



Research Article

Promoting Children's Social Wellbeing through Therapeutic Landscape Quality in Public Library

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Abstract

Reading has been essential for personal growth, whereby an information-equipped individual will greatly contribute to his nation's well-being. Realizing this fact, bibliotherapy and therapeutic landscapes elements have started being emphasized in public and school libraries, while rehabilitation centers work hand-in-hand with libraries and counselors to ensure that it is being implemented in order for its benefits to be shared with many. This paper aims to study the library therapeutic elements being applied in Malaysian public libraries and how they stimulate and foster children's well-being in a conceptual research framework. In this study, data collection is carried out in a mixed-method approach within two separate phases. The initial phase of the study qualitatively approached the study via interviews while the latter stage of the research involved questionnaire distribution as a quantitative method in data collection. For the qualitative approach, a series of interviews is conducted in a semi structural method within a focus group. This is later represented in a conceptual research framework as to capture the essence of library therapeutic concepts in stimulating children's well-being.

Keywords: Bibliotherapy, therapeutic landscape, wellbeing, children, public library, reading habit

Introduction

Children today are citizens of tomorrow as they are the key players in the development of knowledge societies. In order to fulfill the needs of our children, it

is important to monitor their development especially in this new era of digital and borderless environment. Children generally go through different types of experiences and challenges as they grow. Bibliotherapy is a concept that involves the

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use of books to help children cope with their life. Bibliotherapy is no longer a strange method or practice in library service, especially the libraries in hospitals. Bibliotherapy has been widely recognized as an approach that helps librarians to better address emotional, behavioral and social concerns. Hence, with bibliotherapeutic schemes, the role of a library will be more visible and significant compared to the traditional perceptions that librarians are the custodians of information or books. Brewster's study supports that public libraries today not only serve as a space of restoration, but also the promotion of well-being, and this concept is better than as a curative environment (Brewster, 2014). Technically speaking, there has been no agreed definition of the term 'wellbeing' in current research literature. However, the term has been described as "an overarching concept regarding the quality of people's lives, whereby wellbeing is described as a dynamic process, emerging from the way in which people interact with the world around them". (Rees et al 2010). In other words, wellbeing is a state of complete mental, physical and social health which reflects the goodness of life such as happiness and life satisfaction. In the past, libraries were expected to play a role in building and maintaining knowledge gateway (Ravi, 2008). Today, however, public libraries have taken a different approach which involves providing a more therapeutic environment. Besides, the uniqueness of a library that has the value of a therapeutic landscape as mentioned in Brewster's study, public library also provides a space for restoration and the promotion of well-being, rather than a curative environment (Brewster, 2004). With the increasing and growing of social problems in Malaysia, the implementation of bibliotherapy and therapeutic scheme is also hoped to be a reliable solution.

According to Susan McLean, "you don't have to be ill to benefit from bibliotherapy as at different times we all find ourselves at different points on the extremes of high or low on the scale of wellbeing, or extremes of absent or present on the scale of mental

illness. And a program like this could help you move forward wherever you are." (McLean, 2013). Ability, possess and good criteria of reading habits, in this study, are regarded as essential elements and life skills for every citizen, especially those at the young age. This will be an asset at the basic level that needs to be nurtured due to the ability to boost a person's knowledge, build maturity and character, promote creative thinking and enhance the well-being of the person.

The public library educates, enlightens and entertains children in every locality. It is seen as an agency that provides information resources and services to individuals from early childhood until old age. Public libraries have helped to transform and improve the quality of people's lives. Research has been conducted on best practices for the public library as a therapeutic landscape (Brewster, 2014; Montealleh, 2015; Husaini H., Noordin S.A., Shuhidan S.M, 2015). This study provides an understanding of therapeutic concepts and library therapeutic elements to be considered by public libraries, librarians and bibliotherapeutic services, as well as makes recommendations to public libraries by providing a description of and a rationale for the implementation of therapeutic concepts in public library. This paper also focuses on how therapeutic service gives impact on children well-being within a public library context.

