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Bibliotherapy with Children with Neurodiverse Profiles: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Expressive arts therapy interventions are continuing to gain recognition as a means of healing for individuals with a wide range of diagnoses. Bibliotherapy is a particularly under researched modality of the expressive arts, leaving ample opportunity for future research on both reading and writing interventions. While bibliotherapy may not be a widespread subject of study, preliminary research shows that reading and writing therapies can promote emotional well-being for individuals dealing with mental illness. Children with neurodiverse profiles (NP) are more likely to be diagnosed with psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, than neurotypical children. Although previous research has suggested that bibliotherapy is an effective form of treatment for individuals with these diagnoses, the impact of reading and writing therapies on children with NP is significantly understudied. Given the correlation between NP and mental illness, the positive effects of bibliotherapy for individuals with mental illness could possibly translate to children with NP. However, it is crucial to consider the individual needs and learning styles of individuals with NP, such as their struggles and limitations in reading, writing, language, and processing. This literature review examines relevant research on three topics: the relationship between NP and mental illness, bibliotherapy as treatment for mental illness, and limitations and considerations of reading and writing for children with NP, in order to further understand how bibliotherapy could be used with children with NP.

Keywords: neurodiverse profiles, mental illness, bibliotherapy, reading therapy, poetry therapy
Author Identity Statement: The author identifies as a white woman who has been diagnosed with a specific learning disability (dyslexia).

Bibliotherapy with Children with Neurodiverse Profiles: A Literature Review

Introduction

Children with neurodiverse profiles (NP) are more likely to struggle in the development of literacy skills than neurotypical children. This makes it more difficult to communicate thoughts, feelings, and needs both verbally and through written means (Clendon, 2021). These difficulties have a significant impact not only on a child's academic abilities, but on their social interactions and interpersonal functions. NP have been linked to an increased likelihood of mental illnesses (Nalavany, Carawan & Brown, 2011) and behavioral struggles (Barowsky & Austin, 2013).

The expressive arts therapies have been used in numerous settings with children with a wide range of NP (LDRFA, 2022). The process of creating art allows individuals with complex social and developmental needs the opportunity to work on their social and cognitive skills in a creative way, allowing them to process difficult emotions in a safe and healthy manner (Parvathi, 2020). This form of therapy also allows participants an opportunity to use visual skillsets instead of relying solely on verbal and written means (LDRFA, 2022). The expressive arts therapies rely mainly on a client's willingness to be creative, which allows for some separation from the need to explain one's inner thoughts and feelings with words (LDRFA, 2022). This is why the expressive arts can be used with such a wide range of individuals, as it can be adapted to meet the needs of whoever is participating (LDRFA, 2022).

Bibliotherapy is a subcategory of the expressive therapies in which therapists utilize books, literature, storytelling, and creative writing in individual and group treatment. Bibliotherapy has been researched as a tool in treatment for individuals with a wide range of mental health struggles (Sevinç, 2019). While the amount of research on the expressive arts is

increasing, including how expressive arts interventions have been used with children with NP, the use of bibliotherapy with children with NP is understudied. While there is not significant research on the effectiveness of this form of treatment for this population, preliminary findings suggest that bibliotherapy interventions could make a positive impact on individuals with mental illness, helping to treat a number of psychiatric symptoms including depression, anxiety, and grief and trauma responses (Sevinç, 2019). Given that children with NP are more likely to have mental illness, there is potential that bibliotherapy interventions could benefit children with NP.

Methods

Research was collected using Lesley University's library database. All articles were retrieved either directly through the database or through other articles used in this review. Sources were limited to peer reviewed articles, academic publications, and websites of established organizations. Sources came from disciplines beyond the expressive arts, mental health, and psychology, such as educational research regarding language and cognition, to address ways in which interventions can be adapted for those with NP. Research used in this thesis focused on studies and reviews concerning characteristics and challenges of individuals with specific neurodiverse profiles, depictions and experiences of mental illness, and conceptualization of and engagement with bibliotherapy interventions. Main search terms included: neurodiversity in children, autism and mental illness, learning disabilities and mental illness, reading and mental health, writing and mental health, and bibliotherapy and mental health. References were organized in folders based on the three topics within this thesis, neurodiversity and mental illness, bibliotherapy and mental illness, and reading and writing considerations for individuals who are neurodiverse.

Literature Review

This thesis will delve into three separate but related topics in order to consider how bibliotherapy may be beneficial for children with NP. These topics are: the prevalence of mental illness in children with NP; the benefits of bibliotherapy for individuals with mental illness; and the challenges of reading and writing for children with NP. Exploring these three topics will help formulate an understanding of the potential benefits of bibliotherapy for children with NP and how to best meet their individual needs based on knowledge of their reading and writing struggles. In understanding how bibliotherapy can be used with children with NP, therapists and educators may gain greater insight into a form of treatment for this population. This knowledge may also provide this population with an opportunity to turn an immense struggle, that of language and verbal and written communication, into a source of confidence and happiness.

Background of Neurodiverse Profiles: Definition and Prevalence

NP include a wide range of diagnoses such as specific learning disabilities like dyslexia or dyscalculia and neurodevelopmental or neurological disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Some diagnoses, such as ADHD and specific learning disabilities, are commonly comorbid (Hendren et al., 2018). According to The National Center for Learning Disabilities, NP occur in approximately one in five children, although only a small percentage of those children receive proper specialized education that meets their needs (NCLD, 2019). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 17% of children in the United States were diagnosed with some sort of "developmental disability," including learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and autism, between 2009 and 2017 (Zablotsky et al., 2019).

