



BIBLIOTHERAPY INITIATIVES AS A MEANS OF CREATIVITY IN PRISONS: INTERNATIONAL AND HUNGARIAN CASES REFLECTED IN THE PROFESSIONAL LITERATURE

Márta MIKLÓSI✉

Department of Cultural Studies, Institute of Educational Studies and Cultural Management, University of Debrecen, 4032 Egyetem tér 1., Debrecen, Hungary

Article History:

- received 6 March 2024
- accepted 13 September 2024

Abstract. Prison libraries open a window to the world. Initiatives in close cooperation with organizations outside the prison form a bridge to culture, providing events for detainees that, figuratively speaking, take them beyond the prison walls. This essay examines prison library reading groups, initiatives, and activities that may contribute to detainees' pulling through the period spent in prison and shaping their personalities. We examine bibliotherapy and its advantages. Providing prison library services to detainees can be a powerful experience for detainees serving their sentences, and the far-reaching and lasting effects of reading are unquestionable. The popularity of the programmes is unbroken. In addition to the detainees' getting out of the cells and establishing social bonds, these programmes typically improve the detainee's general mood, reduce their anxiety, and improve their communication and emotional expression skills. In the second part of the article, we collect exciting and unique initiatives from all over the world. The presented cases clearly show that the provision of various reading therapies and cultural and educational activities for detainees can contribute to making prison sentences more tolerable. Collecting innovative experiences and creative solutions is helpful because these initiatives can even serve as models for other countries.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, creativity in prison, cultural activities, detainees' cultural possibility, initiatives, prison library.

✉Corresponding author. E-mail: miklosimarta@unideb.hu

1. Introduction

Serving a prison sentence is a life-altering experience for all detainees. In penitentiary institutions, where detainees are deprived of fundamental human rights, the promotion of creative activities is crucial, even if, at first glance, it may seem a luxury that people convicted of crimes do not deserve (Calhoun, 2020). Engaging in any creative activity reduces the detainee's focus on isolation and emerging health and mental health problems, thus contributing to emotional stability. Creative activity helps them to regain balance by enhancing emotional stability and influencing their adaptation to their particular life situation (Gajewski, 2020). The practice of creative activity also allows the detainee to "escape" and retreat, even if only for a few moments or hours, into the world he has created. It allows him to escape from a harsh environment and promotes sensitivity, emotions, and positive thinking, which are key elements of human existence (Caron, 2021; Gajewski, 2020; Gussak, 1997; Gussak & Cohen-Liebman, 2001; Hall, 1997). This emphasis on promoting these key elements of human existence should resonate with society members, fostering empathy and support for these initiatives.

However, supporting creative activities within prison walls benefits not only the detainees, but the prison system and society as a whole. Creative activities, in addition to providing them with dignity, play a significant role in reducing disciplinary offences and contribute to reducing recidivism (Calhoun, 2020). This underscores the power of these activities in the hands of prison authorities to make a tangible difference. One key element in the promotion of rehabilitation and reintegration is detainees learning to process their experiences of perpetrating the crime, serving the sentence, losing their freedom. This therapeutic process may include bibliotherapy, which is particularly favourable in the case of persons detained in closed institutions, especially those confined in penitentiary institutions (hereinafter: prison).

Literary works can open channels that promote great possibilities in communication, which, in its turn, efficiently supports the success of the therapeutic process, facilitating personality development. Fixed patterns and attitudes – which have a role in the individual's relationship with themselves, others and, ultimately, society – are susceptible to shaping (Gálosi, 2020, p. 31).

This essay will examine prison library reading groups, initiatives, activities, which may contribute – through the development of detainees' skills, the mitigation of their anxiety, and several other positive effects – to detainees pulling through the period spent in prison as well as shaping their personalities. The following questions will be discussed: why is bibliotherapy important in prison? What positive impacts can literature therapy sessions have for detainees? What are some examples of initiatives and good practices of this area globally? What about Hungarian prisons – do they have literature therapy programmes? These are some of the questions visited in the essay by processing the international and Hungarian professional literature.

2. Bibliotherapy and its advantages

Bibliotherapy (literature therapy) derives Greek *biblion* – book and *therapeía* – healing, referring to the healing power of books and the use of books to help people solve problems (ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1982). Bibliotherapy is defined as “the guided reading of written materials in gaining understanding or solving problems relevant to a person's therapeutic needs” (Riordan & Wilson, 1989, p. 506). Reading and prison libraries provide an escape from the stressors in prison by giving detainees a place to find comfort and play a crucial role in promoting convicts' mental health by reducing stress and improving well-being (Finlay & Bates, 2018; Han, 2023). In his theory about the purpose of prison libraries, Rubin (1973) propounds that bibliotherapy is perhaps libraries' most important contribution to detainees' rehabilitation.