Background

In Malaysia, public libraries are under categories of state libraries, and its branches and rural libraries or community libraries have an administrative power under state government or local authority, while the role of National Library Malaysia is to channel and monitor development and operational budget on behalf of the Federal government. Specifically, there are 12, 358 libraries in Malaysia, only one (1) National Library of Malaysia, 1401 state Public Libraries, which are comprised of state (14), region (1), branch/district (173), town (15), rural (1089) and mobile (82)

libraries (NLM, 2012). Generally, the community uses the public library for different reasons, choices and social activities. Today, public libraries serve as a type of community centers which exist to support community and society's development. Students, teachers, educators, parents, and people in general use them as a medium for information sharing and knowledge benefit. It is a basic thing to use the library as an emporium to shop for knowledge, from general information to a specific area. The library can play a major role in a child's development, if it is used correctly by society. However, generally, the usage of libraries in Malaysian society is rarely exposed to the youth and children, especially those who live in rural areas. Mohamad Yusoff et al., (2013) stated that rural libraries are lacking in information on needs assessment which is to be conducted by library personnel; have outdated and unattractive reading materials (for youths); and have the provision of irrelevant materials that do not apply to the local context. As discussed by Noordin, S.A., Husaini, H. and Shuhidan S.M (2015), in many cases, rural libraries fail to construct positive attitudes among youths, as there is a failure to promote their books and services, which in turn demotivates youths from using them as they do not see any reasons for doing so.

In order to properly gain positive perception of the public library in the eyes of the people in communities, an approach to children's program and child development should be adopted more aggressively as this will inspire children at an early age to feel excited in finding knowledge and in the works of the imagination. Thus, they are likely to benefit from these vital elements of personal development throughout their lives, which both enrich themselves and enhance their contribution to society. Children would also encourage parents and other adults to make use of the library. According to Lucas (2013), bibliotherapy is considered as a useful tool when promoting child development. Teachers need to be provided with bibliotherapy education, which includes theoretical and operational

concepts of bibliotherapy. By educating teachers, they will be able to further educate children especially those who have been victims of different circumstances or have experienced more than one type of maltreatment and traumatic events (Tukhareli, 2011; Treese, 2010; Tucker, Brady, Harris & Fraser, 1993) in issues like families, life cycle and societal (Rudman, 1995). Moreover, as children also love to copy or model characters, (Lucas & Soares, 2013) when appropriately guided, bibliotherapy could be useful to them as they identify characters, and express their feelings and thoughts.

Power of Book and Literature for Children

In the article, 'A Feeling for Books' by Jennifer Burek-Pierce, a professor of library at the University of Iowa, described bibliotherapy as a method of healing (Burek-Pierce, 2010). Books, both fiction and nonfiction, pictures and chapters, all can be used for bibliotherapy. Selecting the right book depends upon how a person may react to the book so that it does its job and help the individual identify himself or herself within the book (Burek-Pierce, 2010). In the public libraries, fictional children's books are the most widely used types of literature because children are better able to identify with characters in these stories. Bibliotherapy does not claim to cure, but rather to enlighten and to promote insight. It is intended as an adjunct to treatment (Caldin, 2009). Coping mechanism is a justification of the use of books for children and students, who will be helped to modify or amend their emotional and behavioral problems. This is possible as students or children will be able to identify themselves with similar characters from the literature (Lucas, 2013). In the programs of bibliotherapy it is important to select proper books for each and individual child so he or she can benefit from reading about the characters in the stories (Lucas, 2013) that are experiencing the same conditions or events which the child is living through. For example, a child struggling with his or her parents' divorce will relate best to books

about characters whose parents are divorced.

According to Tukhareli (2011), overall, these types of literatures are used to educate individuals about the personal issues they are facing. This opinion is in line with a past researcher (Kramer, 1999) who stated that the focus of bibliotherapy is on using the literature in therapeutic ways to aid children in working through a crisis. It was reiterated by Yusof & Taharem (2006) that bibliotherapy works in the setting that a good book can model a child's self-concept. Good reading materials provide insight that would change children and adolescent behavior to face their problems. Good literature would enable them to be obedient and thoughtful of others. The highlight of the therapy is for children and adolescents to grow up to be assertive and socially well-adjusted so that they could keep themselves away from trouble and be a productive member of society.

Bibliotherapy is a method which uses books to help people, giving a new insight by information specialists and with the cooperation of psychologists. The aspect of bibliotherapeutic work can be viewed as a service that libraries provide (Brewster, 2008). According to Salimi et al. (2014), in this method, selected readings are proposed to clients and used by them in order to help them during the session. These resources are offered to individuals with an aim to help them to resolve issues; identify the needs related to their problem; and to gain new insights. Through the method of bibliotherapy, people's attitudes are effected which leads them to change their behaviors. The impact on people attitudes and behaviors is the main target of bibliotherapy in order to change the community's perception about cultivating reading habits and affecting well-being. The method depends on librarians because they are more adept than others to recommend the most readable topics based on their experiences and profession. In a past research, it is explained that the approach can be strengthened by close relationships between library and

librarians and their communities (Brewster, 2014).