Background of Neurodiverse Profiles: Biologic and Environmental Causes

While there is no single known cause of NP, research has shown that there are numerous biological and environmental factors to consider that influence certain types of NP such as learning disabilities, ASD and ADHD (NCLD, 2014). Specific learning disabilities, while not strictly genetic, do have a genetic component, as they may be common among numerous members of a single family. Both prenatal and postnatal traumas, such as substance use during pregnancy or deprivation of nourishment, may lead to the development of learning disabilities (NCLD, 2014). Researchers have also linked some cases to neuropsychological dysfunction, stress hormones, and disturbances in the central nervous system (Barowsky & Austin, 2013).

While specific learning disabilities are not the same as developmental disabilities, such as ASD, the biological factors are similar (NIH, 2022). Although ASD is not strictly caused by genetics, there is a recognized genetic factor in the development of the disorder. Families with one child with ASD are more likely to have another child with the same disorder than other families, and identical twins are likely to both develop ASD if one twin has developed it (NIH, 2022). Inhibited brain development caused by trauma during birth, such as premature delivery, is common among individuals with ASD. A wide range of genetic variations and mutations, starting as early as egg fertilization, are considered related to the development of ASD (NIH, 2022).

Though NP are often considered through a biological scope, there are also numerous environmental factors that exacerbate symptoms. Adverse experiences during numerous stages of both prenatal and postnatal development can "alter the trajectory in an individual's social-emotional, behavioral and learning skills" (Barowsky & Austin, 2013 pg. 3). It is also possible for environmental factors to impact a child's neurological development. For example, cognitive

and language development is likely to be delayed or impeded when a child is maltreated or malnourished. Smithgall (2004) estimated that children who were maltreated were developmentally behind their school grade by 1.5 years, due to delayed verbal and communication skills. Similarly, older adolescents who were continuously maltreated in their childhood were likely to be behind their peers in reading skills by three or four grade levels (Mallet, 2014). Raschle et al. (2011) confirmed the presence of structural differences in the brain of children with dyslexia before and after their reading development. There is also evidence that variations in the central nervous system can compromise learning and emotional abilities (Mangina & Beuzeron, 2009).

Blair (2002) suggested that "rather than pointing toward temperamental nature or environmental nurture… it is more accurate to think of how combined actions of nature and nurture influence propensities toward particular developmental trajectories" (pg. 118). So while both environmental and biological factors exist in the development of NP, it is likely a combination of factors have led to an individual's development (Barowsky & Austin, 2013).

The Relationship Between Neurodiverse Profiles and Mental Health

Individuals with specific learning disabilities (SLD) are more likely to struggle with a wide range of disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia (Nalavany, Carawan & Brown, 2011). According to Strang (2011), psychiatric comorbidities are especially common among children with ASD, affecting nearly 72%. The complex relationship between NP and mental health is crucial to understand, given that struggles in both domains impact educational, social, and emotional performance to an extent greater than the individual parts (Barowsky & Austin, 2013).

Students with NP often have increased levels of stress due to the obstacles they face in understanding and completing academic assignments (Fuller-Thompson, Carroll & Yang, 2017). A failure to achieve academic expectations, accompanied by increased emotional lability perpetuates an adverse bi-directional relationship between the child and the environment in which there is reciprocity in the degree of emotional disability and academic achievement (Barowsky & Austin, 2013). Pollak (2005) suggested that students with dyslexia may experience mental health issues more so than their neurotypical peers because they feel "different," taking longer to understand schoolwork and assignments, causing low self-esteem and negative self-image. These feelings often lead to students comparing themselves to their peers without NP, blaming themselves, and labeling themselves as "stupid" or "incapable" (Fuller-Thompson et al. 2017). This may lead students with NP to give up on assignments or look for an escape, such as dropping out of school.

In addition, children with learning disabilities are more likely to face bullying and peer victimization than neurotypical children (Hendren et al., 2018). While many children with NP have faced adversity in their lives, they may not have learned or implemented coping strategies to help them deal with it effectively (Hagarty & Morgan, 2020). So, not only are children with NP at higher risk of struggling with their mental health, they are less likely to be able to communicate their struggles to their parents, guardians, and educators. The difficulties children with NP face in comprehending and expressing their thoughts and emotions may have a more significant impact on their well-being given the fact that they are already struggling in educational domains (Hendren et al., 2018). Below, the most common mental health challenges faced by children with NP are explored in more detail.

Anxiety

While anxiety is one of the most prominent psychiatric disorders in children, it is especially common in children with NP (Barowsky & Austin, 2013). A study from Strang et al. (2012), which used a sample of 95 children diagnosed with ASD, found that over 90% of participants had either clinical or close to clinical levels of anxiety. Despite a relatively small sample size, this was a significant finding considering that only approximately 24% of the general population reported these levels of anxiety. Hendren et al. (2018) reported that children with reading disorders (RD) often express far greater levels of generalized anxiety than their peers without RD.

