

## **School Libraries and Bibliotherapeutic Services for Vulnerable Children**

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### **Abstract**

*Bibliotherapy entails the use of literature to support the emotional, social and psychological well-being of individuals and has become a veritable tool for addressing the needs of vulnerable children through the administration of carefully selected books and other literary forms. Hence, for school libraries to be effective in meeting the bibliotherapeutic needs of vulnerable children, the services of trained professional librarians and therapists are needed. Bibliotherapy services can either be given through self-help reading or as a part of a guided therapeutic process with trained professionals; either way, vulnerable children are assisted through emotional expressions and validations, increased self-awareness and self-discovery, empathy and perspective-taking. To successfully implement bibliotherapeutic services in school libraries, trained professionals need to identify vulnerable children, make appropriate referrals, conduct initial and detailed assessments, and develop individualised plan of support. In order to ensure the overall success of any bibliotherapeutic services in any school Library, librarians and library staff need to be trained on bibliotherapy techniques, as this will ensure effectiveness and efficiency in their services, as bibliotherapeutic services in school libraries are indispensable in addressing the needs of vulnerable children.*

**Keywords:** *Bibliotherapeutic services, Emotional support, Librarians, School libraries, Vulnerable children.*

### **Introduction**

School libraries are specialised libraries that are located within basic and post basic educational institutions, primarily serving students and teachers. These libraries house collections of books, periodicals, multimedia resources, and digital materials that support and enhance the educational curriculum. They provide access to a wide range of information, promote reading and literacy, and offer students a place to study, research, and explore their interests (Loertscher & Woolls, 2018). Whereas, bibliotherapy is a form of therapy that utilises books and reading materials as means of promoting emotional and psychological well-being of individuals, bibliotherapeutic services are provided by trained professionals, such as librarians or therapists, who use literature to help individuals cope with various challenges, including emotional issues, mental health concerns, and personal growth. Through carefully selected books, bibliotherapy aims to offer

comfort, guidance, and insight to individuals, fostering self-reflection and facilitating positive changes (Beardsley and Smith, 2020). Addressing the needs of vulnerable children is of utmost importance for several reasons including the fact that these children may come from disadvantaged backgrounds, facing challenges such as poverty, abuse, neglect, or unstable living conditions. In addressing their needs, they should be provided with support and resources that can significantly impact their lives positively and improve their overall well-being (Hynes and Hynes-Berry, 2014).

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. ascertain the concept of vulnerable children
2. find out the factors that predispose children to vulnerability
3. establish the various methods of implementing bibliotherapeutic services in school libraries
4. describe the various types of bibliotherapeutic training and support for library staff

### **Understanding Vulnerable Children**

Vulnerable children refer to individuals under the age of 18 who are at a higher risk of experiencing harm, neglect, or adverse outcomes due to various factors in their lives. These factors can include social, economic, cultural, or environmental circumstances that impact their well-being and development. Identifying and supporting vulnerable children is crucial for ensuring their safety, protection, and overall healthy development. There are different categories of vulnerable children such as children in poverty who face higher risks of inadequate nutrition, limited access to healthcare, substandard education, and exposure to unsafe living conditions (ALA, 2018). According to UNICEF, nearly half of the world's children (approximately 1 billion) live in poverty, with significant implications for their well-being and future opportunities. Also, children in conflict zones are affected by armed conflict with severe risks, including displacement, loss of family members, physical and psychological trauma, lack of access to education and healthcare, and recruitment into armed groups.

