

<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/pe.2024.17.10>

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How to cite [jak cytować]: Walotek, A. (2024). *My Very Special Book – Bibliotherapy Project that Involves Working with Children with Special Needs. Application Proposal. Podstawy Edukacji. Education for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, 17, 129–140.*

My Very Special Book – Bibliotherapy Project that Involves Working with Children with Special Needs. Application Proposal

Abstract

The article's primary goal is to present the educational project *MyVery Special Book*, based on the bibliotherapy method, and illustrate the development of social competencies in students with special needs during revalidation classes based on this idea. The article discusses the process of creating a therapeutic story with sixth-grade students in an integrated school based on *My Very Special Book* project carried out as part of a grant from the "Nowa Era" Publishing House in the *Projektanci Edukacji* contest. The theoretical foundations, course, assumptions, and method of conducting revalidation classes are analysed, the aim of which is to improve emotional and social competencies. The project involved creating a therapeutic story with students about their difficulties and problems. The project recipients are the students with special needs, difficulties in social functioning, chronic diseases and low self-esteem.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, therapy, autism, project-based work.

Introduction

The educational project entitled *My Very Special Book* was created by students of an integrated school (the sixth grade) and supervised by a therapist and

psychologist as part of their revalidation classes. In the article, I discuss the process of creating a therapeutic fairy tale with students, the goals of the project focusing on developing social competencies (cooperation, assertiveness, active listening, sharing experiences), practical aspects of using such a method of working with students with special educational needs, as well as the benefits of undertaking this type of initiatives for students. I have analysed the theoretical foundations of this approach, the goals and assumptions of the project, and the practical implications. In the article, we discuss how creating therapeutic fairy tales can influence the development of students, their relationships with peers, and their ability to talk about their experiences, emotions, and challenges in dealing with difficult situations.

My Very Special Book project allowed students to create stories about their experiences and needs. It is a form of therapeutic work that can be both a way of expressing emotions, an opportunity to share one's problems, and a tool for integration, development of social competencies and students' self-esteem. Appropriate books can modify the behaviour of students with emotional disorders and introduce positive changes in them (Shem, 2016). For students in integrated schools, creating therapeutic fairy tales is not only an exciting way to conduct therapeutic classes and build their motivation to participate but also a way to develop emotional competencies and build bonds in the peer group.

One of the minor difficulties of the children participating in the project was the feeling of rejection in the group. As a psychosocial phenomenon, this term was analysed in terms of its impact on an individual's emotional and psychosocial development in the relationship with the social group. Regardless of the form, the actions of peers aimed at rejecting it are perceived by a given individual very clearly. Peer rejection may take various forms: isolation and quick interruption of social contact with a specific student, aggressive behaviour, preventing activities, providing information, subordination, constant checking and supervision, up to unfair negation directed directly at the child and his/her activities, conveying lies and degrading opinions (Urban 2005).

Peer relationships are essential in child development (Domagała-Zyśk, 2012). Colleagues provide the student with a sense of social belonging and emotional support. Relationships with peers are a fundamental source of self-esteem. They allow a child to feel valued by those he considers necessary.

Revalidation classes

Revalidation classes are additional classes not subject to assessment, and their progress is documented in a separate class log. The main goal of these classes is to support the child's development through specialised activities tailored

to a given person's needs. The term "revalidation" comes from the Latin words "re-" (again) and "validus" (strong), which reflects the essence of these activities – strengthening and improving abilities.

The purpose of revalidation classes is to increase the child's competencies on various levels to facilitate the process of socialisation and education and maximise the chances of independence. These activities should consider all the difficulties the child is struggling with while relying on his/her capabilities and strengths. Conducting these classes requires systematicity, consistency and cooperation with a team of therapists who strive to achieve goals related to education, upbringing, therapy and revalidation (Obuchowska, 2003).

As part of the revalidation process, certain basic principles are observed, including continuity of therapeutic activities; the principle of grading difficulty and correction of disorders; compensation for disorders by exercising more efficient functions in order to induce a compensatory mechanism; the principle of systematic actions; consolidating acquired knowledge and skills; cooperation with the family and the principle of attractiveness of exercises (Niepokólczycka-Gac, 2018).

