

Reading as a therapy to relieve distress and heal the mind during the covid pandemic. Bridges towards lifelong learning and personal blossoming

Authors:

Mihaela-Viorica Rușitoru, Associate Professor IUTAM Montréal and CRSEA Dijon, mihaela_rusitoru@yahoo.com

Alison Taysum, Professor School of Education, University of Birmingham, a.taysum@bham.ac.uk

Abstract:

Over the last years, emergencies linked to pandemic changed our personal and professional life. To face these challenges, reading turned out to be a therapy within our grasp to nourish personal development and lifelong learning. In this article, we will discover the benefits of reading, as revealed by popular wisdom and scientific research. In a second stage, we will examine the link between reading and lifelong learning, as well as the connection between this intellectual activity and personal blossoming.

Keywords: reading, therapy, wellbeing, lifelong learning, personal blossoming, pandemic

1. OVERALL FRAMEWORK

In the last decades, research on wellbeing has revealed that human beings mobilise plenty of inner and outer tools and strategies to cope with stress and negative influences of the social environment. Researchers such as Gregory Berns, Kristina Blaine and Brandon Pye, Michel Cymes and Frédéric Bernard, Josie Billington or Marianne Desautels-Marissal have highlighted that reading goes hand in hand with neurocognitive and socio-emotional development, stimulating attention and concentration, neural connections, and sensorial representations, decision-making and problem-solving. This also links to development of better relationships with secure attachments which Hysa, and Taysum (2022) call higher levels of secure attachment capital. It was also brought to light that reading on paper rather than on the screen helps for a better understanding and a longer storage of information, and enhance language, memory, and visual recognition. Reading seems to be an excellent way to promote lifelong learning taking an holistic approach (mind, spirit, and body) as well as the personal blossoming through education. Therefore, in this article the benefits of reading will be explored in the light of lifelong learning and personal blossoming pedagogy.

2. READING AS A BENEFIT AND BLESSING

From the beginning of humanity, reading and writing were fundamental activities to gain knowledge, share it with others and spend time in a useful and fruitful way. In this section, the overall benefits, highlighted by both popular and scientific points of view will be detailed.

2.1. Popular wisdom on reading benefits

Throughout the centuries, the popular wisdom advocates that reading acts as a blessing, having tremendous benefits, of which we can list: 1) increases vocabulary and improves oral and written expression; 2) enhances writing skills, creativity, and communication skills; 3) promotes attention and concentration; 4) stimulates brain and imagination; 5) improves memory and cognitive abilities; 6) develops analysis capacity, critical and reflecting thinking; 7) enriches knowledge and cultures.

In addition to promoting cognitive development, reading contributes to psychological wellbeing and personal development – called *bibliotherapy* – because it: 1) creates social links, compassion, and open-mindedness; 2) calms the mind and improves sleep quality; 3) facilitates ethical and moral problem solving for good, ethical decision making on a daily basis; 4) decreases stress and anxiety; 5) makes readers happier and more confident; 6) allows reads to enjoy longer and healthier lives; 7) acts as a free entertainment and produces pleasure.

Of note was readers prefer to read about someone they can easily identify with for example people living a normal life and making mistakes or a heroine/hero with a brave character and/or strong sense of loyalty, and/or a strong moral compass that assures choices are made within ethical frameworks regarding duties and rights.

2.2. Scientific certification on reading benefits

These findings are validated by recent academic studies showing that reading has numerous rewards, such us:

1. **book reading and longevity**²³- choosing to read 30 minutes a day increases the length of life by up to 17% compared with a control group who choose not to read;
2. **book reading and healthy brain**²⁴- reading can prevent Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative diseases, alongside, intensifying cognitive activities;
3. **book reading and stress decreasing**²⁵- among recreational activities, such as enjoying a walk in the middle of the nature or listening to music, reading at least 6 minutes a day significantly diminishes stress levels;
4. **book reading and creativity**²⁶- reading shapes creative thinking and creativity levels seems to be directly proportional with the quantity and frequency of reading;
5. **book reading and joy in confidence**²⁷- regular reading empowers people with strong personalities, enabling them to keep calm in stressful situations and resilient when managing their self-care, health and happiness;
6. **book reading and social interaction**²⁸- reading broadens emotional intelligence and engenders building better social relationships whilst poetry combats social isolation and loneliness;
7. **book reading and socioeconomic status**²⁹: longitudinal research that extended over 35 years highlighted that childhood mathematics and reading achievements (PISA study) are linked to intelligence scores, academic motivation, duration of education and early mathematics and reading can improve socio-economic status across the life span.

