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Collaborative creative writing and improving interpersonal relationships in primary school: The case of primary schools in Greece

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Abstract

Collaborative writing is a specific form of cooperative learning aimed at transforming a text by several students into a collaborative text. Indeed, in creative writing activities, students playfully and, most importantly, imaginatively focus on a common goal, communicate and collaborate to create a shared text. This paper includes a survey conducted during the academic year 2023-2024 in primary schools in Greece in which 1020 students and 71 teachers participated. The students were divided into two groups: an intervention group with students who

implemented collaborative creative writing exercises for approximately four months and a control group with students who only followed the school's curriculum. The degree of improvement in students' interpersonal relationships was assessed through two questionnaires completed by the teachers participating in the research program. The results of the research, which showed a positive correlation between collaborative creative writing and interpersonal relationship skills are presented and analyzed in this article.

Keywords: Collaborative Creative Writing, Interpersonal Relationships, Primary School, Greece

1. Introduction

Interpersonal relationships play an important role in a person's life, as they affect not only their mental and physical health, but also the way they develop cognitively and emotionally. For this reason, a lot of research has been conducted, usually along three directions: a) research that studies the impact of interpersonal relationships on a person's mental health, b) research that deals with interpersonal relationships in a person's personal and social life, and c) research that studies these relationships in the workplace ^[1].

The relationships that children develop with their social environment are equally important, as it is through them that they develop cognitively and socio-emotionally. In particular, through their relationship with their parents they create internal representations of relationships as a result of interacting with them, which they then use either to create new relationships or to maintain existing ones ^[2].

The relationships, on the other hand, that develop between children are completely separate from their relationships with adults. The latter fall on a vertical level of dominance, whereas in the former children can examine conflicting views, negotiate and discuss multiple perspectives ^[3]. Indeed, it could be said that children's interpersonal relationships primarily shape their personality and social development ^[4], a view, however, which has been the source of much criticism ^[5].

Considering the great importance of children's relationships with their close and wider social environment, the present paper aims to highlight the importance of children's relationships with their close and wider social environment. The pedagogical tools used in this research, as well as its results, are reflected in this article.

1.1 Collaborative creative writing in primary school

Collaborative writing is defined as a process in which a goal-focused group negotiates and communicates in creating a shared text ^[6]. The collaboration of students in the writing process not only has a strong impact on the quality of their writing ^[7], but also on several non-cognitive areas, which are: a) motivation ^[8], b) self-efficacy ^[9], c) attitudes towards writing ^[10], d) e) interactions of group members ^[11], but also active participation ^[12].

On the other hand, creative writing, the art of finding ideas ^[13] and then putting them on paper, has its basic pedagogical method collaborative teaching, encouraging students to take part in co-reading and co-writing activities. In the creative writing workshop, people, emotions, ideas and inspirations interact and strengthen the dialogue ^[14]. Everyone involved feels safe to

experiment creatively in the workshop space ^[15]. Besides, poetry, stories, myths and fairy tales give students the opportunity to communicate and relate better with others, and to be able to solve any problems between them. ^[16]

1.2 Collaborative creative writing and enhancement of interpersonal relationships in primary school

Collaborative creative writing enables students to compose original and imaginative ideas ^[17]. In fact, as expressive writing is part of the broader context of creative writing and it is a therapeutic means of expressing thoughts and feelings, it is particularly effective in improving one's social relationships ^[18]. In other words, collaborative creative writing activities enable students to share their thoughts with their peers, but also to create a more meaningful connection with their teachers beyond the boundaries of their classroom ^[19].

To all the above should be added that the richness of imagination, which is the basis of all collaborative creative writing activities, implies the cooperation between the individual's mind and his environment ^[20]. Besides, participating in a collaborative writing task is a particularly affirming experience for students, as it allows them to access themselves, their imagination and their "voice" ^[21].

2. Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate whether creative writing activities can enhance interpersonal relationship skills. The specific objectives are as follows:

- Whether students are friendly towards others
- Whether students treat others with respect

3. Research design

The survey involved 1020 students and 71 teachers who initially completed a structured, self-administered, closed-ended questionnaire, called the "Soft skills assessment questionnaire", which included 2 questions related to interpersonal relationship skills. Relevant literature was reviewed to create these questions ^[22, 23].

Responses were given via a five-point Likert-type scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) and teachers completed one for each of their students. Of the 1020 students, 679 took part in the creative writing activities, while 341 followed the school curriculum. One tool used to evaluate the effectiveness of the creative writing activities was the "Teacher Satisfaction Form", which consisted of 13 closed-ended questions, one of which was related to interpersonal relationship skills. The answers were given through a four-point Likert-type scale (not at all, a little, enough, very). This questionnaire was completed only by the 44 teachers who implemented the creative writing

activities with their students.

