, specifically the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky argued that higher mental functions appear first on the social level before being internalized. In the context of the

“Libraries of Emotions,” the librarian or bibliotherapist acts as the mediator. Many participants possess the raw feeling of an emotion but lack the vocabulary to articulate it (emotional granularity). Through the “dialogic reading” of the group session, the facilitator provides the scaffolding necessary for participants to process complex emotions, transforming a solitary reading experience into a communal act of meaning-making.

Program structure and implementation

The implementation of the projects relied on a multi-dimensional approach that combined digital innovation, spatial redesign, and professional training.

Digital Innovation: the Key Emotion Indicator (KEI)©

A central challenge in bibliotherapy is the “discovery problem:” how does a reader find a book that matches their emotional need? Traditional cataloging standards (MARC records) rarely capture the “mood” or “tone” of a book. To address this, Love for Livres developed the Key Emotion Indicator (KEI)©, a search engine and classification system based on five basic emotions: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, Surprise and Love. This tool introduces “affective access points” into the library catalog, allowing users to search for materials that offer specific emotional resonance—whether they are seeking to mirror their current state (mood congruency) or alter it (mood repair).

The *Library* as a therapeutic landscape

Physically, participating libraries in cities such as Lodz, Kranj, and Anderlecht created dedicated “Emotions Corners.” Drawing on the concept of “therapeutic landscapes”—environments designed to promote healing—these spaces were distinct from high-traffic areas. They featured comfortable seating and face-out book displays organized by emotion icons rather than call numbers. This spatial reorganization signaled to patrons that the library is a “holding environment” safe for emotional exploration, distinct from the transactional nature of the circulation desk.

Professional development

Crucially, the program addressed the “competency gap” in librarianship regarding mental health. A comprehensive training program was deployed to equip librarians not as therapists, but as facilitators of bibliotherapeutic experiences. The curriculum covered the neuroscience of reading, group dynamics, and trauma-informed practices, ensuring staff could manage the delicate boundary between cultural mediation and psychological support.

Methodology of the intervention

The bibliotherapy sessions followed a structured protocol designed to maximize safety and engagement. Each session opened with “ice-breaking” activities to establish psychological safety, followed by the reading of short, high-resonance texts selected for their ambiguity and interpretative openness.

The text selection criteria were rigorous: materials had to demonstrate high literary quality while remaining accessible to diverse literacy levels. Following the reading, facilitators guided a discussion using open-ended prompts derived from the Vygotskian approach, encouraging participants to project their feelings onto the characters (the “third object” technique) before sharing personal reflections. This method allows for “safe rehearsal” of emotion; discussing a character's grief is often safer than discussing one's own, yet it yields similar therapeutic re-lease.

Cross-cultural adaptation was a vital component. While the core methodology remained consistent, reading lists were localized to reflect the literary heritage of each partner country (e.g., specific Polish or Slovenian authors), ensuring cultural relevance.

Librarians and facilitators receive training covering:

- bibliotherapy principles and history,
- emotional literacy and group dynamics,
- ethical boundaries and referral protocols,
- trauma-informed awareness.

Clear limits are communicated to participants: bibliotherapy sessions do not replace psychological care, and facilitators are not acting as therapists. This ethical clarity is crucial in public settings where audiences are diverse and vulnerabilities may vary.

Results and impact analysis

Data collected from over 160 participants across the seven partner countries provides strong indications of perceived impact of this model. The evaluation utilized a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative feedback.

Quantitative outcomes

The data indicates a high degree of participant satisfaction and emotional engagement:

- 95% of participants reported that the sessions met or exceeded their expectations.
- 96% experienced positive emotional responses, suggesting an alignment between KEI categorization and participants reported emotional experience.
- 87% expressed a desire to attend future sessions, indicating high retention potential.
- Notably, 46% of participants reported gaining a new perspective on the library, viewing it not just as a place for books, but as a space for self-healing.

Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis of participant feedback highlights three primary benefits:

Emotional granularity: Participants frequently reported an improved ability to name and distinguish their emotions. “I found words for what I was feeling” was a recurring sentiment, supporting the theory that literary vocabulary enhances emotional regulation.

Social connection: In line with findings on shared reading groups, the sessions successfully reduced feelings of isolation. The shared focus on a text allowed for deep connection without the pressure of direct eye contact or forced intimacy.

Resilience through modeling: participants often cited characters who survived adversity as sources of inspiration, directly confirming Bandura’s theory of symbolic modeling.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, including reliance on self-reported data, the absence of a control group, and cultural variability across implementation sites. These limitations, however, are consistent with the exploratory and practice-based nature of the projects.

Discussion and Strategic Implications

The findings from the “Libraries of Emotions” and “Bookpower” projects suggest that public libraries are underutilized assets in the public health landscape. By systematizing bibliotherapy, these projects demonstrate that libraries can function as effective nodes in “social prescribing” networks—pathways where health professionals refer patients to non-clinical community activities to support well-being.

The “Key Emotion Indicator” (KEI) represents an example of an innovative infrastructure within the landscape of information science. It challenges the neutrality of traditional cataloging by introducing affect as a legitimate organizing principle. This moves the library from a “warehouse of books” to a user-centered service model that responds to the “affective labor” required in modern communities.

However, challenges remain. The pilot highlighted the need for standardized training to ensure librarians feel confident in their role. There is also a need for longitudinal research to track the durability of these emotional gains over time. Besides, implementing bibliotherapy in public libraries raises questions about:

- the boundary between culture and care,
- institutional legitimacy,
- resource allocation and staff training,
- and the risk of instrumentalising literature for well-being outcomes.

Conclusion

The “Libraries of Emotions” and “Bookpower” initiatives provide compelling evidence that bibliotherapy, when supported by digital innovation and theoretical rigor, is a viable and potent service for European public libraries. By anchoring their practice notably in the theories of Rosenblatt, Bandura, and Vygotsky, these projects have transformed the library into a laboratory for emotional resilience. As Europe faces ongoing social and mental health challenges, the integration of bibliotherapy into public infrastructure offers a scalable, democratic, and deeply human solution. The library of the future will likely be defined not just by the collections it holds, but by the emotional well-being it upholds.

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APPENDIX

Example of one readlist provided throughout the project:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 13 Reasons Why, Jay Ashler (Anderlecht) 2. The Last Tree on Earth, Małgorzata Kur (Lodz) 3. Gremlini mi v tri krasne, Konc Lorenzutti, Nataša (Kranj) 4. Hana, Mornštajnová, Alena (Kranj) 5. Prikriti plameni, Celeste NG (Kranj) - English title : little fires everywhere 6. Telefon v vetru, Laura Imai Messina (Kranj) - English title: The Phone Booth at the Edge of the World) 			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. De si beaux cheveux, Gwladys Constant (Anderlecht) 12. Ma réputation, Aymon, Gaël (Anderlecht) 13. Connexions dangereuses, Sarah Cohen Scail (Anderlecht) 14. Tu es si belle, Eva Kavian (Anderlecht) 15. Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul, J.Canfield (Kaunas) 	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Raztrgajno nebo, Paola Gioardano (Kranj) - English title: Let's tear up the Sky 8. Pod snegom, Soukupová Petra (Kranj) - English title: Under the snow 9. Karantena Rim, Janko Petrovec (Kranj) 10. Aristotle and Dante discover the secrets of the universe, B.Alire Saenz (Lodz) 			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. Kūrėjo kelias, Julia Cameron (Kaunas) 17. Rytų vėl patekės saulė, Inga Juodkūnė (Kaunas) 18. Vienos epochos liudijimas, Emilijos dienoraštis 1942-2015 m (Kaunas) 19. Apie rašymą. Kaip išlaisvinti vidinį rašytoją, Natalie Goldberg (Kaunas) 20. Vidinis gyvenimas, Christophe André (Kaunas) 	