In their study focusing on psychiatric comorbidities in children with reading disorders (RD), Grills-Taquechel et al. (2012) found there to be a "bi-directional" relationship between anxiety and reading. This means that "reading problems associated with RD can lead to anxiety as a result of the experience of school failure", while at the same time, "anxiety distracts from learning and interferes with cognitive processes necessary for reading, leading to potential RD" (Hendren et al., 2018, pg. 5). Although school and schoolwork related anxiety and generalized anxiety are closely related and oftentimes comorbid, they are two separate issues (Hendren et al., 2018). However, both forms of anxiety are common experiences for children with RD. While many aspects of mental health are thought to be biologically based, Whitehouse, Spector, & Cherkas (2009) suggest that anxiety in individuals with NP may have psychological origins based on environmental factors. For example, a child with NP who is forced to learn in a traditional classroom setting will likely have higher levels of anxiety than a child with NP who is learning in a special education classroom (Barowsky & Austin, 2013).

Depression and Suicidality

Depression is another widespread issue among children with NP. Strang's et al. (2012) found that 70% of children with ASD reported feelings of depression, which is in contrast to the general population, in which approximately 6% reported the same feelings. Individuals with NP are more likely to experience several depressive symptoms, including low self-esteem or self-hatred, which may result in suicidal ideations (Fuller-Thompson et al., 2017) and self-injurious behaviors (Strang et al., 2012). Developing research suggests that children with NP may have a hindered ability to process emotion, leading to self-deprecating thoughts and actions. In addition, the increased likelihood of children with NP facing negative social experiences, such as bullying, may contribute to an increased likelihood of depression (Hendren et al., 2018).

There is a significant link between individuals with NP and suicidal ideations and attempts. Fuller-Thompson et al. (2017) found that individuals with SLD were more likely to report feelings of suicidality, and were 46% more likely to have attempted suicide than those without SLD. In addition, children with learning disabilities are naturally more likely to have personality traits that are linked to suicidal thoughts and attempts, such as impulsivity, interpersonal conflicts, social withdrawal, and anger management issues (Mazher, 2018).

Specific Mental Disorders

While there is limited information on the prevalence of specific mental disorders, including bipolar disorder and personality disorders, in those with NP, preliminary research suggests a connection. In Barowsky and Austin's study (2013), which used psychological records to determine the co-occurrence of emotional issues among those with learning disabilities, almost all of the 170 participants had a mood disorder, while just under 3% had a diagnosed personality disorder. The latter's low percentage was likely due to the adolescent

population, as most personality disorders are not diagnosed until after the age of 18 (Barowsky & Austin, 2013).

While the information on this comorbidity is limited, researchers have recognized a pattern of learning disabilities in those with schizophrenia (Pearce, 2017). A study from Revheim et al. (2014) found that 70% of adults with schizophrenia met the criteria for a reading disorder. This is significant given that the majority of cases of schizophrenia are not diagnosed until adulthood (Hendren et al., 2018). This means that individuals who had not been formally diagnosed may still meet the criteria for a reading disability. Pearce's research (2017) on learning disabilities and mental health supported this finding, stating that both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are more commonly found in those with learning disabilities than those without. However, Pearce did not specify whether individuals with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder were often later diagnosed with learning disabilities, or if individuals with learning disabilities were later diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Behavioral and Conduct Disorders

Having NP increases the risk for several behavioral issues and conduct disorders. Barowsky and Austin (2013) state that "some researchers report data that suggests that reading problems and behavior problems serve as risk factors for each other" (pg. 3). Children with NP often show signs of disruptive and impulse control issues and conduct disorders, including oppositional defiance disorder (ODD). It is critical to consider that many studies have found that these behavioral issues often develop subsequent to the diagnosis of a learning disability (Hendren et al., 2018). This may be due to the fact that many individuals with learning disabilities have trouble communicating verbally, thus leading them to act out physically. Academic and social frustrations also may lead to feelings of anger and subsequent aggression.

An individual's experiences of neurodiversity can affect all aspects of their life, and these behavioral issues can be "exhibited across both academic and non-academic settings" (Hendren et al., 2018, pg. 5). It is also thought that many adolescents who have been suspended or expelled due to offending behaviors have undiagnosed learning disabilities (Mallett, 2014). Subsequently, adolescents with NP are more likely to drop out of high school or be arrested while still in high school (Mallett, 2014).

Bibliotherapy and Neurodiverse Profiles: Background

Therapists may provide clients with literature and reading materials that reflect the struggles they are facing so as to allow them to feel understood and to better understand their own situations (Sevinç, 2019). Additionally, therapists may lead clients through a wide range of creative writing and poetry interventions, which allow clients to express themselves with written or spoken words in metaphorical or poetic ways (LDRFA, 2022). Bibliotherapy allows for clients to distance themselves from having a direct conversation about their traumas and hardships, while still using language to express themselves (De Vries, 2017). Turning words and conversations into creative interventions allows for the heart of the matter to be addressed, while not forcing individuals to recount difficult memories and retraumatizing them (Sharma, 2019).

Using bibliotherapy as treatment for children with NP is potentially an overlooked topic of research for two main reasons. The first reason is that bibliotherapy is a relatively understudied modality of the expressive arts therapies in general, and the expressive arts therapies are already relatively understudied compared to traditional forms of therapy (Kempler, 2003). Secondly, using bibliotherapy with children who struggle with NP may at first seem counterintuitive and challenging, as the modality calls for the creative use of language, something that is already difficult for this population (Ion, 2021). Not only that, but the idea of

bibliotherapy may seem intimidating to many clients, not just those with NP, as it relies on using language as a form of expression which is not called for in the other expressive arts modalities.