4. Reliability

The "test-retest" procedure was carried out to assess the reliability of the questionnaire in terms of the consistency of responses over time. The questionnaire was administered to 30 students, 30 parents and 30 teachers.

This procedure was carried out twice, at the beginning and at the end. The reliability of each item was measured by calculating the Agreement Coefficient AC2 ^[24].

5. Obtaining permission

A request was submitted to the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education of Central Macedonia to conduct the research. In addition, a statement was issued by the Internal Ethics Committee of the Department of Pre-school Education of the University of Thessaly regarding the necessary pedagogical and scientific criteria to be met by this research.

6. Results

Teachers' ratings of students' interpersonal relationship skills are presented in the form of means and standard deviations for each assessment (before and after creative writing activities) and for each group of students (intervention and control).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for teachers' ratings of students before and after the intervention by student group

Skill	Assessment	Group	
		Intervention	Control
		Average/ Standard deviation	Average/ Standard deviation
Interpersonal relationship	Initial	4.26/0.75	4.29/0.79
	Final	4.44/0.71	4.29/0.80

Table 1 highlights that teachers' post-intervention grades were higher for students in the intervention group compared to students in the control group.

It should be clarified that the teachers' ratings for the students after the intervention were compared between the two groups using ANCOVA. These comparisons are made after controlling for (removing) the effect of the pre-intervention assessment on the post-intervention assessment (as would be done, that is, if all students had the same pre-intervention assessment).

The following table presents the result of ANCOVA and adjusted means for the post - intervention scores obtained after controlling for (removing) the effect of the pre-intervention assessment on the post-intervention assessment.

Table 2: Results of comparisons between the two groups of students (control and intervention) in relation to teachers' post-intervention assessments of interpersonal relationship skills and with the corresponding pre-intervention assessments as covariates (ANCOVA)

Skills	Group				F (1.1017)	p
	Intervention	Standard error	Control	Standard error		
Interpersonal relationship	Average	Standard error	Average	Standard error		
	4.45	0.02	4.27	0.03	23.55	<0.001

Table 2 highlights that teachers have assessed the interpersonal relationship skills of students in the intervention group with a higher degree than the corresponding skill of students in the control group ($p < 0.001$).

The table below shows the level of teachers' satisfaction with the improvement of students' interpersonal relationship skills, as reflected by the analysis and processing of the responses to the questionnaire "Teacher Satisfaction Form".

Table 3: Teachers' level of satisfaction with the improvement of students' interpersonal relationship skills

Skill	At all	A little	Enough	Very	Total	Total (Enough-Very)
Interpersonal relationship	0.0	9.1	47.7	43.2	100	90.9

Table 3 highlights that Among the 44 participating teachers, 90.9% reported notable improvement in students' interpersonal relationship skills.

7. Findings and Discussion

The four-month-long collaborative creative writing activities appear to have enhanced the interpersonal relationship skills of the students in the intervention group to a greater extent than the students in the control group. Besides, according to Teacher Satisfaction Form, 90.9% of the teachers stated that the students improved quite/very much in treating each other in a friendly and respectful manner.

According to social cultural theory, writing should no longer be considered a solitary process, but a social activity in which cooperation and guided instructions are key elements [25]. At the same time, the process of active knowledge building is mainly promoted by collaborative learning environments where all students are encouraged to inform, discuss, explore and evaluate together with their peers.

In the context of collaborative creative writing activities, the adoption of different roles by group members (writer, advisor, editor, critic, assistant) can help students to explore and experience the writing process from different perspectives, depending on their interests and abilities, thus strengthening their relationships with each other.

To the above should be added some difficulties encountered during the conduct of this research. Thus, some of them included the non-randomized assignment of students to the two groups, the long duration of each workshop (approximately 3-4 hours), the dual role of the teachers who implemented the creative writing exercises as observers and evaluators and the lack of repetition of the evaluation (follow-up) in order to investigate the sustainability of the results.

In summary, the study provides strong evidence that creative writing activities positively influence students' interpersonal relationship skills. Teachers observed in the context of the exercises an improvement in students' friendly and respectful behaviour towards their peers despite any limitations such as non-randomized grouping and lack of long-term follow-up. The findings support the use of collaborative creative writing as a viable pedagogical tool that can enhance a variety of interpersonal and interpersonal skills for all children.

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