

La biblioterapia nei contesti educativi-scolastici

Il metodo Bi.Ne¹

Bibliotherapy in educational-scholastic contexts

The Bi.Ne. method

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RIASSUNTO: La biblioterapia viene usata dai medici e dagli psicoterapeuti e nei servizi educativi-scolastici anche da professioni non mediche. In particolare, la biblioterapia educativa applicata con il metodo Bi.Ne. sviluppa un processo che genera un flusso di idee ed emozioni altrimenti sopite. Il fulcro non è il libro, ma l'ascoltatore che da passivo diventa attivo e acquisisce consapevolezza delle proprie capacità relazionali, del pensiero divergente, del problem solving, dell'empatia, abilità che un educatore deve sostenere già dall'infanzia.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: biblioterapia educativa, pedagogia, narrazione emotiva, empatia.

ABSTRACT: Bibliotherapy is used by doctors and psychotherapists and in educational-school services also by non-medical professions. In particular, educational bibliotherapy applied with the Bi.Ne. method develops a process that generates a flow of ideas and emotions otherwise dormant. The focus is not the book, but the listener who from passive becomes active and acquires awareness of his own relational skills, divergent thinking, problem solving, empathy, skills that an educator must support from childhood.

KEYWORDS: educational bibliotherapy, pedagogy, emotional narration, empathy.

1. The article was created collectively and shared in the setting. Doctor and trainer. Psychologist and trainer. Doctor and trainer.

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1. Introduction

In an era like the current one made of iPads, iPhones, digital libraries, it is legitimate to ask whether it still makes sense to talk about paper books, laboratories in the presence of bibliotherapy, interactive book reading circles, expressive reading, and the answer should be affirmative for everyone, because even if the world and technological progress continue to evolve rapidly, reading a book and telling a story are and will always be lifelines. When everything seems to go crazy and we lose our sense of inner direction, we will only want to stop and browse a good book or write thoughts, because in this way we can regain the value of time and the dimension of our existence (Amadei, Sbaraglia, 2020).

Bibliotherapy is a discipline that can be used in the clinical field by both doctors and psychotherapists, but also in educational services and schools of all levels.

The history of bibliotherapy can be traced back to the inscription at the entrance of the library of Alexandria in Egypt, which read “Place of healing of the soul”, to the creation of hospital libraries during the First World War, thanks to the intervention of the American Library Association and Elizabeth Pomeroy, superintendent of the hospital library of the Veterans Administration, who in 1927 promoted the charitable intent of those structures, aimed at improving the mental health and emotional well-being of patients. It was in 1937 that bibliotherapy appeared in official publications with the psychiatrist William Menninger, who codified the principles, method and results of bibliotherapy, emphasizing its use also by non-professionals, as reported in the article *Biblio-therapy* published in “The Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic” (Menninger, 1937). Also worthy of note in the field of bibliotherapy are Louis A. Gottschalk, Caroline Shrodes and Rosa Mininno, psychologist and psychotherapist, creator of the first Italian website dedicated to bibliotherapy.

Developmental bibliotherapy, or educational bibliotherapy, which is also proposed by non-medical professions known as humanistic professions (teachers, librarians, booksellers), focuses on the resources, often dormant, that each person has and which, thanks to the book tool, they are able to recognize and bring out for their own well-being (Dalla Valle, 2018).

In this perspective, educational bibliotherapy with the Bi.Ne. method (interactive book reading and emotional narration) (Amadei, Sbaraglia,

2020) allows the development of an emotional process that, thanks to the book, generates a flow of ideas and emotions that would otherwise remain dormant. Inside a circle that can be defined as magical, a narrator tells or reads a story, placing the listener at the center and not the book. Listening allows for an introjection and then a restitution of the story which at that point is that of the listener, who has always remained active, who tells or tells himself according to free associations that belong to his experiences.

With interactive book reading and emotional narration, the listener becomes active from passive and this is also the basis of Reading Literacy (1991) which emphasizes the difference between knowing how to read and being a reader. This allows one to acquire an awareness of one's own communication, relationship, flexibility, divergent thinking, research, problem solving and empathy skills which are essential abilities that an educator has the obligation to support in childhood and adolescence.

Taking care of children and young people also means immersing them in emotional narratives at any age and in doing this the educator must be willing to change the point of view of the action: not the adult's doing for the child, or the young person, but the child's or young person's doing under the watchful eye of the adult. Truly putting the child or young person at the center means for the adult to get out of his or her comfort zone, break the mold of his or her role as an educator or teacher, open the mind to possibilities, intuitions, unforeseen solutions, but not for this reason not functional to learning. It means dismantling years of school procedures that have brought forward an image of the child or young person as an empty container to be filled with notions, passive and, let's face it, also inferior because lacking in knowledge.