While the use of bibliotherapy with children with NP may be relatively under researched, preliminary studies and literature have provided promising insight into the positive impacts of a wide range of bibliotherapy interventions with children with ASD (Minaabad, 2020), intellectual disabilities (Mehdizadeh & Khosravi, 2018), and ADHD (Sapra, 2019). When bibliotherapy interventions are introduced in understandable and meaningful ways, they may provide children with NP with feelings of mastery and increased self-esteem (LDRFA, 2022). In addition, these interventions can act as a means of verbal or written communication, which may not have been accessible for this population in a non-therapeutic and creative setting (LDRFA, 2022). While bibliotherapy interventions may not be a common form of treatment for children with NP, they are often used with individuals facing a wide range of trauma, emotional disturbances, and mental illnesses (Sevinç, 2019).

Reading Therapy and Mental Illness

Reading therapy, a subcategory of bibliotherapy in which healing is facilitated through literature, storytelling, and other reading materials, can be especially useful in combatting feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness, all of which are common in those with depression (Sevinc, 2019). It is helpful to read material in which clients can relate to their own life and experiences so as to gain a greater understanding of themselves. Literature is also a particularly great way for children and adolescents to learn about experiences beyond their own through diverse characters and settings (Tribe et al, 2021). Books can provide examples of coping mechanisms that empower individuals to analyze, challenge, and replace their negative

thoughts (Mumbauer, 2017). This allows children and adolescents to face their mental health struggles with new insights, leading to better social and educational experiences.

Reading therapy has been found to be effective in a psychiatric hospital (Eisen et al., 2018) and school-based settings (Mumbauer, 2017, Lucas et al., 2019), and has been used in treatment with individuals with a wide range of mental illnesses, (Tribe et al, 2021), including schizophrenia (Bembry, Zentgraf, & Baffour, 2013). Researchers who have looked at the use of reading therapy with people who have mental illness have examined different outcomes including expression, connection, mental health confidence, and hope for the future (Eisen et al., 2018; Lucas et al., 2019; Tribe et al, 2021). Researchers who have conducted these studies have noted the positive impact not only of reading therapy, but of group discussion processes (Bembry, et al, 2013; Lucas et al. 2019; Mumbauer, 2017; Tribe et al, 2021). Lucas et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of the post-intervention discussion for participants, as it allowed them to further process and relate to the material. Furthermore, Tribe et al. (2021) explored how group discussion can further strengthen participant's relationship with a childhood favorite story. Further information on the benefits of reading therapy are explored in more detail below.

Understanding the Self

Eisen et al. (2018) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of a recovery-oriented book club in an inpatient psychiatric hospital. Participants had been diagnosed with a range of mental illnesses including depression, bipolar disorder, and psychotic disorders. Participants engaging in the intervention were asked to choose an autobiography written by someone living with mental illness. After finishing their books, participants engaged in a one-time group in which they discussed their thoughts on the stories and the meaning of recovery. Post-intervention surveys showed that book club participants felt that the group helped them

better understand themselves, and that the intervention was positively impactful for their recovery journey (Eisen et al. 2018).

Similarly, Mumbauer (2017) explored how bibliotherapy can promote mental health literacy in school settings. Mental health literacy can be defined as "knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management, or prevention" (Mumbauer, 2017, pg. 85). Mumbauer (2017) explained that increasing mental health literacy in school-based settings is the first step in recognizing mental health disorders among children and adolescents and providing early interventions and management. When children are able to identify the characteristics of the mental health issues they may be facing, as well as the causes and triggers of their distress, they are more likely to seek and receive help (Mumbauer, 2017). Understanding one's own experiences is crucial to one's well-being, and bibliotherapy may be used to help children and adolescents to do so.

Fostering Social Development

Bembry, Zentgraf, and Baffour (2013) conducted a study that used a group poetry intervention in order to enhance the social skills of individuals with schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a condition that can impair the development of social and occupational skills, so the authors aimed to introduce specific skills through community poetry therapy (Bembry et al. 2013). Participants were between the ages of 25 and 60 and had lived at the state psychiatric facility for between 2 and 10 years. Each patient was in their own stage of treatment, though all of them were looking to enhance their social skills for various personal and therapeutic reasons.

Each week, participants were given short poems that related to the topic of the session, all connecting back to the larger theme of social skills. Each week followed a different theme; self-esteem, responsibility to oneself and one's community, feelings and emotions, understanding

triggers, and conflict resolution. The goal of the group was to encourage participants to express themselves effectively, mirroring the expression of the poetry they were reading. During some weeks, participants were asked to write their own poems in response to the one's they read, then were asked to share them aloud. Researchers viewed the poetry modality as "a catalyst to promote verbalization and interaction," as the intervention was particularly impactful in facilitating expression among group members (Bembry et al, 2013, pg. 77). The authors noted that, given the effectiveness of the intervention, the structure could be used as a model for numerous populations that can be adjusted given the groups individual needs (Bembry et al, 2013).

Instilling Hope

A study conducted by Lucas et al. (2019) aimed to determine whether a bibliotherapy intervention could be effective in instilling hopeful thinking in children in Portugal. The intervention, which was developed and facilitated by a group of psychologists, consisted of a bibliotherapy project that encouraged children to think about their futures with hope. After engaging in a brief warm-up activity, the 113 participating children were read stories with a main character whose age, interests, and aspirations were similar to their own. Characters faced struggles that could be reflected in the lives of the children listening to the stories, allowing the children to think about realistic solutions and hopeful endings for the character. After listening to a story, participants engaged in a guided discussion in which the children talked about the protagonist's situation, which allowed the children to express their own understandings of overcoming obstacles and being hopeful about the future. In looking at pre-assessment and post-assessment measures, children who originally reported low levels of hope in the pre-assessment showed a significant increase in hopeful feelings in the post-assessment (Lucas et al., 2019).

