

Project 6: Fiction and Feeling: Investigating the Nature, Utility and Potential Mechanisms of 'Creative Bibliotherapy' for children and young people.

Proposed supervisory Team

- Professor Kate Nation
- Second supervisor to be selected depending on student's proposal

Background and rationale

Creative bibliotherapy refers to the use of fiction/literature to support wellbeing and mental health. A recent systematic review (Redman et al., 2025) highlighted its potential for improving mental health outcomes in 5-16 year olds. Bibliotherapy has popular appeal, and it chimes with discussions around creative arts and social prescribing more generally. If evidenced, it might be a way to develop low-cost, acceptable and scalable initiatives in schools/homes to support good mental health for all children and young people, and it could complement traditional psychological approaches to prevention and intervention.

Importantly, however, the evidence base is tiny and lacking in depth and quality. Many questions are completely unanswered. What type of books should be used? What type of interaction with the text is needed? Who is a good candidate for bibliotherapy? What are the critical ingredients that underpin any positive effects and are there potential harms?

The aim of this studentship is to use mixed methods to address these knowledge gaps.

Possible investigations could include:

- Manipulation of emotional language in reading materials to test generalisation to emotion differentiation of own emotions
- Manipulation of explicitness of emotional inference in narrative to test ability to consider different perspectives and predict character (other) emotions
- Variation in social connectiveness within texts (quantified by social network analyses) to test participants sensitivity to social relationships.
- Manipulation of book reading episodes (shared, didactic, private) to test emotional response as a function of directed instruction

As well working in schools, there is the opportunity to make use of the new Emerging Minds Experimental Classroom. An innovative new facility at the Oxford Life and Mind Building. The Emerging Minds classroom offers the opportunity for detailed observations to provide insights for future development as well as opportunities for creative involvement and engagement of children and young people.

Proposed research aims

- Explore what makes a good story for social-emotional learning and what aspects of fiction engagement might optimise response.
- Isolate and test specific identified features.
- Assess therapeutic potential alongside feasibility and acceptability.

Potential methodologies

- Literature review
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of text and fiction engagement
- Experimental manipulations to isolate and and test specific features and assess language, social and emotional outcomes (in primary and secondary schools)
- Pilot work in clinical context