Revalidation classes are adapted to the student's needs based on judgment or opinion. Their classes may include various therapies, such as speech therapy, psychological therapy, pedagogical therapy, sensory integration therapy, physiotherapy or corrective and compensatory therapy. The scope of activities during these classes is broad and considers various aspects of development, such as social, emotional, communicative, cognitive, motivational, motor and perceptual (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2017).

Therapists conducting this type of class acquire qualifications during bachelor's, master's, postgraduate and specialised courses. The methods used during these classes should be attractive to the child and adapted to his or her age and abilities. Examples of methods include various types of activity programs, such as applied behaviour analysis, music therapy, occupational therapy, dog therapy, art therapy, bibliotherapy, and many others. These methods can be combined and modified to achieve therapeutic goals. Information and communication technologies are increasingly used in revalidation, such as specialised software on a tablet or therapeutic games (Niepokólczycka-Gac, 2018). These activities must integrate the child into his or her peer environment, which can be achieved by using tools popular among his or her peers.

Bibliotherapy

The fairy tale is an irreplaceable tool for teachers working in preschool education (Domagała, 2022). A child acquires knowledge about the world through spontaneous and unconscious learning in new, diverse situations in the environ-

ment around him. Learning about social reality is a child's fundamental need, and information at the stage of its development is acquired through cognitive processes such as perceptions, impressions, speech, thinking, memory and attention. Fairy tales teach parents the art of storytelling while children develop listening skills (Kruszewska, 2017). A fairy tale can have various functions: translation, conveying values, education or calming. The potential of a fairy tale makes it a valuable educational tool, contributing to learning and supporting development. Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic form that allows one to discuss complex topics with a child, considering their developmental needs and enabling an open discussion. Due to the multitude of therapeutic texts, it is possible to adapt them to the child's individual needs and interests to make the therapeutic process as comfortable as possible. It is a form of therapy that allows one to metaphorically capture various problems while giving the freedom and safety to select the content so that it does not overload the patient.

Bibliotherapy is a tool for promoting children's psychological well-being (Lucas, Soares, 2013). This method can meet a wide variety of therapeutic goals that are defined according to the specific needs and problems of clients, for example, increasing the skills of introspection and self-assessment, better understanding the specific motivations for human behaviour, alleviating egocentrism by paying attention to the reactions of others (Abdulah, 2008).

The main goals of bibliotherapy are to support and strengthen the recipient through focused reading. A vital role in this process is played by an intermediary, such as a librarian, psychologist, or bibliotherapist who uses psychotherapy methods, focusing on selecting and using appropriate literature when working with the reader. Bibliotherapy includes reading texts and various methods and forms of working with them to support development and improve the quality of life (Matras-Mastelarz, 2016).

There are at least three areas in which the bibliotherapeutic process can develop. The first relates to the universal ground covering general concepts about interpersonal relationships common to all parents and children. The personal level concerns the participant's recalling his or her experiences in bibliotherapeutic activities and comparing them with other people's experiences, such as relationships between the child and friends or parents. The third area results from the context and is shaped by specific interpersonal relationships, for example, between the teacher and students in the classroom. It is worth emphasising that the interpenetration of these levels contributes to correctly understanding relationships with other people and explaining individual reactions to various life situations. That, in turn, promotes effective communication, distinguishing values, beauty, necessity and correctness from what is reprehensible, evil and harmful (Borecka, 2002).

Story therapy can be placed in the context of bibliotherapy and art therapy. This method strengthens self-confidence and changes one's attitude towards oneself and one's surroundings. Additionally, it helps develop memory and increase vocabulary. Fairy tale therapy is a form of changing behaviour through identification with the characters. According to her, each fairy tale has a didactic nature, and its structure is based on the juxtaposition of various characters, such as good versus evil, wealth versus poverty, wisdom versus stupidity, and justice versus injustice, which enables the assessment of both one's own and other people's behaviour. (Łaba, 2011).