Researchers also noted that they saw the children engaging with the material on a personal and emotional level and identifying with specific characters with interest and enthusiasm.

Hope was a common theme throughout another bibliotherapy-oriented study from Tribe et al. (2021). This study focused not only on how books have the power to support mental health, but how an entire literary and cinematic universe can give hope to people living with severe mental illness. The *Harry Potter* novels, written by J.K Rowling, have previously been noted as a possible tool in mental health recovery due to the numerous depictions of real-life issues brought into a fantasy world (Tribe et al, 2021). The protagonist is faced with numerous traumas and losses throughout his childhood development, while also depicting immense resilience and bravery. The *Harry Potter* universe had previously been used in a number of other studies, including ones focused on adolescent development (Rosegrant, 2009), identity (Gibson, 2007), war-based trauma (Katz, 2003), and traumatic loss and grief (Markell & Markell, 2013, McNulty, 2008). This study from Tribe et al. (2021) was the first to look into how *Harry Potter* could be used in mental health recovery. Participants were asked six open ended questions that explored their relationship to the series. In analyzing the answers to these questions, researchers noticed a number of themes, including engagement in the universe, connection to the characters, connection to other readers, and hope for the future (Tribe et al, 2021).

While it is not necessarily possible to teach hope, it is possible to "open spaces for reflection and promote the exercise of key skills" (Lucas et al., 2019, pg. 209). Interventions may be designed with the specific academic and emotional needs of the group in mind. Tribe et al. (2021) strategically chose a book that participants had a preexisting relationship with throughout their childhood, which allowed them to feel safe in the intervention whilst experiencing nostalgia. Growing up with these books, which had such positive memories attached to them,

made re-reading them a reminder of the comfort they once provided. This led to increased feelings of hope, as participants remembered the challenges they faced and overcame when they first engaged in the series, as well as the challenges they are facing and overcoming in the present.

Poetry Writing Therapy and Mental Illness

Kempler (2003) explained that poetry therapy, a subcategory of bibliotherapy in which healing is facilitated through writing poetry, has been the least recognized form of the expressive arts therapies, despite possessing immense opportunity for healing and growth. Creative writing has long been used as a means of not only processing and understanding traumatic experiences, but of healing from them (Sharma, 2019). Writing can be used as a means of recording and analyzing, acting as both a tool to recount one's experiences and as a witness in and of itself, and has proven to foster growth and healing through deep and symbolic expression and emotional release (Sharma, 2019).

Sharma's research (2019) delved into the use of poetry in autoethnography of individuals experiencing grief, trauma, and mental health struggles. Autoethnography, a form of qualitative research that analyzes lived experience through personal and autobiographical writing, can be effectively captured through poetry, as poetry "has the ability to capture the human experiences and emotions in more totality and truthfulness than prose" (Sharma, 2019, pg. 25). This finding is similar to that of Kreuter (2009), who argued that when an individual writes autobiographical poetry, they find new meaning in their experiences through inward reflection and outward expression.

There are a number of reasons why poetry therapy is a potentially meaningful and effective treatment option for a wide range of individuals, including those struggling with mental

illness. First of all, the use of metaphor and symbolism allows clients to access unconscious

thoughts and explore their manifestations (Kempler, 2003). Clients are not forced to directly

name their deepest and darkest feelings. Instead, they can give those feelings a metaphor, image,

or name, thus giving a voice to "whatever is too large, too incomprehensible to express in any

other way" (Soter, 2016, pg. 2). This gives organization and containment to topics that are easily

overwhelming. This also enables the understanding of "complex, dialectical, and ostensibly

contradictory dynamics" (Furman et al., 2006, p. 332). In addition, the understanding of

metaphor between client and therapist can also strengthen the therapeutic relationship, as both

are entering into the client's inner world (Costa & Abreu, 2018).

The importance of metaphor is based on a number of therapeutic considerations,

including opportunity for exploration, experimentation, and individualization (Maanmieli &

Ihanus, 2021). Metaphors hold the potential to foster transformation within therapeutic settings,

facilitating movement into new and creative directions that can lead to healing. As stated by

Ihanus (2019):

> a metaphor makes different matters face each other, transfers meanings and opens new
>
> thoughts and feeling connections. In creative situations, where nothing is forced to arise,
>
> but everything is given space to be born, metaphor extends perspectives; it assembles and
>
> breaks obsolete frames of reference. Metaphors transport and transform meaning
>
> mentally, somatically, and neurally. (p. 218)

In addition, metaphors can provide a sense of safety, as they can communicate difficult thoughts

and emotions through non-literal language (Tribe et al, 2021). For individuals who are unable or

unwilling to express themselves directly, metaphors may be the only way to illustrate an

experience by verbal or written means.

