Ensuring Emotional and Psychological Wellbeing in Children Through Bibliotherapy During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Experimental Approach

Sophia Adeyeye and Opeyemi Oboh

Abstract:

Sudden lifestyle changes and disruption necessitated by the COVID-19 precautionary measures resulted in children becoming frightened, bored, isolated and anxious which automatically posed a threat to their emotional and psychological wellbeing. These set of children could be helped through therapeutic reading of books. Reading stories provides children with opportunities to gain insight and learn healthier ways to face the uncertainty caused by their inability to do things that they normally do like going to school, visit friends, go to parties, visit parks, visit the library and so on. The study used a prestest - posttest quasi- experimental methodology which lasted for a duration of 10 weeks, the study population were twenty-five (25) within the age bracket of 7-16 years old. The study concluded that bibliotherapy is an effective tool in helping children to learn more about the coronavirus, help them to calm down, change their perspective and become more confident about the situation while looking forward to eventual reopening of the country.

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ABSTRACT

Sudden lifestyle changes and disruption necessitated by the COVID-19 precautionary measures resulted in children becoming frightened, bored, isolated and anxious which automatically posed a threat to their emotional and psychological wellbeing. These set of children could be helped through therapeutic reading of books. Reading stories provides children with opportunities to gain insight and learn healthier ways to face the uncertainty caused by their inability to do things that they normally do like going to school, visit friends, go to parties, visit parks, visit the library and so on. The study used a prestest - posttest quasi- experimental methodology which lasted for a duration of 10 weeks, the study population were twenty-five (25) within the age bracket of 7-16 years old. The study concluded that bibliotherapy is an effective tool in helping children to learn more about the coronavirus, help them to calm down, change their perspective and become more confident about the situation while looking forward to eventual reopening of the country.

Keywords: Bibliotherapy, Experimental study, COVID-19 Pandemic, Psychological Wellbeing, Emotional Wellbeing, Young Ones

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 crept into the country causing anxiety, fear, confusion which led to eventual lockdown of the country. The normal pattern/routine of the children were forcefully changed without prior notice nor were they given proper orientation/information about the novel virus and how to stay safe mentally, emotionally and psychologically. The lockdown has its attending problems such as increase in anxiety, exposure to domestic and sexual violence, increased stress, access denial to other significant people in children's life and so on; which could affect the children immediately or at the long run (OECD, 2020). Most children when not helped to understand the pandemic might go back to school as a damaged individual, this could have negative impact on the family, school and society at large (United Nations, 2020) This sudden change could pose issues for the children in terms of coping with the times and season. The children rely on information on the television, social media and parents regarding the virus. In a situation where the parents do not even have adequate information about the virus and where there are lots of misinformation on the internet,

the children were likely to be at the receiving end of this situation. Some of the information out there could cause panic, heightened fear and anxiety because of myths and beliefs.

Children might experience emotional and psychological traumas which could result to behavioural anomaly if no proper intervention measures are put in place. It is expedient to help the children during the pandemic so that they will be able to understand what it entails to survival and handle the situation properly. Systematic reading of books for therapeutic reasons could increase the coping capacity and informed decisions could be made. Reading stories to/with the children could provide safe haven, made them understand that they are not alone, have insight into what is happening around them, get information that could help to overcome the situation and positively look ahead to re-opening of the country. There are several ways to help the young ones' cope with situations imposed by the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Those interventions could be music therapy, art therapy, dance therapy, play therapy, bibliotherapy and so on (Tukhareli,2011).