In Gálosi's (2020) definition, literature therapy is a therapy effecting personality development through using texts suitable for treating several different psychic disorders. Healing with narrative and story is almost as old as humanity itself and was always used for purposes of teaching as well as solving problems. It is recommended that bibliotherapy should be carried out by trained professionals (such as librarians) who are experienced in its use. Before beginning bibliotherapy, however, the practitioner must remember that it is more than a random recommendation of a particular book to an individual as it is a deliberate action

that requires careful planning (ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1982). Bibliotherapy must be carried out with considerable care, and not all professionals have the necessary personal training to be a facilitators of the process. Those involved must have personal stability and the ability to empathise with others without moralising, threatening, or commanding (ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1982). Concerning the types of bibliography, we have to highlight that Rubin (1979) distinguished the following types:

1. Traditional bibliotherapy (participant reads literature himself/herself; written literature is read to participant);
2. Literatherapy means that oral literature is communicated to the participant;
3. Creative writing therapy (participant creates literary products, poems, short stories, diary entries, life history recollections, etc. – they are written works);
4. Creative orating therapy (participant creates literary products orally, e.g., a poem or short story, or an oral diary or an oral life history, etc. – they are oral works).

Hász (2001) differentiates bibliotherapy according to the orientation of the session, distinguishing between receptive bibliotherapy (where participants read a work of fiction and after it, they share their thoughts) and productive bibliotherapy, where participants create a literary text on their own, related to a given theme. The literary works used in the session can also be as diverse as fairy tales, myths, epics, poems, short stories, novels, novel excerpts, and religious works (Gulyás, 2015).

During such therapy the literary work processed, a short story, for instance, motivates the detainee to think, then inspiring them to joint work, self-reflection, developing their self-knowledge. Identification with the stories is characterised by the detainees working with several problem-solving strategies without any consequences, and the goal is to ensure that later in life they will not make decisions based on impulses and emotions, but choose between solutions more consciously (Gálosi, 2020). Self-knowledge can help detainees question and change their value systems and behaviours. Initiatives based on reading and writing, common activities are favourable for any age group because they enhance self-esteem, self-knowledge, tolerance, the skill of discussing thoughts and feelings. They become more open-minded and better understand others' viewpoints, their coping strategies and problem-solving skill improve, and thus their personality is developing in the prison environment while undergoing a strong process of personality development (Uzoezi Emasealu, 2019; Krolak, 2019).

With the help of literature, detainees can begin to comprehend and process their own actions, learn the consequences of their crimes, and enhancing empathy can go hand in hand with experiencing the pain caused to others (Kiss, 2018). Reading and processing the literary text together helps them to embrace their punishment, through the texts the perpetrators can express their own feelings, relieve their inner tensions and develop their communication skills (Kiss, 2018; Waxler & Trounstine, 1999). All of these can contribute to getting through the prison years, and after their release, detainees can reintegrate into society, their workplace and their family, and avoid repeat offence (Schutt et al., 2013; Trounstine & Waxler, 2005). In group bibliotherapy sessions, detainees can increase their tolerance towards each other during the joint discussions, which makes it possible to avoid

causing additional pain to each other in their confinement, which is one aspect of social well-being (Billington, 2011; Kiss, 2018). Robinson and Billington's (2012) study describes four types of well-being specifically in relation to literature therapy in prisons. In addition to social well-being (acceptance of others' points of view, development of communication, involvement of isolated people), we also include emotional/psychological well-being (development of self-expression, recreation), educational well-being (willingness to work with "difficult" books, volunteering and motivation in relation to the activity, the involvement of people with different levels of education), and organisational well-being (the positive experiences of the staff when working with detainees, compared to their expectations, the participants show a greater willingness to engage in more serious reading and are more motivated) (Robinson & Billington, 2012).

In addition to popularising reading, these initiatives contribute to the development of detainee's use of their mother tongue, to increasing literacy and an aesthetic sense, as well as to catching up in the field of culture, so it can be interpreted as a definitive element of lifelong learning (Béres & Csorba-Simon, 2013).

Detainees attend literature therapy group sessions in order to make the most of their time spent in prison, but there may be many other reasons behind applying for bibliotherapy: in addition to the sessions being a sensible free-time activity, other reasons include getting out of the cells, meeting other detainees other than cellmates; also, in the case of male groups, the interest in a female group leader (Kiss, 2018). We can therefore conclude that from the perspective of the participants, the rationale behind applying for the sessions can be manifold.