A study from Maanmieli and Ihanus (2021) focused on the use of metaphor and personal meaning in group poetry therapy. Group participants, all of whom had a diagnosis of schizophrenia, engaged in 36 poetry therapy group session over the course of one year. Participants wrote about themes that resonated with their personal mental health journeys, such as pain and suffering as a result of their illness, positive moments throughout their life and treatment, and the desire for a life without mental illness (Maanmieli & Ihanus, 2021). A number of significant elements of the intervention were noted by the participants, including the opportunity to write and read self-written poetry, and having a vessel for self-expression and self-understanding.

In addition to the creation of metaphors and symbols, poetry allows one to play with the rules of language, such as changing or disregarding proper grammar and form, as a means of communication or expression (Shafi, 2010). This also allows clients to develop a unique voice, be it self-expression or a reinvention or creative version of themselves. Poetry allows people to "call forth our deepest held emotions and give to them a truly authentic voice, a voice which ultimately enables us to identify, express and integrate our whole selves" (Kempler, 2003, pg. 220). For individuals dealing with mental illness, finding one's voice can be especially liberating, as it allows a separation between oneself and their illness (De Vries, 2017). Furthermore, it allows individuals to separate themselves from the words of others in their lives, which is particularly crucial for those who have experienced abuse and trauma.

Not only can the expression of deep emotions and traumatic experiences through writing be a cathartic experience leading to self-understanding, it can provide significant insights and realization for those reading the material (Fraser, 2011). The connection between writer and reader who hold shared experience can be incredibly meaningful, and act as a reminder that one

is not alone in their hardships. Even if the two do not hold an exact shared experience, connection can be built based on the writing itself, relating through the beauty of specific poetic language or through the processes of writing and reading (Fraser, 2011). In reading another's work, individuals bear witness to moments in their lives and to the current journey of healing through written means. In other words, both reading and writing poetry offer solidarity and hope for the future despite the suffering experienced in dealing with mental illness (Fraser, 2011).

Poetry has also been used as a form of communication between therapist and client (Shafi, 2010). In writing poetry, an individual is not only expressing their inner world, they are allowing others to take a look inside of it. This can be a useful tool for therapists, especially if a client cannot otherwise verbalize their experiences. Tamura (2001) documented the use of renku, a form of poetry that originated in Japan which uses specific syllable counts of 5-7-7 and 7-7, with individuals with severe schizophrenia. The therapist used renku to communicate with two female clients, who would then communicate back to him using the same poetic form. Both clients originally exhibited hindered abilities to understand word meanings and sentence contexts as results from their schizophrenia symptoms. They both spent more than a year participating in renku therapy with their therapist, communicating information about a wide range of topics including everyday life, social experiences, and hallucinations and delusions. One client was observed to have increased interpersonal abilities, as well as decreased negative schizophrenic symptoms. The other client also exhibited changes in her communication style, shifting from fantasy-based to reality-based poetry (Shafi, 2010).

The group setting has also been an effective format for poetry therapy. In Maanmieli & Ihanus's study (2021), participants expressed that the most helpful and meaningful aspect of group poetry therapy was the group setting itself, which was described as "a safe harbor where

the threatening orders and the blaming voices can be appeased with help from others, accompanied by therapeutic words and metaphors" (Maanmieli & Ihanus, 2021, pg. 221). The authors noted that having a space to be able to interact and collaborate with others with similar struggles and openly communicate in a safe and non-judgmental environment was especially significant for individuals diagnosed with severe, life-long mental illnesses such as schizophrenia (Maanmieli & Ihanus, 2021).

Considerations for Bibliotherapy with Children with Neurodiverse Profiles

Bibliotherapy may benefit children with NP given how it has been used as a form of treatment for individuals struggling with mental illness. However, it is crucial to consider aspects of bibliotherapy that may be difficult for individuals with NP. No matter what material a therapist chooses as the basis for reading therapy with a client with NP, the client is still being asked to focus on the material in a way that may not be easy for them. Similarly, while creative writing and poetry therapy does not necessarily require individuals to follow the rules of grammar and traditional writing techniques, it calls for an expression of language that can be verbalized or written on paper. Assuming that all clients are capable of engaging in bibliotherapy interventions in a "traditional" way could be harmful to those clients. This portion of this thesis will focus on some of the considerations for reading, writing, and expression in individuals with NP, so as to further understand how their needs can be met in bibliotherapy interventions.

Reading Considerations

People with NP may have difficulties decoding reading material (Mazher, 2018), and engaging in strategic reading (Ciullo et al., 2018), thus hindering their ability to derive meaning from the material. They may also struggle to process verbal information, making listening to recitation of written material equally challenging. While it may be assumed that slow recitation

may make processing information easier for someone with NP, it actuality may make it more difficult to understand. Mazher (2018) explained that "low speed of input of verbal information makes it harder for memory in having to hold on to the bits of information a longer time before being able to interpret them" (pg. 156). Finding the appropriate pace for each individual's processing abilities is crucial to the successful understanding of the material (Mazher, 2018).

Individuals with NP may have a hindered ability to understand the attitudes and emotions of those around them (Ion, 2021). It is important to consider how this may translate to a misunderstanding of character perspectives in reading a novel. Still, for those who struggle to understand others, reading may be a great way to gain social skills, especially if delving into a first-person narrative, as it allows the reader to see things from the protagonist's point of view (Tribe et al, 2021). For therapists leading someone with NP through a reading intervention, it may be helpful to discuss the reading one-on-one or in a group setting to encourage a dialogue about the perspectives in the book (Ciullo et al., 2018). Activities that focus on reading comprehension and engagement, such as partner or group questions and discussions, may be particularly helpful for those with NP. Using organizational strategies, such as summarizing paragraphs and identifying key information, may also be useful (Ciullo et al., 2018).