A good intervention that could be used at this time of lockdown in helping the children to cope with it and attending problem is bibliotherapy. It provides children with opportunity to face the uncertainties caused by sudden lockdown of schools, inability to meet up with friends and families. Bibliotherapy help children to identify the problem, discuss their feelings and explore ways to cope with the problem. Books from time immemorial has been instrument of change, development and very effective in making decisions that could help with coping with situation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus a pandemic, hence the Federal Government of Nigeria had to close down the country and the children were forced to stay at home which has its attending problems ranging from confusion, fear, fake news, misinformation and so on. If those issues are left unattended, it could lead to social, emotional and psychological problem to the children. Children might experience severe emotional, psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness and in some cases bereavement due to death of member of family caused by the occasion of the COVID-19 virus and at times sexual dysfunction. Misinformation around the novel virus may negatively affect the perception of the children and have impact on how the children conceptualised the virus. There is need to educate the children through pictorial charts, let the children know they are not alone and gain insight into the problem and how to cope. Reading of storybooks can become a safe place where they will be free to expression their feelings, ask questions, release emotions and gain insight. Systematic reading of deliberately chosen book will help the children to experience that they are not alone, release emotion and gain better perspective to overcome fear, loneliness, isolation, despair and prepare them for re-opening.

OBJECTIVES

Based on the anticipated changes that could occur when books are read systematically for therapeutic reasons, the following objectives were identified.

➢ To increase the level of knowledge on COVID-19 pandemic of children through therapeutic reading,

> ➢ To assuage the fear of children about COVID-19 Pandemic through therapeutic reading.
> ➢ To Enhance the coping skills of children during COVID-19 Pandemic while waiting for the curve to flattened

LITERATURE REVIEW

Covid-19 Pandemic and Its Attendance Effect on Children

COVID-19 has impacted the lives of people around the world including children in an unprecedented manner. Though a relatively fewer children have been sick with COVID-19 in comparison to adults, the pandemic has however still had a major impact on their lives and wellbeing. It may seem that children are vulnerable but their resilience is also commendable. Despite this, the pandemic has its negative prints on their lives, like changes to their daily routines, social distancing, a lost sense of security and safety and making them feel depressed. stressed, or anxious. This is captured by the assertion of UNICEF (2020) that "While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently reports that the risk of exposure to COVID-19 is low for young people, research on natural disasters makes it clear that, compared to adults, children are more vulnerable to the emotional impact of traumatic events that disrupt their daily lives."

In a bid to tame this whirlwind, an essential strategy for prevention from COVID-19 has been isolation, social distancing and lockdown, especially in the initial heat of it (Shen et al. 2020). On these grounds, since January, 2020, various countries though Nigeria commenced in March 2020 started implementing regional and national lockdowns. This consequently led to the closure of schools. These inevitable circumstances led to stress, anxiety and a feeling of helplessness in all especially children (Singh, Roy, Sinha, Parveen, Sharma and Joshi, 2020).

In one of the preliminary studies during the on-going pandemic, it was found that the older children (6-18 years old) which aligns with the age group of children used for this study; were more likely to experience inattention and were persistently inquiring regarding COVID-19 (Viner et al., 2020). It has been indicated that compared to adults, this pandemic may continue to have increased long term adverse consequences on children and adolescents (Shen et al., 2020) Thus the need for intervention.

Bibliotherapy as an Interventional Tool During Covid-19 Pandemic

Bibliotherapy is reading to heal and it involves the selection of reading materials which includes fiction and non-fiction books that can be used to guide readers to realise greater self-understanding, self- reflection and comfort when faced with problems, loss, disabilities, illness and other challenges. Bibliotherapy is a combination of two Greek words "biblio" meaning book and "therapeia" meaning healing (Strurm, 2003). It involves the reading of books, stories and poems creatively in order to make people feel better in themselves and about themselves. Although Tukhareli (2011) opined that books cannot protect children from facing the reality but it could help them build the coping skills needed to survive the reality

Bibliotherapy is of different types, the clinical bibliotherapy, the affective bibliotherapy and developmental bibliotherapy. For the purpose of this study, affective bibliotherapy is being considered. Affective bibliotherapy is practiced by librarians, non- medical staff and teachers to facilitate and to help students cope with issues or situations that could affect their learning and

behaviour in order to facilitate normal development and self-actualisation. The process of bibliotherapy when followed technically and completely could help children comprehend the sentiments they have, discover arrangements that will work and improve their perception and feelings about themselves which could ultimately increase their personal success (Dirks, 2010).