The conflicts in countries such as Syria, Yemen, South Sudan and even Nigeria (due to Boko haram incursion) have had a devastating impact on children in these regions. Orphaned and abandoned children who have lost one or both parents or have been abandoned face increased vulnerability due to the loss of family support and care. Without proper care and protection, these children are at risks of exploitation, abuse, and limited access to education and healthcare (ALA, 2019). Children with disabilities with physical, intellectual, sensory, or developmental disabilities often face barriers to full participation in society. They may experience discrimination, limited access to healthcare and education, and social exclusion, making them more vulnerable to neglect, abuse, and marginalisation. Moreover, refugee and migrant children who are forcibly displaced or migrated face

numerous challenges, including separation from their families, exposure to violence and exploitation, limited access to education and healthcare, and legal and social protection gaps. The global refugee crisis has resulted in millions of children being displaced from their homes (ALIA, 2018).

It is important to note that vulnerability can intersect across these categories, and children may face multiple forms of vulnerability simultaneously. School libraries and bibliotherapy play crucial roles in addressing the needs of vulnerable children. These services provide a safe and supportive environment for children to explore literature, develop literacy skills, and access emotional and psychological support. The school library can offer supports through promotion of literacy, fostering a love for reading and improving literacy skills among vulnerable children. Access to a well-stocked library with a wide range of books positively impacts reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and academic achievement (Krashen, 2004). By offering a diverse collection of books, school libraries cater to the varied interests and reading levels of vulnerable children, thereby encouraging them to engage with literature. It also provides emotional support since vulnerable children often face emotional challenges due to their circumstances, such as trauma, loss, or social difficulties (Johnson & Adeyeye, 2023). Bibliotherapy, which is the use of literature to support emotional well-being, can be a valuable tool in addressing these needs.

Moreover, school libraries provide access to books that deal with topics such as grief, bullying, mental health, and diversity. These books serve as mirrors which allows children to find characters who they can relate to, and windows, providing insights into different experiences (Adeyeye, 2014). Through bibliotherapy, vulnerable children can find solace, develop empathy, and gain perspective to cope with their own challenges (Bosch, 2012). For many vulnerable children, school libraries offer a safe and welcoming space where they feel included, respected, and supported just as they provide an environment free from judgment, where vulnerable children can explore their interests, engage in independent learning, and seek assistance from librarians (Williams, et al. 2011). The presence of caring library staff who provide guidance and encouragement contributes to the emotional well-being and sense of belonging for vulnerable children (Rogers, 2017).

In today's digital age, school libraries play vital roles in bridging the digital divide among vulnerable children by providing access to computers, internet connectivity, and digital resources that are often limited or inaccessible at home. By offering equal access to technology and digital literacy programmes, school libraries empower vulnerable children to develop essential skills for the 21st century and overcome barriers to educational success (Lance & Kachel, 2018). More so, school libraries of the digital age provide support for vulnerable children with diverse needs by striving to accommodate the unique needs of all children, including those with disabilities or special requirements. They offer accessible resources, such as large print books, audiobooks, and assistive technologies, to

ensure that children with visual impairments, learning disabilities, or other challenges can access information and participate fully in the library's offerings. Additionally, school libraries often collaborate with special education teachers and other professionals to develop inclusive programmes and services that cater to the specific needs of diverse learners, fostering a sense of belonging and equal opportunity. (Hines, et al. 2020)

Library staff play a crucial role in assisting vulnerable children by providing them with access to resources, information, and support. Library staff can ensure that libraries have a diverse range of materials and resources suitable for vulnerable children, including books, audio-books, e-books, educational games, and multimedia materials. They curate collections that reflect the needs and interests of vulnerable children, such as books on resilience, mental health, diversity, and social issues (Adeyeye, 2022). Library staff can also offer personalised reading recommendations based on the interests, reading levels, and needs of vulnerable children and engage with the children to understand their preferences and suggest appropriate materials that can support their emotional well-being, educational development, and personal growth (CILIP, 2019).