Therapeutic fairy tales do not meet the definition of classic fairy tales because they are neither short nor written in verse and do not contain a moral (Krasoń, 2009). These are fantasy stories whose plot reflects intrapsychic experiences, such as fears, difficulties related to developing self-esteem and identity, internal conflicts, relationships with peers and significant others, and understanding and identifying emotions. Therapeutic fairy tales are created strictly to support development, only in a therapeutic context, distinguishing them from fairy tales and traditional fairy tales (Bautsz-Sontag, 2015).

Therapeutic fairy tales cover all areas of a child's functioning that may require therapeutic support, for example, the death of a loved one, chronic illness, difficulties in social functioning, behavioural difficulties, the situation of parents' divorce and the like. They are created to allow a conversation with the child about potentially tricky topics that challenge the child and the parent or teacher, not only in the therapeutic space but also at home or school. This activity is an easier and safer way to discover a specific part of one's personality because it is related to the characters presented in the text (Lutovac, Kaasila, 2020). Therapeutic fairy tales allow one to naturally start a conversation on complex topics and explain complicated psychological phenomena, processes and situations.

The current state of research on the issue of bibliotherapy

Research has shown that fairy tales evoke positive emotions, and carefully selecting literature and spending time with parents (guardians) and teachers positively impact the child's development (Kruszewska, 2017). Research reports confirm the beneficial impact of fairy tales on the development of children (Basak, 2012). Storytelling therapy is also an effective method in educational work, which at the same time provides support in everyday challenges and offers a chance to solve difficulties in working with a child. It is a valuable tool that supports both teachers and parents.

According to a meta-analysis of articles on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in the treatment of neurocognitive disorders (Wang, 2020), it was found, among

other things, that studies on children and adolescents showed a moderate effect of bibliotherapy on reducing depression (Yuan,2018). The study's results showed that the method of conducting bibliotherapy can significantly affect its effectiveness compared to control groups without intervention, and video bibliotherapy turned out to be more effective than Internet bibliotherapy.

In further research on the effects of bibliotherapy on caregiver self-efficacy, it was found that of all aspects of self-efficacy, bibliotherapy had a significant cumulative effect at a trim to a moderate level in improving the ability to cope with challenging behaviours (Steffen, Gant, 2016), and a small effect of online bibliotherapy after three months (Cristancho-Lacroix, 2015). The sample sizes of the intervention groups ranged from 10 to 28 people, which may explain the small effect size and lack of significance of the results. Other systematic analyses also found that psychosocial interventions were generally effective in increasing self-efficacy in dementia caregivers. However, remote interventions were less effective than face-to-face interventions (Tang, Chan, 2016).

Assumptions and description of the project

The "*My Very Special Book*" project was one of the elements of revalidation classes for six students with special educational needs. Its main goal was to create a therapeutic story that cooperated with students with special educational needs. Its assumptions aimed to create a safe, creative space for students to express themselves and gain greater awareness and acceptance of themselves and others. At the same time, the project aimed to educate and raise awareness of the local community, which contributed to building a more inclusive educational environment. The next step after publishing a therapeutic fairy tale with a specific task provided the therapeutic tool for educators, who joined the last part of the project and conducted classes based on "*My Very Special Book*".

The project involved six sixth-grade students of an integrated school who, during revalidation classes, created content, illustrations and tasks for a therapeutic fairy tale, which was used during bibliotherapeutic workshops in grades 1-3 in special schools, hospital schools, and for children of a foundation dealing with children with diabetes. The project involved students with pervasive developmental disorders, motor aphasia and mild intellectual disability. It was financed by a grant from Nowa Era Publishing House during the Projektanci Edukacji contest.

The students participating in the project co-authored a therapeutic fairy tale that touched on the problems they reported that they experience every day. Thanks to this, it was possible to continuously react and talk about students' problems, developing communication skills and team cooperation. The project's

recipients also developed skills in graphomotor skills, imagination, the ability to plan tasks in time, share responsibilities, and assertiveness. All these competencies were developed in a practical aspect while creating a therapeutic fairy tale.

The essential assumption of the project was for the students to create a therapeutic fairy tale with the teacher's help, in which they jointly discussed topics related to their difficulties and challenges. The project supported the development of the imagination and creativity of students, who expressed their feelings and thoughts by creating their own stories. The project was based on a therapeutic approach that assumes that stories are tools for understanding and processing difficult experiences (Matras-Mastalerz, 2016). Joint creation and sharing of stories contribute to developing social competencies, such as working in a group, communicating needs, sharing responsibilities, talking about one's experiences, et cetera.