However, the most critical advice when using bibliotherapy as an interventional tool is to coordinate proper books with various problems. There should be similarities between what the juvenile has gone through or what led him into the present situation and the character in the book (Khalik, 2017 & Sridhar and Vaughn, 2000). In other words, for the intervention to have a restorative impact the reader should be able to identify with the character in the story, situation or emotions which enables such reader to relate his personal life circumstance and have a feeling of passionate discharge that prompts a feeling of strengthening and understanding bringing about new development and improvement. Once the child can relate to the character in the book, the child would experience release of emotions (catharsis). It is after this that the child with the help of the bibliotherapist can gain insight into the problem of the client. Consequently, the realisation that there are other people somewhere with similar problems and have been able to overcome it will be realised. The uniqueness of bibliotherapy is that it starts in an indirect manner by focusing on the reading of the storybook, to the knowledge that others are also passing through the particular problem (identification), and later to discovery of self (catharsis), emotional release (insight) and end with how to solve the problem.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model for COVID-19 Impact and Interventional Measures developed to Guide This Work
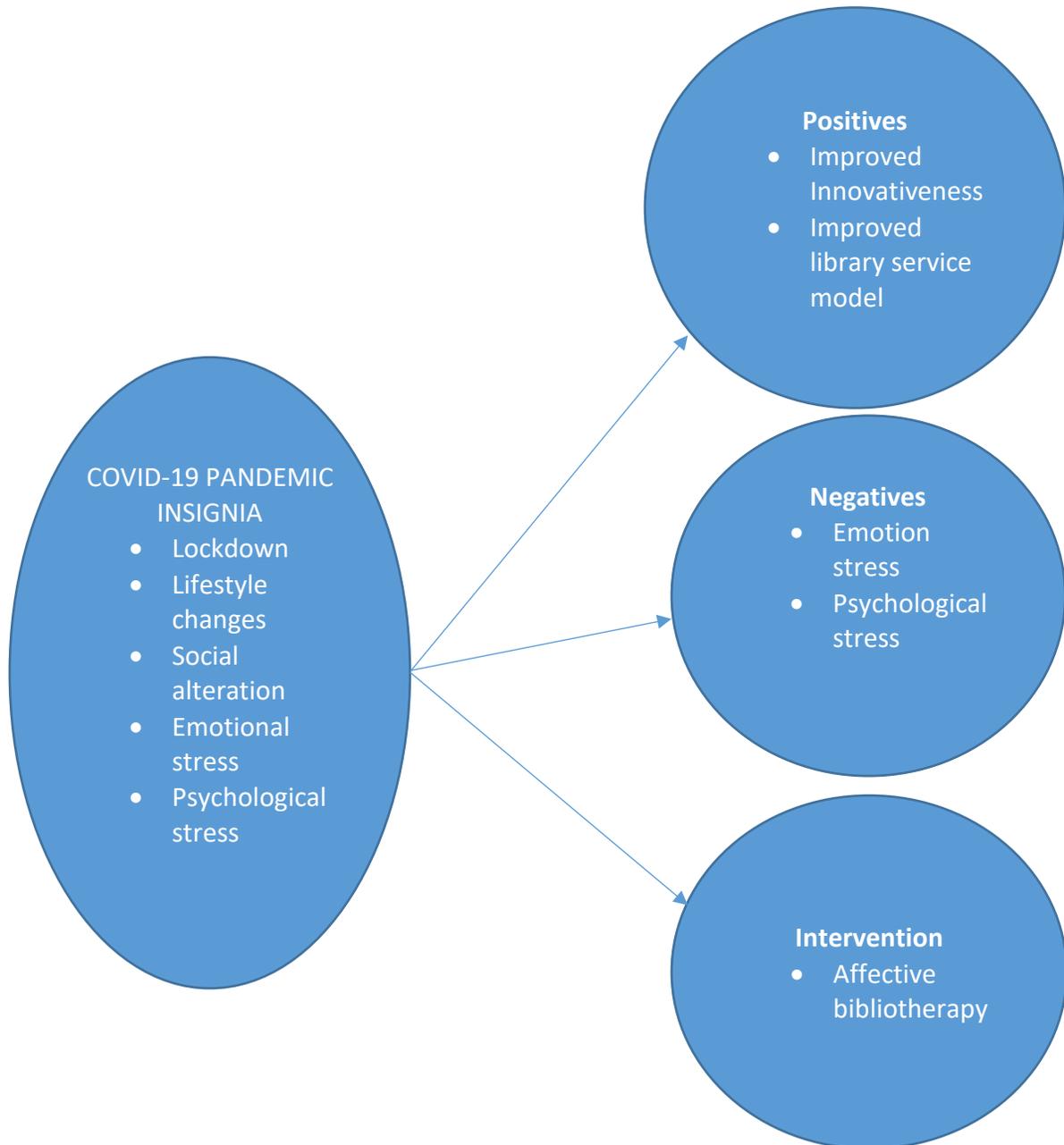
Source: The authors