In this regard, a fundamental principle of the Bi.Ne. method is that, in learning, cognitive elements must necessarily rely on emotional ones such as curiosity, wonder, passion, discovery and the more a child or a boy is supported in this path, the more he will also nurture self-confidence, self-control and interest in what he learns, especially through narratives.

2. Why it is important to cultivate narrative intelligence

How do you cultivate narrative intelligence? Narration is a primary need, almost biological, like dreams, and it is at the origin of societies and cul-

tures. Everyone needs to recognize themselves through telling and being told: telling, in fact, is equivalent to becoming aware of oneself, to feeling alive, to giving shape to what one imagines, to scaling down emotions and experiences. Narration responds to the need to belong: telling and being told creates a group, a community, makes one recognize oneself as part of a tradition, but also of future projects, or allows one to stand out, to be other than oneself. In any case, whether it is a recognition of values, or a detachment from what one does not consider similar to one's own history, this need guarantees survival, even beyond one's own narration. Narration also allows one to orient oneself in the world, because stories provide the keys to interpreting it.

As American psychologist Jerome Bruner reminds us, telling stories, even from an early age, offers the possibility of building an identity and finding a place in the world, because by growing and forming experiences, children create meanings of their lives within a specific culture.

This is what the educator or teacher must be aware of and not take it for granted, or not treat it at all, because the risk is to deprive a child of his cultural identity.

They are the narratives that allow us to explore and push our imagination beyond what is visible, which is a border, an obstacle, a limit, to search for ourselves and, sometimes, change our own destiny.

Stories are the emotional training that children need: spontaneous and instinctive at a young age, conscious and beneficial in later years. The human mind, through narrative thought, attributes meaning to the world and, as Bruner always maintains, «we will never know whether we learn to understand stories from life or whether we learn to know life from narrative: probably both» (1997).

People get to know each other through their narratives, which can be oral, written, drawn, mimed, recited: any narrative form used tells about the other and should never be taken for granted, especially when the ones telling the story are children who have not yet developed language.

Duccio Demetrio, professor and essayist who founded the Libera Università dell'Autobiografia in Anghiari, writes that: «inner thought is not enough to give us the sensation of being at and in the world. It is the questions of others, it is their desire to listen, to be interested in us that produce a mental event: for those who are self-conscious, usual, for everyone else exceptional» (Anzaldi L., et al. Edited by Demetrio D., 1999).

One should never underestimate, belittle, or ridicule the narrator, especially if he is young; indeed, it is precisely through stories that an educator can learn about some of the dynamics that concern a child and act accordingly to support him, rather than starting a series of questions in the form of an interrogation that would not lead to any new knowledge.

Developing and supporting narrative intelligence allows self-esteem to grow while telling, listening and telling about oneself and this is an achievement that gives awareness and frees us from stereotypes and prejudices. Because, as we read in the book by Ngozi Adichie C., *The danger of a single story*: «Telling a single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not so much that they are false, but that they are incomplete. They transform a story into a single story. (...) When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story for any place, we regain a sort of paradise». (Ngozi Adichie, 2024, pag. 20, 15)

Cultivating narrative intelligence therefore means proposing different narratives from an early age to allow children to identify with multiple stories, multiple situations, multiple subjects, to be able to not only recognize themselves in what they are listening to or reading, but also to have the possibility of re-telling stories or creating new ones. The more you have access to multitudes of stories, the more your thinking does not flatten out, on the contrary, thanks to narration, it opens up to the world and allows the acceptance of what is different.

Cultivating narrative intelligence also means training your mind to organize what happens in the form of a story, and this helps you accept the unexpected, protects you from painful situations and accentuates joyful ones. Narrating an experience, an emotion gives shape and coherence to the event and subsequently arouses a feeling of well-being in the narrator.

Growing up in narrative contexts means having the opportunity to narrate your own experiences, to listen to the stories of others, to tell and listen to dreams, fairy tales, myths, memories and this strengthens the image we have of ourselves, because we reinterpret it every time we tell.

It is through narrative thinking that the mind allows each person, from childhood onwards, to create a version of the world in which they can «imagine, on a psychological level, a place for themselves, a personal world» (Bruner, 1997, p. 52).

We find ourselves, therefore, in a situation in which the listener and the narrator have the story as their common goal and collaborate in a shared space and in a time dedicated to listening and telling.

