

Biblio/Poetry Therapy: Mitigating Stress and Enhancing Creativity among Teachers in Croatia

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Abstract

Worldwide, stress and burnout persist as significant challenges for teachers, contributing to feelings of anxiety and depression. Burnout can have detrimental effects on teachers' health and is a known risk factor for diminished physical and mental well-being. Understanding the prevalence and factors associated with stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression among educators is crucial for addressing this pressing public health issue. Kyriacou (2001) identifies seven common sources of stress encountered by teachers: students with negative attitudes towards school and lacking motivation, disruptive behaviour and general classroom management issues, rapid changes in curriculum and organizational structures, unfavourable working conditions, including issues related to promotions, time constraints, conflicts with colleagues and parents and a sense of undervaluation within society. Taking into consideration these prevalent stressors, I have developed as a part of my CAPF (certified applied poetry facilitator) training a series of bibliotherapy and poetry therapy interactive workshops specifically for Croatian language teachers in primary and secondary schools. These workshops focus on mindfulness, navigating transitions, fostering creativity, promoting a sense of belonging, and enhancing empathy, following the Hynes & Hynes-Berry (2012) four steps bibliotherapy process: recognition (something in material engages the participant, catharsis) examination (intensification of first step, questioning: who, what, when, why, how, how much, wherefore) juxtaposition (putting side by side two impressions or objects to compare and contrast and come up with possible new insight) self-application (genuinely experienced previous steps evaluation – new level of recognition and integration).

Keywords: biblio/poetry therapy process, teacher burnout, stress management, creativity, mindfulness, teacher well-being

Introduction

Biblio/poetry therapy is a therapeutic intervention that integrates literature with guided dialogue to promote emotional growth, self-awareness, and coping strategies (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012). By engaging with carefully selected texts, participants confront authentic emotions, leading to personal insights and the development of creative problem-solving abilities. This process, facilitated by an empathetic and trained practitioner, is tailored to align with the participants' experiences and needs, making it both dynamic and impactful.

Teachers face a variety of occupational stressors, as noted by Kyriacou (2001), students with negative attitudes towards school and lacking motivation, disruptive behaviour and general classroom management issues, rapid changes in curriculum and organizational structures,

unfavourable working conditions, including issues related to promotions, time constraints, conflicts with colleagues and parents and a sense of undervaluation within society.

Chronic stress and burnout not only reduce teachers' effectiveness but also pose significant risks to their physical and mental well-being. To address these pressing challenges, this study investigates the potential of biblio/poetry therapy workshops to alleviate stress and foster resilience among teachers in Croatia.

As part of my CAPF training with my mentor, Nancy Scherlong, I have developed a series of biblio/poetry therapy workshops tailored for primary and secondary school teachers in Croatia. This approach leverages the therapeutic framework of biblio/poetry therapy to address the emotional and professional challenges faced by educators.

Bibliotherapy: A Structured Process

The process of bibliotherapy, as implemented in these workshops, is guided by the framework outlined by Hynes & Hynes-Berry, comprising four key steps:

1. **Recognition:** Participants engage with texts that evoke emotional resonance, facilitating a cathartic experience.
2. **Examination:** Participants reflect on the material through probing questions (e.g., who, what, when, why, and how), fostering deeper exploration.
3. **Juxtaposition:** New insights emerge by comparing and contrasting ideas and impressions within the text.
4. **Self-Application:** Participants integrate these insights into their understanding of themselves and their relationships.

This structured process combines analysis - deconstructing feelings and ideas into components - and synthesis - reorganizing these elements into a new understanding. As Frank (1973) notes, bibliotherapy enhances creative responses to unchangeable realities, improves self-perception, and deepens interpersonal awareness.

Interactive Bibliotherapy

Interactive bibliotherapy forms the foundation of these workshops, fostering growth and healing through guided discussions about selected material. This approach helps participants confront genuine emotions, enabling them to integrate cognitive and emotional responses to literature or audiovisual materials, and their own creative writing.

The facilitator plays a pivotal role in ensuring the effectiveness of this process by:

- Selecting appropriate texts that align with the participants' needs.
- Accurately and empathetically interpreting participants' responses.
- Guiding discussions to elicit meaningful self-reflection and deeper insights.

Through this process, participants engage in a dynamic dialogue with the material, the facilitator, and themselves, leading to new understandings and personal growth.

Workshop Design and Goals

The workshops are structured around four primary goals of biblio/poetry therapy, each linked to desired outcomes that guide the selection of texts and activities:

1. **Shifting Perspectives:** Transitioning from a problem-focused mindset to a solution-oriented approach while fostering creativity.
2. **Emotional Identification:** Recognizing and articulating emotions to enhance self-awareness.
3. **Building Connections:** Fostering a sense of belonging, boosting self-esteem, and improving interpersonal relationships.
4. **Embracing Change:** Navigating life transitions with resilience and adaptability.

These goals are achieved through stimulating mental imagery, surfacing associated emotions, and encouraging participants to explore new connections among attitudes, feelings, and experiences. Personal growth occurs when participants synthesize these connections, creating fresh perceptions that enhance self-understanding and reality orientation. This creative act of synthesizing new insights serves as the foundation of the therapeutic process.

Description of sessions and processes, results and findings

The workshops “Words that Heal”, “Creative Bridges”, and “Transitions” address seven common sources of stress encountered by teachers. They are scheduled during three particularly stressful periods in a teacher's work cycle: the beginning of the school year, the end of the first term/beginning of the second term, and the end of the school year. Texts for each workshop are carefully selected to address specific stress sources and desired outcomes. The workshops focus on themes such as mindfulness, fostering creativity, promoting a sense of belonging, enhancing empathy, and navigating transitions.