METHODOLOGY

Purposive sampling procedure was used to select participants for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The participants were children within selected 10 households in the researchers' immediate

community, in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Thus, the meeting point was at one of the public school compound the researchers' neighbourhood. This is so because of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic which restricted movement. The researchers who lecture in a university could not make use of the university library because the university was completely locked down. However, despite the restriction, the researchers were resolute on playing an active part in the fight against COVID-19, therefore decided to use a space close to the researchers' residential community. Twenty-five children (sixteen girls and nine boys) within the age bracket of 7-16 years old participated in the study. The population size is 25 aged 7-16 years and total enumeration was used. Data was collected using FGD. The intervention was done on a 'one-to-one' basis because of WHO recommended that social distancing rule in place to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The main purpose of the focus group discussion is to provide the information on COVID-19 pandemic and helping the children to gain insight about the virus through discussion using two storybooks titled "Bayo's Weekend Trip and Halima Saves Her Village" by Okediran Wale (2020). These storybooks were considered fit for the study because it addresses COVID-19 and its disruptive tendencies and it also focused on children, thereby using a language that children can easily understand. FGD also helped in soliciting in-depth information on how the children viewed the pandemic, create awareness and prepare them for re-opening of the schools using the story from the book as a baseline for bibliotherapy treatment. The reading programme was designed for 10 weeks of 3 sessions per week. Each session ran for 45 minutes and evaluation was conducted at the end of the reading programme through Focus Group Discussion which was content analysed. Also, oral quizzes were conducted at the end to ensure that the participants acquired the necessary information about the coronavirus. The bibliotherapy sessions addressed the following issues

- ➤ Facts, myths about COVID-19 pandemic transmission and prevention
- ➤ Challenges that could arise with the lockdown
- ➤ Universality, catharsis, gaining insight
- ➤ Coping strategy
- ➤ Positive thinking and treating others right after the lockdown

Titles of Books Employed for the Study

"Bayo's Weekend Trip and Halima Saves Her Village" by Okediran Wale

The book is centred on a middle-class family called 'The Adisas.' The family was able to put in place all the necessary precautions against the spread of COVID-19 infection. However, their 10 years old son named Bayo was asked to accompany his aunt to Lagos to welcome a relative who just returned from abroad. Unknowing to them, the relative was already infected by the virus. The Adisas family had to journey through the ordeals of going for tests as well as self-isolation in an effort to fight a disease that had no cure.

Halima Saves Her Village

The author used the story of eighteen-year-old Halima in Halima Saves Her Village to educate children on the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. Halima who was visiting her grandmother got trapped in the village by the COVID-19 lockdown. She decided to keep herself busy by educating the villagers on the prevention of the spread of the Coronavirus. It was in the process of this very important but difficult task that she stumbled on Alhaji Kokoma, a rich but arrogant businessman who did not believe that the Coronavirus pandemic was real. Unfortunately, Alhaji Kokoma did

not know that he had already been infected by the virus. It was Halima's timely intervention that saved her village from what could have been a terrible calamity.