If the listener is an educator, or a teacher, and the narrator is a child, a collaborative learning mechanism is activated: the educator or teacher is inclined to active listening, does not judge, but is intent on bringing out the implicit meaning of that story, the sense and emotions it transmits while the child is giving shape to his experience. The educator or teacher facilitates the narration, also using non-verbal language that supports listening and consequently encourages the child's narration, who can thus express his emotions, learns to recognize them and feels understood.

Over the years, several studies have highlighted the beneficial impact of reading on the personal development of the individual. In particular, the one conducted by Emory University in Georgia has scientifically demonstrated, through the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), that reading novels enhances brain capacity. The study, conducted by neuroscientist Gregory Berns and published in the journal *Brain Connectivity* (Berns *et al.* 2013), revealed, in a group of students who read the same novel for twenty days, a long-lasting increase in connectivity in the areas of the brain called "central sulcus" and "left temporal cortex", those areas responsible for language, receptivity and the creation of sensory representations of the body.

This happens, at a biological level, because reading a novel involves a physical identification with the protagonists of the story through *embodied simulation* (Gallese, 2007) activated by mirror neurons, with evident long-term benefits, which persist even after reading the novel. Researchers have shown that empathy and emotional intelligence increase with the reading of literary texts, while there is a lesser effect with the reading of essays or self-help texts.

Wojciehowski and Gallese, in their 2011 study, deduced that *embodied simulation* plays a determining role in the experience of imaginary worlds narrated in novels. This occurs not only because a particular state of identification with others is generated through the mirror mechanisms activated by characters and situations read, but also because narration automatically awakens in the minds of readers bodily memories and imaginative associations already acquired, without the need to reflect explicitly on them. Mayer and Salovey (1990, pp. 185-211) define literature as "the first home of emotional intelligence" and reading as "the useful tool for acquiring good emotional competence".

3. Educational Bibliotherapy and Pedagogy of Listening

The role of the educator and the teacher as a facilitator, director, companion who supports, stimulates and cultivates intelligence, guides emotional, social and cognitive abilities, promoting autonomy, awareness, individual and shared attitudes was already discussed in the mid-twentieth century in the studies of Carl Rogers (1983) and Malcolm Knowles.

According to Rogers' vision, educating means bringing out the internal abilities of students, while the adult of reference, whether educator or teacher, prepares the environment to facilitate the formative experiences. Children and young people, who express themselves freely, are at the center of attention, while the educator observes, listens, facilitates, activating an empathic learning, whose key factors, also taken up by Thomas Gordon, are: a sincere interest in the student, a non-directive pedagogy, a non-judgmental listening and an authentic empathy.

Interest is sincere when the student, at the moment in which he becomes aware of his abilities, is supported and encouraged by the educator without any prejudice. A non-directive pedagogy, as Rogers says, gives space to the thoughts of the other and does not see the child, or the boy, do or say what the adult expects him to do or say. Listening is non-judgmental when the educator is welcoming and, to quote Daniela Lucangeli, does not ally himself with the error, which must not be a pretext for punishment but a moment of comparison and important growth. Authentic empathy, finally, must be able to grasp the implicit and explicit being of the other.

The child creates his own world and the educator should offer educational and didactic proposals capable of enriching and nourishing that world, through an open comparison and a lively conversation between profoundly different ways of looking at the world (Lorenzoni, 2023, page 97).

According to the principle on which the pedagogy of listening is based, Ginzburg brings together the adult and the child in a single, continuous process of research where knowing means first of all learning to ask and pose questions. The adult's ability to listen is like a mirror in which the child finds his own form made explicit and which allows him that consolidation necessary for the acquisition of new knowledge and for the development of a creativity aware of his own tools (Ginzburg, 1979).

For many schools of all levels, even today, the child or the boy is a blank sheet, an empty container, all his emotional and experiential baggage is

not taken into consideration at all, is not listened to, is not respected, indeed, the child, or the boy, is immediately asked to conform and to achieve performances in a set time. Standardized educational and scholastic models certainly serve the adult to calm the anxiety of leaving his comfort zone, but not the child, naturally immersed in a fantasy world, full of rites and passages, which even the adult should inhabit naturally, and consider an opportunity for his growth as an educator.

The child's beliefs, his questions create knowledge, adults cannot ask him to give them up, just because they are often not able to give equally interesting answers. The teacher Franco Lorenzoni, who founded and coordinated the Cenci laboratory-house in Amelia since 1980, in this regard, adds that «girls and boys revealed ways of thinking completely different from ours, with which it is necessary to talk and come to terms because, as Alessandra Ginzburg never tired of repeating, emotion is the mother of thought, always» (Lorenzoni, 2017).