The opening workshop of “Words that Heal”, provides a concise overview of biblio/poetry therapy, outlining its origins, key methods, and the bibliotherapeutic process. Participants are introduced to the historical development of this therapeutic approach, which uses literature and writing to promote emotional well-being and personal growth. The session also emphasizes two essential concepts in the process: metaphor and catharsis.

- **Metaphor:** This concept plays a vital role in biblio/poetry therapy as a bridge between abstract emotions and tangible expressions. Through metaphor, individuals can articulate feelings and experiences in symbolic terms, fostering insight and new perspectives.

- Catharsis: Central to the healing process, catharsis involves the emotional release that occurs when individuals connect deeply with the literature or their own writing. This release helps reduce emotional tension and promotes psychological clarity.

Together, these concepts highlight how the creative and reflective use of language can support healing and transformation in a safe, guided environment.

During this session, mindfulness is practiced through carefully chosen poems: *Touch* by unknown poet, fosters awareness of the physical sensation of touch, highlighting its importance in grounding us and “Traveler your footprints” by Antonio Machado uses the metaphor of walking to explore a sense of grounding and creating new paths, helping participants reflect on navigating life's elements. This poem is enhancing awareness of the inner landscape and writing about one's life journey deepens self-awareness.

Through these poems, participants deepen self-awareness by exploring their inner landscapes and writing about their life journeys. Reflective writing prompts accompany each poem, effectively helping participants gain new insights, become aware of surfacing emotions and thoughts, and process these through self-reflection by naming their feelings and physical sensations.

The second workshop “Creative Bridges” emphasizes promoting a sense of belonging and enhancing empathy. Key poems and exercises include: “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver, which inspires participants to find a sense of connection and belonging; “The Secret” by Denise Levertov, which helps teachers rediscover motivation for their work; “Hopeless Cases” by Stjepan Lice, which encourages a shift in perspective when addressing students with negative attitudes. In this workshop, we focus on enhancing empathy and developing active listening skills through carefully designed exercises. Participants engage in activities such as creating emotional daily maps, which provide a visual and reflective way to navigate the fluctuating “sea of emotions.” These maps help participants recognize and articulate their feelings while fostering a deeper understanding of others' emotional experiences. This activity demonstrates how naming emotions fosters calmness and emotional balance.

The active listening exercises emphasize attentiveness, reflection, and validation, enabling participants to practice truly hearing and connecting with others. This approach not only strengthens empathy but also builds more meaningful and supportive communication skills.

The third workshop “Transitions” is based on the Bridges' transition model (Ending, Transition, New Beginning). Each phase is examined and illustrated by chosen texts addressing the key emotions during each phase.

I. Ending, Losing, and Letting Go

(Key emotions: denial, fear, shock, delusion)

This phase highlights that every new beginning starts with an ending; change is triggered by something as captured in poems “Wake Up” and “Wind” by Adam Zagajewski. “Yellow Tulip” by George Swede representing life's struggles, daily efforts, and persistence. “Reminders for

the Advanced Soul” by Richard Bach the focus is on motivation to change, empowering the reader to inspire and provoke action.

II. Neutral Zone

(Key emotions: conflict, resistance, aimless energy, redirection, adjustment)

This transitional phase is explored through Joy Harjo’s “Perhaps the World Ends Here”, which symbolizes life’s conflicts and the potential for renewal and redirection.

III. New Beginning

(Key emotions: hope, relief, doubt, enthusiasm, stress, anxiety)

Poems such as Rosemerry Wahtola Trotter’s “Let Awake Be Awake” encourage embracing change, while John O’Donohue’s “For a New Beginning” and “For the Traveler” emphasize optimism, courage, and persistence. These texts inspire participants to view each day as an opportunity for growth.

This series of workshops effectively addresses the main sources of stress among the teachers and through chosen texts and prompts achieving the following outcomes:

Main sources of stress	Workshops outcomes
Students with negative attitudes towards school and lacking motivation	Shifting from a problem-focused mindset to a solution-oriented approach; unlocking a successful classroom: the secrets of great teacher
Disruptive behaviour and general classroom management issues Rapid changes in curriculum and organizational structures	Identifying emotions and feelings; active listening Embracing change: navigating life's transitions
Unfavourable working conditions, including issues related to promotions; time constraints	Mindfulness, motivation, fostering creativity
Conflicts with colleagues and parents	Identifying emotions and feelings; active listening
A sense of undervaluation within society	Fostering a sense of belonging, boosting self-esteem, and enhancing self-awareness

Impact and Testimonials

This series of workshops has been conducted in 18 schools across Croatia so far, involving a total of 527 teachers. Post-workshop feedback and evaluations consistently underscore the efficacy of biblio/poetry therapy in mitigating stress and addressing burnout among educators. Participants reported that this therapeutic approach was entirely new to them and expressed a strong appreciation for its focus on their emotional challenges, which are often overlooked in professional development programs. The workshops facilitated reflective writing and guided discussions, enabling participants to gain deeper insights and develop innovative coping mechanisms to address work-related stressors. Quantitative results revealed that 99% of participants reported an improvement in their emotional state following the sessions, 90% indicated increased self-awareness, and 85% affirmed their ability to apply the methods in their daily professional practice.

The workshops have been shown to improve self-esteem and morale, encouraging participants to approach themselves with kindness, embrace personal growth, and navigate life's difficulties with creativity and resilience. By fostering a realistic and compassionate relationship with both themselves and the world around them, teachers find themselves better equipped to respond to challenges and embrace the opportunities inherent in their profession.

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