Furthermore, library staff can provide guidance and instruction to vulnerable children on how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively and also teach them critical thinking skills, digital literacy, and safe internet practices, thereby enabling them to navigate the online world responsibly and make informed decisions. The library staff can assist vulnerable children with their homework and school assignments by providing guidance, access to reference materials, and help them develop effective study skills. This support can be particularly valuable for children who lack access to educational resources at home. Programmes such as workshops and events specifically designed for vulnerable children can be organised and these may include storytelling sessions, book clubs, creative writing workshops, art and craft activities, and educational sessions on various topics. Such programmes can foster a sense of belonging, social interaction, and learning opportunities for vulnerable children. Organisation of outreaches with community organisations, schools, social services, and development partners with other stakeholders to identify and reach vulnerable children who may not have regular access to library services are part of services which the library staff can offer to vulnerable children. By establishing partnerships and collaborations, library staff can extend their support beyond the library walls and connect vulnerable children with necessary resources and support networks (Hines, et al (2020).

Bibliotherapy refers to the use of books and reading materials as therapeutic tools to promote emotional, psychological, and cognitive development. It involves the intentional selection and utilisation of books that address specific issues or challenges faced by individuals (Adeyeye and Ogunwuyi, 2021). By engaging in literature, individuals, including vulnerable children, can explore and understand their own feelings, thoughts, and experiences, and develop coping strategies and

problem-solving skills. Bibliotherapy can be implemented in various settings, such as schools, libraries, and counseling or therapy sessions. The relevance of bibliotherapy in the context of vulnerable children is significant as it help them in coping and overcoming the various challenges being faced by them. Bibliotherapy offers a non-threatening and accessible way for these children to explore their emotions, gain insights into their experiences, and develop resilience (Gallo, et al, 2018).

Through carefully selected books, vulnerable children can encounter characters who face similar challenges and find ways to overcome them. They can identify with the characters, empathize with their struggles, and gain a sense of validation and understanding (Adeyeye and Oboh, 2022). Bibliotherapy can provide a safe space for children to express their emotions, ask questions, and engage in discussions with trusted adults or peers as it provides a starting point for therapeutic interventions, facilitating conversations and reflections that promote healing and growth (Ray et al., 2019). Studies have shown that bibliotherapy interventions can improve emotional well-being, self-esteem, empathy, and problem-solving skills in children and adolescents (McClain et al., 2020); as well as enhance reading comprehension, vocabulary, and academic achievement (Scheinfeld et al., 2020). Additionally, bibliotherapy has been found to be a cost-effective and accessible intervention, particularly when combined with guidance from trained professionals (Gallo et al., 2018). Integrating bibliotherapy into school library services offers numerous benefits to vulnerable children. By incorporating bibliotherapy into school libraries, educators and librarians can create supportive and nurturing environments that promote vulnerable children's well-being and personal growth (Fitzgibbons & Richardson, 2007).

Bibliotherapy can be implemented through self-help reading or as part of a guided therapeutic process with a trained professional. Some ways in which bibliotherapy can contribute to emotional well-being and resilience are: through emotional expression and validation - reading about characters or situations that resonate with individuals' own experiences can provide a sense of validation and help individuals to recognise and articulate their emotions (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2014). It offers a safe and non-judgmental space to explore and express complex feelings, which can be cathartic and contribute to emotional release and relief, thereby offering increased self-awareness including engaging with literature which can foster self-reflection and enhance self-awareness. By identifying with characters, readers can gain insights into their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. This process of self-discovery can lead to a better understanding of individuals' strengths, and areas for growth, ultimately promoting emotional well-being just as it enables empathy and perspective-taking in the sense that reading exposes individuals to diverse perspectives, cultures, and life experiences. This exposure cultivates empathy and understanding towards others, which in turn can enhance emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships.

Developing empathy can contribute to resilience by fostering compassion, tolerance, and the ability to navigate challenging social situations effectively (Adeyeye & Aramide, 2021) which could lead to the provision of coping strategies and problem-solving skills because bibliotherapeutic books often feature characters who face adversity, overcome challenges, and develop coping strategies (Baskin & Harris, 2015). By reading about their experiences, individuals can gain inspiration and learn new ways to handle their own difficulties (Adeyeye and Aramide, 2021).