Creating a therapeutic book by a group of students with similar challenges and difficulties resulting from special educational needs facilitated the exchange of experiences and the creation of a specific network of support and exchange of resources between them. By creating a therapeutic fairy tale together, students and therapists created a tool that can be used to support both therapy and the educational process.

Methods of project implementation

The project was divided into stages:

- a. Analysis of the therapeutic fairy tale's theme in a practical and theoretical context
- b. Creating characters in the text
- c. Shaping the plot
- d. Analysis of possible forms of therapeutic fairy tales and creation of concepts for tasks included in the book,
- e. Translating the therapeutic fairy tale into English
- f. Creating illustrations for a therapeutic fairy tale
- g. Creating tasks
- h. Distribution of books and conducting workshops

When creating the outline of a therapeutic fairy tale, it was crucial to determine the topic that meets the current needs of students. During revalidation classes, the topic of feeling different, rejection in the group, and low self-esteem emerged.

Creating a therapeutic fairy tale character, the central character of a therapeutic fairy tale, requires considering characteristic features related to the sense of rejection. This character has been personalised and adapted to the target

group to represent the experiences, emotions and challenges readers identify adequately.

By creating characters, the children analysed their problems and emotions related to them. Creating a character who, due to his differences, experiences rejection among his peer group allowed students to share their own experiences while describing social situations that the main character encountered. Animating the therapeutic fairy tale characters made it easier for them to talk about potentially complex topics, which also had a critical therapeutic value. The main character of the therapeutic fairy tale, Alex, had three horns, which clearly distinguished him from the group of unicorns. He also had difficulty responding to challenging behaviour from peers and often suffered from sensory overload. When creating characters, students talked much more willingly and openly about their experiences from everyday life, translating them into the fate of the fairy-tale character. At the same time, all classes took place in a group, and the children shared their observations, experiences, and strategies for dealing with difficult situations.

In shaping the plot of the therapeutic story, the focus was on elements related to confrontation with rejection, the process of accepting one's difference and the search for self-esteem. A vital aspect of the project was making decisions regarding the form of the therapeutic fairy tale, planning the layout and structure to create a coherent and logical whole, and determining the form of tasks for readers, et cetera. Working in a group, making decisions, establishing an action plan, and exerting a significant influence on each element of the therapeutic fairy tale contributed to increasing students' self-esteem, the sense of their subjective treatment, and the sense of agency and competence in-group cooperation. Each participant in the project impacted the final appearance of the therapeutic fairy tale, and the students took part in every element of its creation. Everyone decided, discussed, and created all the elements with the teacher.

The illustrations in the book played a crucial role in conveying emotions and visualising the plot while remaining relevant to the subject matter. The students created illustrations and discussed each element of the therapeutic fairy tale during group activities, discussing and arguing for their ideas.

The graphomotor tasks included in the book had to be consistent with the target group's subject matter and advancement level to enable readers to practice practical work on developing their skills. The students also determined their shape, form and thematic scope. During the discussion, they analysed what the tasks should look like and what form they should take, determining the final shape of each element.

The tasks attached to the therapeutic fairy tale were not only to consolidate knowledge about the therapeutic fairy tale and develop fine motor skills and creativity but also to enable potential readers to create a therapeutic fairy tale

together. Each illustration in the book requires completion and colouring so that the reader – informed about it at the beginning of the therapeutic fairy tale – can co-create it. Creating a therapeutic fairy tale is an essential therapeutic element, which is why it has also been preserved for its readers.

The project included activities that finished with conducting bibliotherapeutic workshops for children with difficulties in social functioning, in a complex health situation, and with special educational needs; the workshops were organised in groups: children with chronic illnesses participating in educational group activities organised at a hospital school, children with mild intellectual disabilities, children with diabetes. The workshops covered the topics of difference, acceptance, and understanding of oneself and others.