It may also be helpful for therapists to consider using language and listening interventions alongside bibliotherapy. A study from Henry and Solari (2020) aimed to determine the effects of integrating comprehension interventions among children with ASD. Forty-three children met over the course of 20 weeks in this group-based program. Instructors began by giving the group a "guiding question," then reading a children's book out loud. Instructors also emphasized two or three special vocab words for the group to focus on, which the children would then do an activity around. Activities were multimodal, including an "act out the word"

prompt, finding pictures to represent the word, and listing antonyms and synonyms. Results showed that the students who participated in the study showed remarkable language improvements, including a more expressive vocabulary and knowledge base. This was attributed to the re-hearing and re-using of the vocabulary words (Henry and Solari, 2020).

Writing Considerations

Many individuals struggle with writing, including those with NP (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). There are numerous characteristics specific to NP that further inhibit one's ability to write. For example, persons with ASD often struggle with organizational, language, and listening skills, and have a hard time moving beyond literal thinking into a creative mindset (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). Children with ASD may also have a hard time moving beyond topics that interest them, thus choosing to ignore the parameters of their tasks. Similarly, while structuring their work to their choosing may be doable, the use of expressive language may be a place of discomfort (Asaro-Saddler, 2016).

In order to write, one must first develop an understanding of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence, the process of turning "letters into sounds and sounds into words." Any mistakes or misunderstandings of spoken word "will hamper the identification and order of phonemes in word structure, thus hindering access to their meaning" (García-Mateos, Mateos & Herrero, 2015, pg. 32). Many people with NP struggle with phonetic awareness, and are unable to dissect sounds within words, leading to misspellings and mispronunciation (Mazher, 2018). Although bibliotherapy does not call for the perfect spelling of words, therapists should be aware that this may be challenging for those with NP if and when they decide to share their work. Furthermore, it may impact if and how an individual with NP reads their work aloud to the therapist or group.

It is important to also consider how the physical act of writing may be difficult for individuals with NP. Those with NP are more likely to have issues with fine motor coordination, causing handwriting to be a physically laborious task (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). This may lead to very short writings in order to finish the task as quickly as possible. So even if the individual has clear and thoughtful ideas, they may not be able to further develop their thoughts or transfer them onto paper (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). Offering the use of technology may be particularly helpful for individuals with NP. Not only can typing take away the physical struggle of writing on paper, electronic forums can offer individualized visual stimuli (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). There are also numerous helpful tools and software, such as spell check, grammar check, text-to-speech, and speech-to-text, that clients can use to further express themselves in their desired way. For individuals with NP who cannot type due to physical limitations, they can use speech-to-text to record their ideas (Asaro-Saddler, 2016).

In addition, writing requires self-regulatory skills that individuals with NP may lack (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). Without these skills, it is far more difficult to maintain focus, work through frustrations, and understand one's own progress. To combat these struggles, Pennington and Delano (2012) suggested continuous, explicit instruction so as to remind clients of their goals and keep them moving forward through the interventions. Furthermore, explicit goal setting can be a crucial component of self-management for this population. Having explicit goals can remind clients of their accomplishments throughout a challenging process, and act as a means of encouragement (Asaro-Saddler, 2016).

A study by Rodriguez et al. (2015) found that difficulties in the preliminary steps of writing, such as planning and initial organization, may prohibit any individual from completing meaningful compositions. Individuals, especially those who struggle with the writing process to

begin with, should consider using a wide range of cognitive frameworks and organization techniques in order to better keep track of their thoughts (Hennes et al., 2015). Those with NP often experience difficulties organizing information (Mazher, 2018), making these findings particularly relevant.

Language Considerations

Individuals with NP may have a particularly difficult time in understanding metaphors and expressions, instead interpreting their meanings as literal (Ion, 2021). This is important to consider in both reading and writing therapies, as both call for the understanding of creative language, be it in reading someone else's work or in creating one's own work. This issue expands itself to possible overall rigidity of thought (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). For example, an individual with NP who reads a fairytale may be confused by the fantastical nature of the story, stuck with the knowledge that none of it is "real." Making inferences or "filling in the gaps" left by the author may also be particularly difficult (Henry, Solari 2020, pg. 3772).

Similarly, disregarding language and grammar norms in poetry, whether it is reading or writing, may be confusing to an individual with NP. They may focus on the fact that the poem does not "follow the rules" that they have been taught in school about writing properly. This sort of difficulty in abstract thinking may lead to restricted behaviors and unwillingness to move beyond their previous knowledge of writing (Ion, 2021).

Cognitive and Executive Functioning Considerations

Healthy executive functioning can be understood as having cognitive flexibility and adaptability to changing environmental variables, and the ability to meet cognitive processing expectations in the face of obstacles (Church et al., 2019). Executive functioning skills are often impaired in those with SLD, specifically in terms of perception, attention, memory, and problem

solving (García-Mateos et al., 2015). In addition, individuals with NP may struggle in their retention of numerous domains of information (Ion, 2021). This is especially true with spoken word instruction and general verbal communication (Mazher, 2018).