Bibliotherapy can provide vulnerable children with a repertoire of coping skills, problem-solving techniques, and resilience-building strategies that they can apply in their own lives (Baskin & Harris, 2015). This process provides stress reduction and relaxation since reading can serve as a form of relaxation and stress reduction. Immersing vulnerable children in a captivating book can provide an escape from daily stressors and offer a respite from negative emotions. This mental break can help restore emotional balance, recharge energy, and improve overall well-being of these vulnerable children. Integrating bibliotherapy can enhance their reading skills and engagement. When vulnerable children are emotionally involved in the content they are reading, they are more likely to develop a love for reading and become motivated to improve their literacy skills (Georgiou, 2018). School library services can incorporate books that address common life transitions, such as starting a new school, dealing with loss, or facing friendship challenges. These books can provide guidance, reassurance, and practical advice, helping students navigate these transitions more effectively (Baskin & Harris, 2015). By reading about characters who face and conquer challenges, vulnerable children can draw inspiration and learn valuable life lessons (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2014).

### **Implementing Bibliotherapeutic Services in School Libraries**

Assessing the needs of vulnerable children is a critical process that requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach. It involves gathering information from various sources, including the child, their caregivers, and professionals working with the child. The first step is to identify vulnerable children who may require support. This can be done through various channels, such as teachers, healthcare providers, social workers, and community organisations. Once identified, appropriate referrals can be made to relevant professionals or agencies (World Health Organization, 2019). Then, an initial assessment is conducted to gain a broad understanding of the children's situation and needs which usually involve gathering relevant information through interviews, questionnaires, and observations. It may cover areas such as the children's physical health, emotional well-being, family dynamics, educational needs, and social support systems (Department for Education, 2018).

Collaboration among professionals involved in the child's life is crucial to ensure a holistic assessment. This may include professionals from education, health, social services, and mental health sectors. Sharing relevant information, with

appropriate consent, helps build a comprehensive picture of the child's needs and facilitates coordinated support (Department for Education, 2018). Based on the initial assessment, further in-depth assessments may be required to explore specific areas of concern. This may involve specialized assessments by professionals such as psychologists, speech and language therapists, or occupational therapists. These assessments provide more detailed information about the child's strengths, challenges, and specific support requirements (Department for Education, 2018). After gathering all the assessment information, professionals involved in the child's care analyze and evaluate the findings. This includes identifying the child's primary needs, strengths, and risks, as well as considering the impact of their environment on their well-being (World Health Organization, 2019). Based on the assessment findings, professionals collaborate with the child, their caregivers, and other relevant stakeholders to develop an individualized plan of support. This plan outlines specific goals, strategies, and interventions to address the child's identified needs and promote their well-being (Department for Education, 2018). The needs of vulnerable children may change over time, so it is important to conduct regular reviews and monitoring. This ensures that the support provided remains relevant, effective, and responsive to the child's evolving needs (World Health Organization, 2019).

Bibliotherapy is an effective therapeutic approach that involves using books and other reading materials to support individuals in dealing with emotional, behavioral, and psychological challenges (Adeyeye and Oyewusi, 2017). When selecting appropriate bibliotherapy materials, it is important to consider several key strategies. Here are some strategies to consider: Identify the children's needs - begin by understanding the specific needs and concerns of these vulnerable children. Consider their age, interests, cognitive level, and the specific issue they are facing. This will help narrow down the scope and select materials that are relevant and meaningful for them (McClain et al, 2020). Research evidence-based resources - books and reading materials that have been recommended or reviewed by professionals in the field should be used. Seek out resources that have empirical evidence supporting their efficacy and positive outcomes. Ensure that the bibliotherapy materials selected represent diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences.