A pedagogy based on sincere listening is hard work because, generally, the adult tends to propose to others his own vision of the world as the only possible one. Accepting that children have their own vision and that the educator's task is to help them express it is truly arduous (Ginzburg, 1984).

In this context, educational bibliotherapy with the tools of interactive book reading and emotional narration fits perfectly, because it makes listening and, in particular, listening to emotions the central pivot.

Schools of all levels must truly believe in emotional learning, creating an environment that is suitable and always ready to work on emotions, supporting the child or the boy in every activity, whether he draws, plays, dramatizes, speaks, writes, reads or tells. It is in those moments that the adult must become a mirror and not a wall, must be ready to listen, to give value to those words, to those narrative stage gestures, to those questions, to those hypotheses, real or imaginary, that he must relaunch to make them starting points for new educational proposals. It is not enough, for example, to transcribe children's dialogues, they must become a new program that passes through childish amazement and wonder.

Educational bibliotherapy allows the child or the boy not only to listen, but also to absorb and re-propose a thought, his thought, without censorship by the adult. This is how he can become aware of his feelings and ideas. His self-esteem grows, the possibility of thinking that his voice

counts grows, as grows in him the awareness that he can inhabit that place in the world. When listening is missing, the sincere and respectful one, the child or the boy becomes demotivated and no longer has confidence in his abilities.

Educating means working on potential, on curious looks, on facilitating the use of tools that allow knowledge and multiply it, and it is never dragging a child along a path already beaten towards what an adult wants him to learn by force. Nurseries and schools of all levels should be places of experimentation that train curiosity and wonder.

Curiosity and wonder are the offspring of that narrative thought, of that embodied simulation that is activated in a continuous interaction between teacher and child. Educators must first of all nourish children's confidence in their abilities and must do so by stimulating their passion and curiosity, engaging in a reciprocal construction of knowledge.

What the practice of interactive book reading and emotional narration offers children is the opportunity to freely express what they feel, their thoughts, their hypotheses, their ideas, through the readings that educators propose, stopping when the little listeners feel the need to give voice to their desire to investigate and experiment. Knowledge of the world always passes through that of oneself, and it is only thanks to this interaction that learning can occur.

4. Conclusions

What can certainly be said, after many years of experience with the Bi.Ne. method during training and workshops from nursery school to high school, is that the practice of bibliotherapy is a bridge that connects different intelligences and puts them in dialogue. The book is a tool through which to find well-being and the words of the American writer Christopher Morley (2011, page 38) contain this meaning: «when you sell a book to a person, you don't just sell them twelve ounces of paper, with ink and glue, you sell them a whole new life. Love, friendship, and ships at sea at night; there is all heaven and earth in a book, in a real book».

When you read a story you embark on a journey towards a life that does not belong to us, but that we soon recognize as ours, identifying our friends, our fears, our dreams. Yes, dreams, which due to the frenetic life

we lead, we too often put aside. Instead, with a book in hand you regain time for yourself, a time in which anxiety is kept at a distance, problems no longer seem so imminent to solve and the mind wanders freely in space. We identify reading and storytelling as a tool for personal growth, self-knowledge and the discovery of new horizons (Amadei, Sbaraglia, 2020).

The Bi.Ne. method is based on solid theoretical foundations, it grows enriched by the good practices of educators and teachers who use it, reaching results that consolidate the studies and, sometimes, go beyond all expectations. The method, whether it is proposed in the nursery or in schools of all levels, is always the same, but it is administered with a different language depending on the age of the children and teenagers.

In early childhood, we begin to discover our own body, then that of others, and so body language becomes a translator of emotional content and messages. In the story circle, therefore, gestures and signals are very important, as they help communication between very young children and adults.

When one reaches the age of linguistic competence, it is essential to support the child's autonomy through stories and dialogues, because it is through stories in which he can reflect himself that the child begins to acquire maturity from an emotional point of view.

In primary schools, the horizons to explore with the Bi.Ne. method are truly many, because interactive book reading and emotional narration adapt to any educational need and allow any topic to be addressed and developed.

The older the children, the greater the commitment of the adult to reach balances that are essential if we want to find the key needed to open the drawer of the imagination of the children that is kept closed by them, because they are not always willing to tell and to tell about themselves. The climate that is experienced during educational bibliotherapy in middle and high schools must be one of trust, a mutual pact of esteem and acceptance.

Being narrative means being aware of one's own existence when one manages to find one's place within a story. The need, however, is not only to tell oneself, but also to listen to the stories of others to compose those parts of life that can only be recognized in mirroring.

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