On the other hand, therapeutic goals can involve various different issues, regardless of the motivation for applying, including the development of patience, tolerance, reading and comprehension skills, as well as the enhancement of self-knowledge and the reduction of depression (Tung-Hsueh Liu et al., 2009; Kiss, 2018; Pardini et al., 2014). The aim of bibliotherapy sessions with female detainees can also be to process issues of female identity, feminine life paths and crises, and, in the case of detainees with families at home, to deepen the father–child or mother–child relationship (Billington et al., 2016; Robinson & Billington, 2012).

After reading a work in bibliotherapy sessions, detainees can learn to form opinions, express their feelings, and reflect upon their lives. In addition to these tasks, we should not forget that for detainees, resocialisation is a goal that must be kept in mind, one of the tools of which can be the development of resocialisation. The latter is assisted by bibliotherapy in a way that by getting to know the literary text, the detainee-reader has a new opportunity to see

"their problems from a different perspective, it allows them to think about various solutions without consequences, to get to know other values and ways of life, which can be an engine of change for their personality and lifepath" (Béres & Csorba-Simon, 2013, p. 252).

Detainees may have a more nuanced and at the same time more prosocial worldview, as well as their view of people, life, and values.

3. Bibliotherapy initiatives worldwide

Ideally, a prison library provides a wide range of services, thus aiming to meet the educational, informational, and recreational needs of detainees. In addition to providing easy access to printed, digital, and reading materials, prison libraries also provide many other services, such as running reading groups and book clubs, organising bibliotherapy and creative writing sessions, discussion groups, authors' visits, and theatre workshops (Krolak, 2019). Numerous examples from around the world show that there are many innovative ways to optimally use the opportunities, library stock and library space available in prison libraries. The range of ideas offered by prison libraries often simply depend on the openness and inventiveness of the staff. Very often even detainees themselves show initiative and organise various literacy programmes, or there are organisations and volunteers from outside the prisons to provide them with help organising these (Krolak, 2019).

3.1. Bibliotherapy initiatives outside Europe

Several initiatives in Africa are organised by the British charity *African Prisons Project* (On Purpose, 2017–2025a). This organisation was established in 2007 with the aim of developing the skills and abilities of detainees and prison staff, supporting them to understand the legislation and laws that apply to them and to be aware of their rights (On Purpose, 2017–2025b). One of the means of *African Prisons Project* in their work to this end is develop and reinforce prison. *Book Aid International* (2023), a British charity working in the field of book donation and library development, supports *African Prisons Project's* work by donating brand new books to 14 prison libraries *African Prisons Project* operates in Uganda and Kenya. These libraries offer more than just borrowing books, they organise a number of reading support programmes for detainees. To promote the joy and importance of reading, the library at Luzira Upper Prison (LUP), Luzira, Uganda, for example, hosts a book club run by one of the detainees along with *African Prisons Project* staff. On Monday mornings, the detainees gather together to discuss their latest reading experiences. The session also provides an opportunity for detainees with poorer abilities to practice their reading skills and improve their general skills together with more advanced readers (Book Aid International, 2023). For detainees around the world, books are not only escapism: they open up a gateway to further education. In Luzira, Kampala, Uganda, for example, several book club participants reported that their newfound love of reading led them to pursue education to complete the schooling they had left unfinished as children (Book Aid International, 2023).

Another Ugandan initiative, also in LUP, is linked to the organisation entitled *Pen Uganda* (Pen International, 2022). This is a creative writing project that resulted in a 150-page book published in 2018 titled *As I Stood Dead before the World: Creative Writing from Luzira Prison* (Kahyana et al., 2025). The book is divided into three parts: poems, short stories, and plays. About 25 detainees from LUP in Kampala – both men and women – contributed 32 poems, 9 short stories, and 8 short dramas to the volume (Kahyana et al., 2025; Musinguzi, 2020).

In another African country, Kenya, with impact from the *African Prisons Project*-led project, the Lang'ata Women's Prison (LWP), Nairobi, Kenya, library provides access for more than 600 female detainees and their children, as well as prison staff and their families, to appro-

appropriate educational materials for children and adults, as well as programmes for detainees (On Purpose, 2017–2025a). A participant in one such cultural programme, the creative writing workshop, reported on his experience in LWP:

"I don't want to talk about what happened then, it was just a moment in which I don't recognize myself. I want to talk about today and tomorrow. I want to be a writer, not just a detainee who is judged and branded only based on the crime she committed".

The leader of the creative writer's workshop said:

"The class nodded and we silently agreed that writing could lead beyond the prison bars. And beyond the bloody moments that landed these women in prison, I see their gentleness. Their compassion and patience, as they listen to each other, even in the most difficult situations" (Bowden, 2018; Ogembo, 2019).