It is important to choose books that reflect the identities and perspectives of the vulnerable children as this promotes inclusivity and helps individuals relate to the characters and situations in the materials (Adeyeye and Oyewusi, 2017). Then evaluate the readability level of the books or reading materials to ensure they are suitable for them (Ray et al, 2019). Consider factors such as language complexity, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Choose materials that are age-appropriate and match the reading skills of these young ones. Read and evaluate the content - carefully review the content of the books or reading materials before recommending them. Assess whether the information provided is accurate, well-researched, and aligned with evidence-based practices. Ensure that the content is presented in a sensitive and non-stigmatizing manner. Seek recommendations and

reviews - consult professionals, such as therapists, counselors, or librarians, who have experience with bibliotherapy (McClain et al, 2020). Valuable insights and recommendations may be offered based on their expertise. Additionally, read reviews from trusted sources, such as educational websites, professional journals, or trusted book review platforms, to gather opinions and perspectives on the materials. Tailor materials to individual needs - consider the unique circumstances and preferences of these vulnerable children. Some may respond better to fictional stories, while others may benefit from non-fiction self-help books or workbooks. Adapt the selection to their specific needs and learning styles (Reynolds, 2018).

### **Training and Support for Library Staff**

Training library staff on bibliotherapy techniques is of paramount importance in enhancing the effectiveness and impact of library services. Bibliotherapy has gained recognition as a powerful approach to support individuals' mental health and well-being (Crawford & Mathews, 2021). By providing training in bibliotherapy, library staff can effectively engage with vulnerable children, promote emotional well-being, and contribute to community health. Mental health is a significant concern in today's society. Library staff, through their training in bibliotherapy, can identify and address mental health needs within their communities (Scheinfeld et al, 2020). They can recommend books and reading materials that offer support, guidance, and solace to individuals struggling with various mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, or grief. Training library staff in bibliotherapy techniques enhances their ability to empathize with vulnerable children and understand their emotional needs. By recommending books that reflect diverse experiences, emotions, and challenges, library staff can foster empathy and emotional intelligence among these children, encouraging them to develop a deeper understanding of their own emotions and those of others.

Libraries serve diverse communities with individuals from different backgrounds, cultures, and age groups (Stallard, 2019). Training library staff in bibliotherapy equips them with the knowledge and resources to cater to the specific needs of these populations. Whether it's providing books that address cultural identity, gender issues, or other unique challenges, trained staff can ensure that the library's collection is inclusive and representative of the community it serves. Bibliotherapy can be a catalyst for community engagement and social connection. Library staff trained in bibliotherapy techniques can organize book clubs, reading groups, or discussion sessions centered around specific themes or issues. These activities provide opportunities for vulnerable children to come together, share experiences, and find support, fostering a sense of belonging and connection. Training library staff in bibliotherapy can facilitate collaborations between libraries and mental health professionals. By developing partnerships with local therapists, counselors, or psychologists, library staff can create comprehensive programs that combine professional expertise with the resources available in the



library. This collaboration ensures a holistic approach to mental health support within the community (Todd et al, 2016).

Implementing bibliotherapeutic services in libraries requires specific skills and knowledge to effectively support these vulnerable children in finding therapeutic benefits through literature. Library staff should have a solid understanding of bibliotherapy principles, including its history, theoretical foundations, and different approaches. They should be familiar with the therapeutic potential of literature and how it can be used to support individuals' well-being and personal growth. Library staff should possess strong reader's advisory skills to recommend appropriate books to vulnerable children based on their specific needs and interests. They should be able to engage in effective conversations with them, actively listen to their concerns, and suggest relevant reading materials that offer emotional support, encourage self-reflection, or address specific mental health issues (Wong & Mak, 2022). The library staff should have a basic understanding of mental health issues, including common disorders, symptoms, and treatment approaches. This knowledge will enable them to identify appropriate reading materials and provide relevant resources to children seeking support.