As public libraries today face a challenging environment, the roles and functions of public libraries act as a community center to support the community and society development. A public library has a unique position in a community as it has an access to resources, services and facilities to provide free access to books and be able to conduct a variety of programs for the community to get involved in (Brewster, 2014). According to, Husaini H., Noordin, S.A and Shuhidan S.M. (2015), the main role of a library is not only as a provider of knowledge or information, but it also plays a role as a stress-reduction agency through their therapeutic landscape, services and activities. In the current era, public libraries need to upgrade their services and show how the library is able to contribute to the well-being of the community. Through this program, children may learn to solve different threatening problems. Past literature also discussed to introduce bibliotherapy in public libraries as it could positively affect the nature of librarians as well, as it is a new approach for librarians to communicate with the library users, since bibliotherapy program could help to spark an idea in the users (Arulanantham and Navaneethakrishnan, 2013). According to Hutchinson (2014), the library is a door to the rest of the world, a place for relation, recreational, leisure and refuge as well as a busy, active and sometimes noisy environment for collaboration (Shen, 2006; Limberg & Alexandersson, 2003). The objective of a public library is to serve and educate the community. Based on the literature reviewed, more importantly, a public library provides a platform for a reciprocal relationship between human and landscape, socio-environmental setting and human restoration (Motealleh et. Al., 2015; Korpela & Ylean, 2007; Conradson, 2005) in influencing the well-being of people.

Library Therapeutic Landscape Quality

Library therapeutic landscape quality, even though it sounds new to the library field,

but the implantation of it has started more than a decade. Brewster (2014) in the study shows the value of the public libraries with the therapeutic landscape elements which might contribute to the development of social communities. Generally; it has been concluded, there are three themes appeared. These occurred from the participants' view and to the construction of the library as a therapeutic landscape from the participants' view of the library as a space:

- a) as familiar, open and welcoming
- b) as comforting and calming
- c) as empowering

Hence, the idea of therapeutic landscape has been widely used to describe the reciprocal relationship between place and improvements in mental health which are; therapeutic landscape, socio-environment and human restoration (Brewster, 2015; Husaini, H., Noordin, SA., Shuhidan SM., 2015; Montealleh, P., 2015) influences human wellbeing that impact on the quality of life of people which is relevant to the study. As mentioned by Noordin SA., Husaini, H., Shuhidan SM., Othman NA., 2016, the functions of public libraries are more than giving services. Even, the finding of the study concluded the five main functions of the public library to the society;

- a) as a second home
- b) as a learning center
- c) a meeting place
- d) a recreational center
- e) a human developmental center

These qualities that make the public library an essential element in the community life. Their relationship, the engagement with the communities are more than just a place, the rewards of engaging with the public library are seen through many intangible qualities that are hard to define such as a place of stress release, a place that is able to promote a healthy culture of life due to the ambience and environment. Place that is safe to the community, the community enjoys the chilling and friendly environment from the concept of

therapeutic that is being implemented. It was emphasized that a public library is a space and place that is able to inspire people through the elements and function as a provider of learning materials, facilities and knowledge to the society and community.

The characteristics mentioned above indirectly proved that public library is an agent of space environment that is able to promote mental health, healthy culture, encourage wellbeing, a learning center and a therapeutic place for its users. Therefore, the landscape affordance of library therapeutic can't be denied to reduce people anger, stress, tension (Montealleh et al., 2015) even the concentration and also to enhance mental health and enlargement of the library space potential to increase learning for their personal development but also the community. These characteristics led to therapeutic landscape as places of opportunity, places of restoration, places of sociability and places of stability (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). The original concept framework from therapeutic landscape like natural/built environment, social environment and spiritual environment still remain but the prospect is seen in the library environment as a place from the criteria of services, facilities and collection. As public library is a service-oriented business; it is important to measure the user's satisfaction needs to remain the quality of the services and facilities.