Impulsive behaviors are another characteristic of individuals with NP that is crucial to consider in reading and writing processes (Al-Dababneh & Al-Zboon, 2018). Due to the common comorbidity of ADHD and SLD, those with SLD commonly exhibit impulsivity, hyperactivity, and an inability to sustain attention. Impulsivity can manifest in numerous ways in individuals with NP, including lack of impulse-control, inability to plan, and inability to think about consequences. This means they may "respond hastily when faced with cognitive tasks, where they would rather be fast than accurate, and give the first answer that comes to their mind" (Al-Dababneh & Al-Zboon, 2018, pg. 101). While there is no "right" or "wrong" answer in a bibliotherapeutic context, impulsivity may cause a client with NP to not accurately express their emotions, instead expressing the thoughts and feelings that first come to their mind or are easiest to express (Al-Dababneh & Al-Zboon, 2018).

Discussion

Children with NP are more likely to struggle in the expression of thoughts and emotions than neurotypical children, leading to increased academic and social difficulties (Clendon, 2021). Children with NP are also at an increased risk of the development of psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia (Nalavany et al., 2011). The expressive therapies have been researched and recognized as a tool for children with NP to foster expression and interpersonal connection (LDRFA, 2022). However, there is limited research on the impact of bibliotherapy interventions on children with NP. Bibliotherapy has likely been overlooked because of the nature of the work, which calls for either reading or writing to be

used, both of which are often difficult for children with NP (Asaro-Saddler, 2016; Ciullo et al., 2018; Mazher, 2018). However, bibliotherapy interventions may be adapted to fit the needs of children with NP, allowing them to engage in reading and writing therapies and creating a new relationship to reading and writing (Asaro-Saddler, 2016; Ciullo et al., 2018).

Based on previous research, bibliotherapy has been established as a promising form of treatment for individuals struggling with mental illness (Sevinç, 2019). Given the high percentage of children with NP who struggle with mental illness, bibliotherapy could be used in treatment for those with NP. While children with NP may struggle with reading and writing in academic settings, introducing reading and writing in a therapeutic setting through bibliotherapy interventions may change their relationship to the processes (Al-Dababneh & Al-Zboon, 2018). Facilitators have an opportunity to show clients that reading and writing do not have to be a source of emotional pain and discomfort, but can instead be a creative vessel for expression.

However, before engaging in bibliotherapy with children with NP, it is crucial to consider how their struggles in reading and writing may impact their ability to take meaning from the interventions (Al-Dababneh & Al-Zboon, 2018). If therapists take the time to understand their client's individual needs before presenting an intervention, the client is more likely to engage in the process and make meaning from the work. Therapists should instead consider how the individual needs of clients can be met, which can only be done through the initial acknowledgement of those needs (García-Mateos et al., 2015; Henry and Solari, 2020).

Therapists may want to consider how to best understand their client's relationship with reading and writing before introducing bibliotherapy interventions, which may be done through conversations with the child's educators (García-Mateos et al., 2015). Most importantly, therapists should communicate with the client themselves, providing different options to engage

in the work and asking them what their preferences are (Asaro-Saddler, 2016). For example, therapists should give their clients options for how to share their work, be it through reading it aloud, or asking others to read what the client as written (Henry and Solari, 2020).

There are a number of implications for further studies within the scope of bibliotherapy. While bibliotherapy with children with NP is under-researched as a whole, the subcategory of poetry therapy with this population has been particularly neglected. Poetry therapy may be particularly impactful in providing individuals with NP, particularly those who struggle with academic writing, with a feeling of mastery and confidence in writing (LDRFA, 2022). For example, repetitive, unorganized language which would normally be discouraged in school, can be made into something meaningful in poetry therapy (Shafi, 2010). Further studies on the impact of poetry therapy, or any free writing, would be impactful on the overall understanding of bibliotherapy with this population (Minaabad, 2020).

The group bibliotherapy setting should be researched further, particularly in literature or reading based interventions. Preliminary evidence shows that "engaging with fiction in community with others may offer a unique platform for mental health recovery, with individuals benefiting both from connecting and identifying emotionally with fellow readers as well" (Tribe et al, 2021, pg. 2-3). For individuals with NP, many of whom struggle in traditional academic and social settings, a feeling of mutual understanding and comradery may be achieved through this work. Relating characters and events back to one's own experience can be healing in and of itself, but sharing that experience with others can be even more meaningful (Lucas et al., 2019). Further studies on the implementation of such bibliotherapy groups would provide a greater understanding of the impacts of said groups.

Limitations of existing research include minimal exploration of bibliotherapy as a means of healing, particularly in comparison to other expressive arts forms and other forms of therapy in general. Furthermore, all of the research gathered for this literature review were English language publications found through a specific database, so research on bibliotherapy that may have been found elsewhere was not included. In addition, the majority of studies reviewed here utilized rather small sample sizes, which may impact the reliability and validity of that research.

This thesis reviewed literature on the connection between NP and mental illness, bibliotherapy as treatment for mental illness, and limitations and considerations of reading and writing for individuals with NP, in order to further understand how bibliotherapy can be used with children with NP in the future. Research suggests that bibliotherapy could be a meaningful and effective form of treatment for children with NP, so long as therapists and facilitators consider their client's individual needs, specifically regarding reading and writing. Engaging in bibliotherapy interventions in ways that work for them, could provide children with NP a newfound feeling of mastery and connection to subjects that they once considered too difficult with which to engage. Introducing a way for children with NP to engage in bibliotherapy interventions could enhance the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist by encouraging new means of expression and provide clients with new therapeutic tools to help them academically and emotionally.

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