²³ Yale University, 2016: <https://www.sciencealert.com/spending-more-time-reading-could-help-you-live-longer-suggests-a-new-study>

²⁴ Cleveland University, 2001: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC30672/>

²⁵ University of Sussex, 2009: <https://www.kumon.co.uk/blog/reading-reduces-stress-levels/>

²⁶ University of Edinburgh, 2013: [https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-relationship-of-reading-ability-to-creativity\(649dd564-7fcc-4146-84f2-e2fe561f6fbf\).html](https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-relationship-of-reading-ability-to-creativity(649dd564-7fcc-4146-84f2-e2fe561f6fbf).html)

²⁷ University of Liverpool, 2016: <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2016/02/04/research-shows-how-reading-for-pleasure-can-improve-your-life/>

²⁸ Scientific American, 2020: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/using-poetry-to-combat-loneliness-and-social-isolation/>

²⁹ University of Edinburgh, 2013: <https://fiar.me/sites/default/files/PsychSci-2013-Ritchie.pdf>

In the light of previous findings, evidence reveals that reading contributes to daily wellbeing and influences decisively the development of the personality. Thus, the goals of PISA or other international studies focusing on reading literacy are both worthwhile and meaningful.

3. READING AS A VALUE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING AND PERSONAL BLOSSOMING

We saw that reading enhances cognitive, neurocognitive and moral capabilities, promoting personal and professional development. Moreover, reading is not a specific activity engaged with over a particular age range(s), but a valuable lifelong gift that empowers lifelong learning for all people regardless of social status.

3.1. Reading for lifelong learning

In a consumerist society, it becomes fundamental to point out the importance of reading for promoting values that might be shared within a social group or community. When reading a book or an article, moral and ethical values can be identified and developed, enriching the social and civic skills. Over the last decades, it became important at the teaching level, to develop several values such as duty to the self and other, associated rights found in Institutional rule-of-law, the spirit of justice and respect, sustainable development, and solidarity. Thus, reading and lifelong learning seem to be strongly linked both pedagogically and juridically. Briefly, lifelong learning comprises: *“all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”* (Cedefop, 2011, p. 105).

Reading is a component of lifelong learning, helping people to amplify education as a pathway to democratic citizenship, and developing intercultural world views for peace (Taysum, 2019). Lifelong learning is nowadays promoted by national governments, the European Union, and international organisations including Council of Europe, UNESCO, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and International Labour Organisation. The main goal of lifelong learning is to encourage people towards a path of active development and dynamic wellbeing. In this regard, reading contributes to a higher physical and mental health, especially in crisis situations. The research conducted by Actissia Group over the spring of 2020 revealed that reading promotes lifelong learning as an intellectual activity synonymous with a break and relaxation, enjoying a hobby or pastime, discovering new pleasures, and seeking new knowledge with an open mind.

3.2. Reading for personal blossoming

It was said that reading contributes to professional and personal development. At the personal level, reading enhances the cognitive (constructive thinking) and affective skills (healthy feelings), supporting readers to find a better balance in their lives, especially when struggling with different obstacles and difficulties, like the covid pandemic. If during normal times, people prefer to read novels, magazines, poetry, and detective stories, during the pandemic it was revealed that reading was a calm refuge, a big challenge, and a great antidote to facing unexpected circumstances. The bibliotherapy started to develop more as people became more involved in reading books or writing their own books. Reading a book was also a different way for people to spend time and enabled them to avoid using screens and social media all the time. We also noticed that the preferences for the kinds of reading changed during the pandemic with people preferring books that focused on illness, distress, pain, suffering and death.

We can then see that reading became a crucial activity that brings people together of different ages and cultures, as expressed in the *pedagogy of personal blossoming* proposed by Ruşitoru (2020, p. 117-128). Thus, reading is included in the aggregate of personal blossoming, at the

intersection of inter-generational and inter-cultural activities focused on a holistic approach to human development. This pedagogy is founded on Plato's four cardinal virtues: courage which may be defined as fortitude, morality or integrity; prudence which may be defined as appropriate action at the appropriate time with modesty or simplicity; temperance which may be defined as discipline or resilience for moderation, and justice, or holiness which may be defined as love or compassion. A deeper analysis of the pandemic crisis reveals that all these virtues or values were more present and promoted in society as a whole during the pandemic than before the pandemic (Fowers et al, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can highlight that regular reading has endless benefits for mind and body as well as for the emotional life and spirit, stimulating personal development both inside and outside of each of us. A good daily read enhances both emotional development and cognitive development, promotes lifelong learning, and broadens personal blossoming. In a nutshell, reading nourishes all of us, and offers a pathway to happiness for all!

REFERENCES

- [1] Cedefop. (2011). Glossary. Quality in education and training. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union
- [2] Fowers, B., Novak, L., Calder, A., and Sommer, R. (2021). Courage, Justice, Practical Wisdom as Key Virtues in the Era of Covid – 19 in *Frontiers in Psychology* <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.647912>
- [3] Hysa, F. and Taysum, A. (2022). Using A Blueprint for Character Development for Evolution (ABCDE) to Build Relationships Through Talk to Mobilise Attachment Theory to Develop Security Attachment Capital for Good Choices that Regulate Continued Good Lives., in *Journal of Groundwork Cases and Faculty of Judgement* 1, (2) 192-213.
- [4] Rușitoru, M-V., (2020). Educational excellence in Finland as I discovered it. Paris: Harmattan, ISBN : 978-2-343-19866-8 <http://liseuse.harmattan.fr/978-2-343-19866-8>.
- [5] Taysum, A. (2019). Education Policy as a Road Map to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Scarborough: Emerald.