Prison library activities in Algerian prisons vary from institution to institution, detainees encounter different opportunities and programmes. In Algerian prisons the librarians organise competitions and events, making it more attractive to visit the prison library. The information needed to participate in the competition is hidden in books found in the prison library in addition to the task of summarising the contents of the books – an activity that promotes creative writing and reading comprehension. Other activities include participating in debates and discussions; organising local and international celebrations, such as 16 April, Knowledge Day; workshops on poetry, creative arts, religion, and literature; lectures by writers, professors, and scientists. In this regard, informative posters are made to invite detainees to the library and draw their attention to participate in the library's events and activities, even the prison radio is used to promote library visits (Mehdi, 2017).

Creative writing also has therapeutic potential and contributes to the rehabilitation of detainees. Founded in 2002 in Washington, District of Columbia, United States, *Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop* (2025) offers bimonthly book club discussions, creative writing exercises, and poetry workshops to juvenile detainees. When entering the programme, only 5% of the youth said they had read or enjoyed reading, and only 10% had written poetry before. After participating in the programme, 75% declared themselves to be active readers and 90% to be writers. In 2015, the dropout rate of participants was 10%, compared to the national rate, which is between 70% and 90% (Hanemann & Krolak, 2017).

After sampling the above practices outside Europe, in the next chapter we will highlight some positive examples of bibliotherapy initiatives in European prisons, without aiming for completeness.

3.2. Bibliotherapy initiatives in Europe

In England, we come across many programmes and initiatives that attempt to make the time spent in prison easier to get through, whether it is reading together, informal reading support groups or detainees reading to their children. At the Liverpool Prison, Liverpool, England, United Kingdom (UK), led by *The Reader* (2025), a non-governmental organisation (NGO), 35 female detainees participated in the programme called *Get into Reading*, a project that investigated the therapeutic effects of reading literature (poems, fiction, plays, short stories) together in prison communities. The focus of the *Get into Reading* programme was shared

reading, and through specific examples and testimonies of the detainees and the staff who read together with them, it shows how important such a programme is for the mental health of the detainees, as it was confirmed that the therapy enhanced the well-being of detainees (Billington, 2011).

Another British organization, *Prison Reading Groups* (2025), promotes the spread of reading groups in prisons, providing support and funding to those who run reading groups. The project started in 1999 and currently has more than 40 groups in more than 35 prisons across the country. The groups are created informally and detainees are encouraged to read. Participants are free to choose what they read, and after reading the books, they pass them on to other detainees. The organisation also organises writer–reader meetings and family days in the prison, as well as provides books for children visiting their incarcerated parents (Prison Reading Groups, 2025).

The initiative of the charity *Storybook Dads* (2025b) is available in 107 prisons across the country, and every year between 5000 and 6000 stories are recorded by detainees for their children, which children receive along with the storybook from the detained parent. Today, this initiative also works in women's prisons, so mothers can read stories to their children (Storybook Dads, 2025a).

As a result of the British initiative, many other European prisons have detainees reading fairy tales to their children and making audio recordings, such as Croatia. Croatian Reading Association, a nonprofit organisation encouraging, researching, and popularising reading and literacy, in partnership with *RODA – Parents in Action* (2025) participated in a reading programme specially organised for fathers in the three largest Croatian penitentiaries: Požega Penitentiary, Požega, Croatia; Glina Penitentiary, Glina, Croatia; and Lepoglava Prison, Lepoglava, Croatia. The implementation of the *Croatian Prison Reading Program for Detainees and Their Children*¹ contributed to increasing social awareness of the problems, needs, and rights of children whose parents are in prison, and drew attention to the need to support families (Berak & Čunović, 2023). Support for literary activities and creative writing can also be found in other Croatian prisons, there are many workshops that help detainees, for example, in publishing, creating prison newspapers and magazines (Šimunić et al., 2014).

A similar initiative can be found in Bulgaria, where the prison libraries host the editorial offices of six Bulgarian prison newspapers. In one prison, the editorial team consists of 5 detainees and 10 permanent staff: reporters and correspondents, who meet regularly in the prison library to discuss their monthly issue (Tsvetkova & Andrekova, 2016). In addition to the publication of prison newspapers, it is also possible to publish literary publications, detainees' works, such as poems or short stories, and in addition, recognition and awards can be given to detainees with outstanding achievements. It is also in Bulgarian prison libraries where the *Great Reading* project takes place, during which fourteen detainees regularly gather in the library, each of them presenting a Bulgarian literary work, and then they discuss, analyse, process, discuss, and perform these together with the other participants. The project is organised in the form of a competition between different prisons, with the winner receiving books

¹ The incarcerated fathers read the stories aloud as if they were reading it directly to their child, and prison employees helped them record the audio. The audio recording along with the book was then sent to the child. This is a very encouraging way of reinforcing a potentially strained relationship with the father, especially for young children.