RESULTS

The participants' outcome analysis based on the data collected throughout the evaluation shows that

➢ Approximately 92% of the children (23 out of 25) demonstrated increased knowledge about COVID-19 and understanding that they are not alone in the struggle. Other children elsewhere are equally experiencing the same thing

➢ Approximately 80% of the children (20 out of 25) acknowledged that they experience a decrease level of fear about COVID-19 and increase in their confidence level in facing the challenges posed by the novel virus

➢ Approximately 88% of the children participants (22 out of 25) reported enhanced positive thinking and strengthened coping skills in order to make positive change and looking forward to better days ahead

DISCUSSION

Stories are helpful in teaching children issues that are difficult/ complex to explain, teaching them about COVID-19 could prove difficult because of its novel nature and explain the reason to stay at home observing compulsory lockdown could be difficult to grasp. Telling of stories and use of bibliotherapy could provide the template to create awareness and education needed to understand the virus and draw conclusions about the novel virus (Rozalski, Stewart and Miller2010).

This study has proven that children could be helped through the systematic reading of books for therapeutic reasons. It has demonstrated that bibliotherapy could provide a safe place for the children to express their feelings, gain insight and be able to face their fears. According to Akinola (2014), using bibliotherapy provides an alternative way in solving children emotional and behavioural disorder. Many children are going through a lot of issues during the lockdown ranging from understanding the novel virus and the attending health/medical challenges around it, understanding and separating myths and facts about the virus. Also, there is need to help the children know that the rate of infections could be reduced when we follow the WHO protocols regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. It is of great importance to let the children know they are not alone, and that they can overcome both emotional and psychological effect the lockdown could have on them. Therapeutic reading of storybooks helps children to get over difficult situations that could have occurred while staying at home during the lockdown. Researches have shown that bibliotherapy can be used to improve the children's emotional and psychological health. Storybooks has positive impact on children's emotional and psychological well-being, research has shown that therapeutic reading of storybooks and other literary activities have positive effect on children's lives (Svilehto, 2019; Mihic, Maich, Belcher, Perrow, Barisic,and Ramic, 2017) This finding affirms the position of Adeyeye and Oyewusi (2019) that bibliotherapy help in creating awareness that reading story books can help young adults to learn from the experience of other young people. Also, this corroborates the study of Tukhareli (2011) that books have consoling

power that could help people to escape, expand their world which is beneficial to trapped physical and emotional problems. Bibliotherapy can help to strengthen individual coping skills.

Bibliotherapy also help juveniles in correctional homes to make informed decisions to guide them in behaving in healthy way that is not harmful and take responsibility for their actions. This corroborates Akinola (2014) findings that bibliotherapy help to make a passionate connection to goodness, a craving to make the best choice, give an abundance of good example and help the juveniles to know the proper way to conduct them. Also, according to Montgomery and Maunders (2015), bibliotherapy could have a positive effect on children behaviour through careful use of the intervention, unhealthy beliefs and behaviour when identified may give way to new beliefs and behaviours. The findings in this study also support the view of Lowe (2009); McKenna, Hevey and Martins (2010) that bibliotherapy helps in recognition of the fact that having problem and solving it is part of being human which helps in identifying problem and deep understanding of emotions. Harper (2017) also affirms that bibliotherapy can be used to help children come to grips with issues that create emotional turmoil for them. It can be very effective in preventing and resolving behaviour problems because it helps to raise awareness of concerns, reassures juveniles that they are not alone and increase the perception that others experience challenges and are able to generate solutions, seek assistance, cope and find resolution.

CONCLUSION

From the result of the study, it is concluded that bibliotherapy is effective in helping the children to understand the myths and facts about COVID-19, provides insights and learn healthier ways of facing uncertainties caused by the novel virus. The project showed that bibliotherapy had positive effect on how the children perceived the virus, built their confidence and had a positive outlook towards reopening of schools, parks, cinemas and so on.

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