The library staff involved in bibliotherapy should have strong interpersonal skills, including empathy and active listening. They should create a safe and non-judgmental environment for vulnerable children, allowing them to express their feelings and concerns openly (Todd et al, 2016). Active listening skills are crucial for understanding their needs and recommending books that resonate with their experiences. Library staff should be familiar with a wide range of diverse literature, including books that represent diverse voices, cultures, and experiences. This knowledge allows them to recommend books that cater to a diverse readership, ensuring inclusivity and promoting understanding and empathy (Madigan & Munson, 2021). Collaboration and Networking skills are essential for library staff involved in bibliotherapy. They should be able to work with mental health professionals, community organizations, and support groups to enhance the effectiveness of bibliotherapeutic services (Todd et al, 2016).

Building a network of professionals and organisations can facilitate referrals, training opportunities, and sharing of resources. The library staff should engage in ongoing professional development and stay updated on the latest research and best practices related to bibliotherapy. Attending workshops, conferences, and training sessions can help them expand their knowledge and refine their skills, ensuring they provide the most effective bibliotherapeutic services (Rogers, 2017).

Assessing the impact of school libraries and bibliotherapy on vulnerable children is essential to understand their needs, evaluate interventions, and ensure effective support. Surveys and Questionnaires are widely used to gather information about children's experiences, well-being, and perceptions. They can be designed to assess various aspects such as mental health, social support, academic achievement, and exposure to violence or trauma. These tools often utilize rating

scales, Likert scales, or open-ended questions to capture both quantitative and qualitative data (Bryman, 2016). Conducting interviews with vulnerable children allows for more in-depth exploration of their experiences, perspectives, and challenges. Structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews can be used to gather qualitative data, providing rich insights into their lives, emotions, and needs. It is important to use child-friendly and age-appropriate interview techniques to create a safe and comfortable environment for communication (Cohen et al., 2017). Direct observations of vulnerable children in various contexts, such as schools, homes, or community settings, can provide valuable information about their behaviors, interactions, and social functioning. Observations can be supplemented with checklists or coding schemes to capture specific behaviors or indicators of well-being (Cohen et al., 2017).

Standardized assessments are often used to measure specific aspects of children's development, such as cognitive abilities, language skills, or emotional well-being. These assessments provide standardized scores that can be compared to a normative sample, facilitating identification of strengths and areas of concern. It is important to select culturally appropriate and validated assessments when working with vulnerable populations (Bryman, 2016). Focus groups involve gathering a small group of vulnerable children to engage in group discussions on specific topics or issues. This method allows for peer interactions, shared perspectives, and collective understanding of experiences. Focus groups can provide insights into social dynamics, social norms, and common concerns among vulnerable children (Cohen et al., 2017). Participatory methods involve actively involving vulnerable children in the assessment process, allowing them to express their views, participate in decision-making, and contribute to program design or evaluation. Examples include participatory mapping, drawings, or photo elicitation techniques. These methods empower children and ensure their voices are heard (Bryman, 2016). It is important to note that when assessing vulnerable children, ethical considerations and informed consent processes must be carefully followed. Additionally, cultural sensitivity, linguistic accessibility, and trauma-informed approaches should be integrated into the assessment methods and tools used.

## **Conclusion**

School libraries and bibliotherapy are indispensable services in addressing the needs of vulnerable children. They promote literacy, provide emotional support, offer a safe haven, and bridge the digital divide. By recognizing and investing in these valuable resources, the growth, well-being, and academic success of vulnerable children are better supported as it helps provide them with the tools, support, and empowerment necessary to overcome challenges and build a brighter future. Bibliotherapy is a valuable therapeutic approach for vulnerable children. By engaging with carefully selected books, these children can explore their emotions, gain insights, and develop resilience. It is therefore imperative that school libraries offer bibliotherapeutic services as it provides vulnerable children

with a safe and accessible avenue for healing, growth, and development in various domains. However, its relevance lies in its ability to address the unique challenges faced by vulnerable children and support their overall well-being.

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