as a reward. This initiative, in addition to nurturing a joy of literature and a love of reading, supports team building and communication (Tsvetkova & Andrekova, 2016). Bulgarian prison libraries also provide a number of other activities to promote the culture of reading and writing, to encourage library use, and to increase and update the library stock. The latter activity is particularly noteworthy, as prison library stocks are often outdated, making them less attractive for detainees. Library programmes include literary and poetry clubs, book discussion forums, creative writing workshops, active reading clubs, public reading evenings of own essays and poems, fun competitions such as quiz competitions, quizzes organised in the library where library materials are required to be used for the competition. In addition, they organise workshops, lectures, and discussions related to the work of famous Bulgarian and foreign writers, poets, and scientists. To celebrate Bulgarian poetry, the best reciters of national poetry are invited to present their skills on stage. They organise reading marathons as well as offer various programmes in connection with national and international holidays (for example, World Book Day), anniversaries, the anniversaries of births and deaths of international and Bulgarian poets, organise book exhibitions, *etc.* (Tsvetkova & Andrekova, 2016).

In France, the opportunity to organise cultural programmes in prisons opened up after 1999, when an organization called the Correctional Department of Reintegration and Probation (CDRP), Paris, France, was created. In order to familiarise the detainees with the prison library as much as possible, CDRP initiated the development of a project related to reading, literature and books, during which it cooperated with the organisers of community events, libraries, and cultural associations. Activities were also planned around cultural events nationwide, initiated by the Ministry of Culture (France), Paris, France, such as the *Reading Festival* (orig. *Lire en fête*), the *Spring of Poets* (orig. *Le Printemps des Poètes*), and the *Week of French Language and Francophonie* (orig. *Semaine de la Langue Française et de la Francophonie*) (Belet & Pujol, 2008; Cramard, 2011, p. 555; Guidez, 2001). Regular workshops are usually led by volunteers who belong to organisations that promote and support literacy and literary programmes. Such programmes include, for example, workshops aimed at improving the writing skills of illiterate or undereducated detainees; storytelling workshops organised for detainees with families or reading workshops where participants practice reading aloud. An interesting initiative is the operation of reading groups where detainees choose books related to an important current topic, sometimes even adding a visit from an author to the programme, for example, since 1995 volunteers have been running a reading group in connection with the *Chambéry–Savoie First Novel Festival* (orig. *Festival du premier roman de Chambéry–Savoie*)² (Belet & Pujol, 2008; Cramard, 2011, p. 555; Guidez, 2001).

In Portugal, the Directorate-General for Books, Archives and Libraries of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (Portugal), Lisbon, Portugal, has been developing the *Reading without Borders* programme since 1998, resulting from a partnership with the Portuguese Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services, Lisbon, Portugal, and the cooperation of municipal public libraries. This collaboration supports a number of initiatives for detainees, including the donation of books to prison libraries, the organization of local awareness

² In this programme the detainees are also part of a group of 3000 people who read debut novels over the course of a year during the festival and then vote which authors should come and meet the readers at the festival. One or two such author meetings are organised in a penitentiary, so detainees can also participate in these programmes (Cramard, 2011).

campaigns, an ongoing contact kept with authors, meet-the-author events, reading and writing competitions. In this context, the support of public libraries is essential for the implementation of the programme; there are already 24 public libraries in Portugal that cooperate with prisons in its region (Dores et al., 2013; Duarte Eiras, 2022).

3.3. Bibliotherapy initiatives in Hungary

Bibliotherapy sessions in Hungary are sporadic: these are characteristically programmes organised in individual prisons by prison psychologists, NGOs, or volunteers. Four such practices are noteworthy here.

Gálosi (2020) held group sessions based on literary therapy at the Békés County Penitentiary Institute, Békés County, Hungary, in 2019. The group was organised 5 times with the participation of 6 detainees, who analysed a short story each time. One of the conditions for joining the group was individual motivation, where the psychologist holding the group sessions ensured a homogenous distribution of intellectual skills among the group members through pre-screening (Gálosi, 2020). The purpose of the sessions was basically complex personality development, as well as deepening self-knowledge and self-reflection. Processing was greatly facilitated by the reiteration and expression of personal experiences. The researcher's hypothesis was confirmed, according to which, based on the homogeneous group composition and as a result of joint work, the level of anxiety decreases, the group's general mood improves, along with the improvement of communication and emotional expression skills (Gálosi, 2020).