Library Therapeutic Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed conceptual framework of library therapeutic which is constructed based on previous studies. The first dimension which is the library represents the roles and functions, objectives, policy, services and facilities of library. With regards to therapeutic elements in the library, the study refers to past studies carried out by Brewster (2009) and Janavievce (2010) which consist of two elements which are the bibliotherapeutic scheme; and the elements of therapeutic landscape. Bibliotherapy schemes involve the

bibliotherapy category, process, practices and strategy which are put forward by Janaviciene (2010), Brewster (2010), Shrodes (1950), Pardeck (1994), Rubin (1978, 1979). It is a program to help people change their perspective through reading books. Through the program, the role of the library will be more visible and significant. Moreover, this practices help to clarify that there is something more unique about the public library and its qualities that are subjectively therapeutic for some people (Brewster, 2014).

The second element is therapeutic landscapes, a theory developed by Wilber Gesler (1992). The original concept of therapeutic landscape is from health geographical thinking. The framework of

therapeutic landscape consists of natural and built environments, social environment and spiritual environment. According to Jiang (2014), research evidence has explained how and why natural and landscape sceneries ease people's pressure and change their mood from various perspectives. This element helps to promote the feeling of well-being among the society. The third element is social well-being by Keyes, (1998). Basically, it refers to the quality of life, and the goodness of life by which people can live successfully and happily within the environment. People require attention and satisfaction from many aspects in the surroundings such as built environment, mental health, education, recreation and leisure time as well as social belonging.

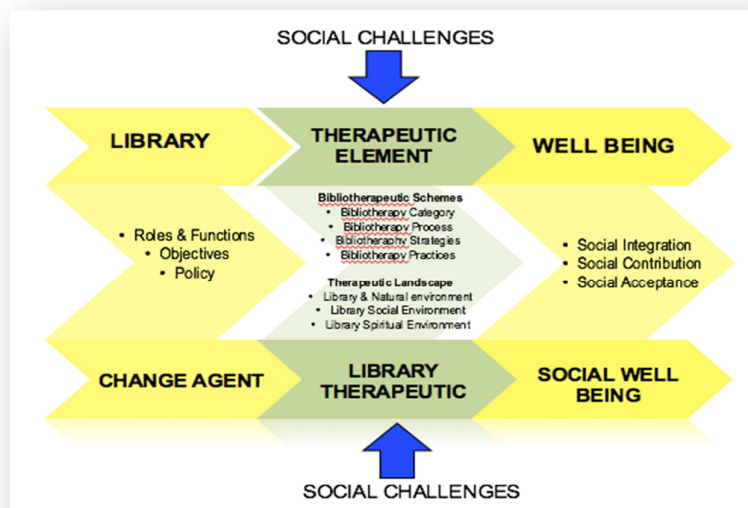


Fig. 1: The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Methodology

The aim of the research is to provide a conceptual understanding on the adoption of therapeutic elements in the context of public libraries to fostering children's wellbeing. As for the research paradigm, the researcher subscribes to the

pragmatism research philosophy. The research of the study will be in two phases of the approach. According to Hancock (2002), qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena; therefore, the qualitative research approach was adopted in the study. Its aim is to explore the adoption of

therapeutic elements in the Malaysian public library. During the pilot study, semi-structured interviews and focus group were conducted. The framework developed in this paper provides an opportunity for further investigation. Hence, in order to validate the framework and the corresponding propositions, survey research involving public libraries is planned to be conducted in Malaysia. Apparently, the unit of analysis would be the individual users of public libraries.

Conclusion

The study will improve library approach in library services and practices. Such services and practice will bring values to develop trustworthiness between libraries, users and society. Trustworthiness is a key to attract children's specially to come over to the library. Overall, public libraries can play an active role in their community's social wellbeing by providing them with tools in the form of books, resources and places to allow them to explore, understand, and potentially improve their emotions or actions. In Husaini H., Noordin, S.A and Shuhidan S.M's (2015) article on bibliotherapy applied to public libraries in Malaysia, they state that bibliotherapy is a way for librarians to help people through their "emotional, behavioral and social concerns". While library therapeutic landscape is part of the therapeutic elements due to the affordances to reduce the stress and indirectly develop promotes a healthy culture. In conclusion, bibliotherapy and therapeutic landscape can be a very effective tool to support the society. It helps to define the further role of public libraries' service. By knowing which characteristics are critical, practitioners would be able to react accordingly as to ensure that Public libraries are maximally utilized. The research will improve the ability of therapeutic relationship between libraries and users. Libraries need to provide high impact services and facilities in order to manifest the role of public libraries in building the society and nation.

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