It also assumed publishing the therapeutic fairy tale in two forms – electronic (PDF) and traditional form- which required organising the publishing process and transforming the therapeutic fairy tale into appropriate formats. It becomes available to a larger group of recipients. Mariusz Rzepka also recorded an audiobook for the therapeutic fairy tale, which considers the needs of various recipients, regardless of their reading skills.

All the above aspects were crucial elements in creating a therapeutic fairy tale aimed at supporting and developing participants in coping with difficulties, understanding themselves and developing self-esteem. The project perfectly combined elements of psychology and pedagogy, using literature and art as practical tools for support and personal development.

Summary

The project discussed in the article was intended to support the implementation of therapeutic goals consistent with the goals of revalidation classes, aimed at understanding oneself, one's own and other people's emotions, increasing self-confidence and self-awareness, which directly affects the sense of agency and developing soft skills in children with special needs. Educational. Students shared their thoughts and problems by working on the issue while creating a friendly, therapeutic environment in the support group. Taking the initiative in the form of a grant from Nowa Era Publishing House, "Projektanci Edukacji" also had a positive impact on their self-perception; as project participants, it gave them the feeling that they were the authors of a therapeutic fairy tale on which they had a joint influence. Moreover, working in a group strongly influenced their level of integration and understanding of the needs and difficulties of other project participants.

When creating a therapeutic fairy tale, focusing on the characters' symbolism, morality, and appearance is crucial. It helps children understand the mean-

ings, demonstrate the problems and use the available features (Shuba, 2023). These characters play a representative role, helping children identify with the story and better understand themselves and their surroundings. Moreover, work in the form of a therapeutic fairy tale, including illustrations, graphomotor tasks and content, is precisely adapted to the student's level of understanding, considering their special educational needs.

The project does not finish with the book publication but also provides for the organisation of bibliotherapeutic workshops based on the book created. The workshops complement the project's activities, offering participants active participation in the therapeutic and educational process. Publishing the therapeutic fairy tale in electronic and paper forms shows a diversified approach to the accessibility and preferences of participants and makes it more spreadable.

As a result, *My Very Special Book* provides children with a therapeutic tool. It creates an inclusive and informed learning environment, promoting understanding, acceptance and support for students with special educational needs. By co-creating a therapeutic fairy tale, students process their own experiences and educate the school community about special educational needs. The project fits into bibliotherapy, using stories to develop understanding, acceptance and the ability to cope with difficulties.

The development of the project's activities included organising a series of bibliotherapeutic workshops based on the created therapeutic fairy tale. The aim of the workshops was the active participation and support of participants in the therapeutic and teaching process. They read a book together, performed graphomotor tasks, and talked about self-esteem, students' strengths and barriers, and acceptance and cooperation in the group.

Critical aspects of the project include discussing topics related to rejection, otherness and self-esteem, creating a therapeutic fairy tale character consistent with the theme, shaping the plot and working on the therapeutic fairy tale form. As a result, the project provides participants with therapeutic tools and creates an inclusive educational environment, supporting the development and self-knowledge of children with intellectual disabilities and Asperger's syndrome.

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My Very Special Book – Projekt biblioterapeutyczny w pracy z dziećmi ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi. Propozycja aplikacyjna

Streszczenie

Głównym celem artykułu jest przedstawienie projektu edukacyjnego: *My Very Special Book* opartego na metodzie biblioterapii oraz zilustrowanie rozwoju kompetencji społecznych u uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami podczas zajęć rewalidacyjnych opartych na tym pomysł. W artykule omówiono proces tworzenia opowiadania terapeutycznego z uczniami klasy szóstej szkoły integracyjnej w oparciu o projekt *My Very Special Book* realizowany w ramach grantu Wydawnictwa „Nowa Era” w konkursie Projektanci Edukacji. Analizie poddano podstawy teoretyczne, przebieg, założenia i sposób prowadzenia zajęć rewalidacyjnych, których celem było podniesienie kompetencji emocjonalnych i społecznych. Projekt polegał na stworzeniu z uczniami opowieści terapeutycznej o ich aktualnych trudnościach i problemach. Odbiorcami projektu są uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami, trudnościami w funkcjonowaniu społecznym, chorobami przewlekłymi i niską samooceną.

Słowa kluczowe: biblioterapia, terapia, autyzm, praca metodą projektu.