Béres and Csorba-Simon (2015) held bibliotherapy sessions for female detainees at the Baranya County Penitentiary, Pécs, Hungary. The aim of the initiative was to develop patience, tolerance, reading and comprehension skills, as well as self-knowledge. According to the experience of the two specialists, the self-image of detainees is often not realistic, they find it difficult to form opinions, express feelings, and reflect on themselves (Béres & Csorba-Simon, 2015). Similar sessions were also held for juveniles, and according to their experience, they have to be particularly careful when choosing texts, because in their case, they get stuck more often due to the lack of reading comprehension. This group was also characterised by impulsivity and a lack of attention; the group leader had to put a lot of emphasis on discipline and the observance of communicational frameworks. The use of therapeutic elements that mobilised a different kind of attention, required a more active participation (e.g. dramatisation) within the participants' own area of interest (e.g. songs and their lyrics) were found to a favourable method for this (Béres & Csorba-Simon, 2013).

In 2010, the Heves County Penitentiary Institute, Eger, Hungary, launched a storytelling programme titled, after an initiative from UK, *Storybook Dads* (2025a, 2025b), under the leadership of Luzsi Margó and Ildikó Boldizsár, and serves the reintegration of women detainees and their children, as well as the reconstruction of family bonds. The goal was twofold: on the one hand, the programme provided emotional support to the children of parents who were in prison, and on the other hand, it aimed to improve the reading skills of the detainees and motivated them to participate in education. Within the framework of the initiative, the imprisoned mothers took part in fairy tale therapy sessions and then sent their children audio material as a gift (Szávai, 2017).

In the Veszprém County Prison, Veszprém, Hungary, bibliotherapy group sessions led by psychologist Zsuzsa Kovács and based on existential psychotherapy were organised on a weekly basis, along Yalom's (2017) four ultimate concerns: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Detainees who were interested could participate in an open group (5–12 male detainees), so overall there were those who participated in the group's work for years. According to the researcher's experience, anxiety is very high in this environment, but by detainees' reflecting on their existential situation, those participating in the group are capable of living their own lives with greater attention and responsibility (Kovács, 2011; Yalom, 2017).

Rezsőfi (2018) succinctly summarized why therapeutic work with texts is of a special kind, which is common to all foreign and Hungarian cases. During the literature therapy sessions, the group members and the group leader have something to hold on to, because a well-chosen text can immediately lend a voice to deeper experiences and feelings. This is accompanied by shock, a feeling of familiarity, wonder, and makes us stop and take a closer look at what we are facing. The fact that an outsider, a person independent of a group (for example, a writer, a poet) shows something that all detainees can relate to, brings out the feeling of universality, the sense of security, and an understanding that the problems of human existence affect everyone without exception.

4. Conclusions

Providing prison library services to detainees can be a powerful experience for them serving their sentences, and the far-reaching and lasting effects of reading are unquestionable. Prison libraries open a window to the world. Initiatives carried out in close cooperation with organisations outside the prison form a bridge to culture, providing events for detainees in the prison that, figuratively speaking, take them beyond the prison walls. Detainees also deserve the same library services and reading therapy sessions – naturally by laying emphasis on security – which are available to all citizens, since they are not deprived of all their rights, “only” their freedom.

In the study, we tried to collect interesting and unique initiatives from all over the world. The presented cases clearly show that the provision of various reading therapy, cultural and educational activities organised for detainees can contribute to making prison sentence more tolerable, despite the difficulties and insufficient funds.

The popularity of the programmes is unbroken, detainees can apply voluntarily, taking security aspects into account, but there is always a huge interest in these initiatives. In addition to the detainees' getting out of the cells and establishing social bonds, these programmes typically improve the detainees' general mood, reduce their anxiety, and improve their communication and emotional expression skills.

Dedicated prison library staff can organise successful programmes for detainees and even adapt them to their interests and needs. It is definitely useful to collect innovative experiences and creative solutions, because these initiatives can even serve as models for other countries.

The experience of prison libraries in organising programmes clearly shows the wide range of opportunities these programmes offer in terms of providing access to education, information and recreation, improving the literacy of detainees and supporting their mental

development, whether it is a literature workshop, a creative writing course, editing a prison newspaper, a meet-the-author event or a reading marathon.

Acknowledgements

This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (BO/00099/24/2).

References

- Belet, D., & Pujol, M. (2008). Les bibliothèques en prison [Libraries in prison]. *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, 5, 40–44.
- Berak, S., & Čunović, K. (2023). Croatian prison reading program for detainees and their children. *Naple Sister Libraries*. <https://www.naplesisterlibraries.org/croatian-prison-reading-program-for-detainees-and-their-children/>
- Béres, J., & Csorba-Simon, E. (2015). Biblioterápia nőknek [Bibliotherapy for women]. *Könyvtári Figyelő*, 2, 178–195.
- Béres, J., & Csorba-Simon, E. (2013). Fejlesztő biblioterápia fiatalokú fogvatartottakkal [Developmental bibliotherapy with juvenile prisoners]. *Könyvtári Figyelő*, 2, 251–268.
- Billington, J. (2011). Reading for life: Prison reading groups in practice and theory. *Critical Survey*, 23(3), 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2011.230306>
- Billington, J., Longden, E., & Robinson, J. (2016). A literature-based intervention for women prisoners: Preliminary findings. *International Journal of Prison Health*, 12(4), 230–243. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-09-2015-0031>
- Book Aid International. (2023). *Our theory of change: How we change lives in the long-term*. <https://bookaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Book-Aid-International-Theory-of-Change.pdf>
- Bowden, T. (2018). The tyger women of Langata women's maximum-security prison, Kenya. *Lucy Writers*. <https://lucywritersplatform.com/2018/12/09/the-tyger-women-of-langata-womens-maximum-security-prison-kenya/>
- Calhoun, L. R. (2020). Incarceration and creative expression: Why prisons should increase access to art materials for incarcerated people. *Washington and Lee University Digital Archive*. <https://digitalarchive.wlu.edu/islandora/incarceration-and-creative-expression-why-prisons-should-increase-access-art-materials>
- Caron, B. (2021). *Reading and writing in prison*. https://www.academia.edu/60201290/Reading_and_Writing_in_Prison
- Cramard, O. (2011). The long development of prison libraries in France. *Library Trends*, 59(3), 544–562. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2011.0007>
- Dores, A. P., Pontes, N., & Loureiro, R. (2013). *Prison conditions in Portugal*. Antigone Edizioni.
- Duarte Eiras, B. (2022). A window into the world: Libraries and librarians in prisons. *Naple Forum*. <https://naple.eu/a-window-into-the-world-libraries-and-librarians-in-prisons/>
- ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. (1982). *Bibliotherapy: Fact sheet*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED234338.pdf>
- Finlay, J., & Bates, J. (2018). What is the role of the prison library? The development of a theoretical foundation. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 5(2), 120–139.
- Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop. (2025). *Incarcerated youths writing new chapters in their lives*. <https://freemindsbookclub.org/>
- Gajewski, M. (2020). Pedagogical and neuropsychological aspects of prisoner creativity. *Acta Neuropsychologica*, 18(1), 97–125. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0014.0189>
- Gálosi, N. (2020). Irodalomterápián alapuló csoportfoglalkozás a Békés Megyei Büntetés-végrehajtási Intézetben [Group activity based on literature therapy at the Békés County Penitentiary]. *Börtönügyi Szemle: A Büntetés-végrehajtási Szervezet szakmai és tudományos folyóirata*, 2, 31–39.

- Guidez, J. (2001). Lire en prison: Les bibliothèques en milieu pénitentiaire [Reading in prison: Libraries in prison settings]. *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, 47(5), 74–78.
- Gulyás, E. (2015). A biblioterápia kialakulása, fejlődése, helye a könyvtárban [The emergence, development, and place of bibliotherapy in the library]. *Könyv, Könyvtár, Könyvtáros*, 24(1), 14–26.
- Gussak, D. (1997). Breaking through barriers: Advantages of art therapy in prison. In D. Gussak & E. Virshup (Eds.), *Drawing time: Art therapy in prisons and other correctional settings* (pp. 1–12). Magnolia Street Publishers.
- Gussak, D., & Cohen-Liebman, M. S. (2001). Investigation vs. intervention: Forensic art therapy and art therapy in forensic settings. *American Journal of Art Therapy*, 40, 123–135.
- Hall, N. (1997). Creativity and incarceration: The purpose of art in a prison culture. In D. Gussak & E. Virshup (Eds.), *Drawing time: Art therapy in prisons and other correctional settings* (pp. 25–41). Magnolia Street Publishers.
- Han, K. (2023). The role of the prison library. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 9(3), 108–112. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ijeh.v9i3.10320>
- Hanemann, U., & Krolak, L. (2017). *Fostering a culture of reading and writing: Examples of dynamic literate environments*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Hász, E. (2001). A biblioterápia oktatásának elméleti és gyakorlati kérdései II [Theoretical and practical issues of bibliotherapy education II]. *Magyar felsőoktatás*, 27(5–6), 55–56.
- Kahyana, D., Kisiki, B. G., & Lanwaka, B. (Eds.). (2025). *As i stood dead before the world: Creative writing from Luzira prison*. Pen Uganda.
- Kiss, A. (2018). Biblioterápia a büntetés – végrehajtási intézményekben [Bibliotherapy in penal institutions]. *Ügyészek lapja: tudományos-szakmai folyóirat*. <https://ugyeszeklapja.hu/?p=4024>
- Kovács, Z. (2011). *Egzisztenciális szemléletű irodalomterápia fogvatartottakkal* [Existential literature therapy with prisoners]. <https://www.irodalomterapia.hu/publikaciok/yalom.pdf>
- Krolak, L. (2019). *Books beyond bars: The transformative potential of prison libraries*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Mehdi, S. (2017). *The reality of prison libraries in Algeria and their agreement with IFLA guidelines: Empirical study of four libraries in educational reform organisations*. Noor Publishing.
- Musinguzi, B. (2020). Luzira: Freeing minds through poetry and stories. *The East African*. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/luzira-freeing-minds-through-poetry-and-stories-1424170>
- Ogembo, W. (2019). *Female recidivism and prison rehabilitation: The case of Lang'ata women maximum security prison* [Master's Thesis, University of Nairobi]. Nairobi, Kenya. https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/108814/Ogembo_Female%20Recidivism%20And%20Prison%20Rehabilitation.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- On Purpose. (2017–2025a). *African prisons project*. <https://onpurpose.org/en/our-community/african-prisons-project/>
- On Purpose. (2017–2025b). *What we do*. <https://onpurpose.org/en/about-us/#what-we-do>
- Pardini, J., Scogin, F., Schriver, J., Domino, M., Wilson, D., & LaRocca, M. (2014). Efficacy and process of cognitive bibliotherapy for the treatment of depression in jail and prison inmates. *Psychological Services*, 11(2), 141–152. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033378>
- Pen International. (2022). *Ugandan PEN*. <https://www.pen-international.org/centre-locations/crzsv0nqfey-pflewm7ix7902vanow6>
- Prison Reading Groups. (2025). *Promoting reading and reading groups in prison*. <https://prisonreading-groups.org.uk/>
- Rezsőfi, J. (2018). Biblioterápia felnőtt férfi elítéltekkel [Bibliotherapy with adult male prisoners]. *Börtönügyi Szemle: Börtönügyi Szemle: A Büntetés-végrehajtási Szervezet szakmai és tudományos folyóirata*, 2, 67–88.
- Riordan, R. J., & Wilson, L. S. (1989). Bibliotherapy: Does it work? *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 67(9), 506–508. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1989.tb02131.x>
- Robinson, J., & Billington, J. (2012). *An evaluation of a pilot study of a literature-based intervention with women in prison*. <https://www.thereader.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CRILS-Women-In-Prison-Report2012.pdf>

- RODA – Parents in Action. (2025). *Who Are Roda parents in action*. <https://www.roda.hr/en/about-us/who-is-roda-parents-in-action.html>
- Rubin, R. J. (1973). US prison library services and their theoretical bases. In *Occasional Papers* (No. 110). University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED088439.pdf>
- Rubin, R. J. (1979). Uses of bibliotherapy in response to the 1970s. *Library Trends*, 28(2), 239–252.
- Schutt, R. K., Deng, X., & Stoehr, T. (2013). Using bibliotherapy to enhance probation and reduce recidivism. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 52(3), 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2012.751952>
- Storybook Dads. (2025a). *Our story*. <https://www.storybookdads.org.uk/our-story>
- Storybook Dads. (2025b). *What we do*. <https://www.storybookdads.org.uk/>
- Szávai, I. (2017). *A mese hídszerepe* [The bridge role of the tale]. Pont Kiadó.
- Šimunić, Z., Faletar Tanacković, S., & Badurina, B. (2014). Library services for incarcerated persons: A survey of recent trends and challenges in prison libraries in Croatia. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 48(1), 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000614538481>
- The Reader. (2025). *About us*. <https://www.thereader.org.uk/about-us/>
- Trounstone, J., & Waxler, R. P. (2005). *Finding a voice: The practice of changing lives through literature*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.94354>
- Tsvetkova, M. I., & Andrekova, S. Y. (2016). The right to read behind bars: Access to books and libraries in the prisons in Bulgaria. *Russian Journal of Sociology*, 4(2), 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.13187/rjs.2016.4.62>
- Tung-Hsueh Liu, E., Chen, W.-L., Li, Y.-H., Han Wang, Ch., Mok, T. J., & Huang, H. Sh. (2009). Exploring the efficacy of cognitive bibliotherapy and a potential mechanism of change in the treatment of depressive symptoms among the Chinese: A randomized controlled trial. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 33, 449–461. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-008-9228-4>
- Uzoezi Emasealu, H. (2019). Attitude of inmates towards the prison library: A predictor of psychological wellbeing. *Brazilian Journal of Information Studies: Research Trends*, 13(2), 78–91. <https://doi.org/10.36311/1981-1640.2019.v13n2.08.p78>
- Waxler, R. P., & Trounstone, J. R. (1999). Finding a voice. In R. P. Waxler & J. R. Trounstone (Eds.), *Changing lives through literature* (pp. 1–26). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Yalom, I. D. (2017). *Egzisztenciális pszichoterápia* [Existential psychotherapy]. Park Könyvkiadó.