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The Interventional Role of Creative Writing in Enhancing Cognitive, Metacognitive and Socio-Emotional Skills of Children of Unmarried or Divorced Parents

Sofia Tsatsou-Nikolouli
University of Thessaly, Greece

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Corresponding Author: Sofia Tsatsou-Nikolouli

Abstract

Creative writing, the art of finding ideas and putting them down on paper, has been linked to the emotional and spiritual release of the individual, helping them to know themselves and others better. On the other hand, the effects of divorce on children are associated with a variety of psychosocial problems, which may persist well into adulthood. The present study presents the results of a creative writing programme implemented in primary schools in Greece over a period of about three months. The research,

which was implemented during the academic year 2019-2020, involved students from the last two grades of primary school who participated in creative writing activities, mainly based on literary texts. The results of the study, which showed a positive correlation between the enhancement of various cognitive, metacognitive and socio-emotional skills of students from divorced parents or single-parent families and creative writing, are presented and analyzed in this article.

Keywords: Creative Writing, Divorce, Single-Parent Families, Cognitive/Metacognitive/Social-Emotional Skills

1. Introduction

Creative writing is therapeutic for a person's mental and physical health ^[1]. It enables the writer to discover their feelings and by talking to themselves they can discover things about themselves, release them, adopt a different way of thinking and face reality with self-esteem and confidence ^[2]. A variety of research has shown that creative writing is considered helpful in dealing with emotional tensions, as it provides therapeutic support and encourages empathy ^[3, 4, 5].

On the other hand, creative writing can enhance a variety of cognitive, metacognitive, social and communication skills, which help the participant to adapt to new changing circumstances, solve problems more easily and create new knowledge ^[6]. In particular, creative writing has been positively associated with enhancing the skills of adapting to instructions ^[7], self-regulated learning ^[8], convergent and divergent thinking ^[9], attention ^[10], creativity ^[11] and metacognition ^[12].

The present study attempts to investigate the degree of enhancement of the above skills of students who implemented creative writing activities and came from divorced or unmarried parents. Specifically, this research intends to investigate:

- whether the skill of adapting to instructions is enhanced
- whether the skill of self-regulation is enhanced
- whether the skill of convergent and divergent thinking is enhanced
- whether the skill of attention is enhanced
- whether the skill of creativity is enhanced
- whether the skill of metacognition is enhanced

2. Material and Method

573 students of the last two grades from various primary schools in Greece participated in the study. 382 of them were the intervention group and implemented creative writing exercises, while the remaining 191 were the control group and followed the school's program. The 89% of their parents, with regard to their marital status, was married, 0,2% was unmarried, 8,7% was divorced and 2,1% belonged to another category.

The assessment of the students' skills was carried out using a structured questionnaire called the "Social Learning Skills Scale"

and included questions related to the above skills, for the creation of which relevant literature was studied [13, 14]. Responses were given through a seven-point Likert-type scale (1=never or almost never, 2= very rarely, 3= rarely, 4=sometimes, 5= often, 6= very often, 7= always or almost always). In addition, the questionnaire included seven questions related to the students' marital status and was completed by the teachers, one for each student, twice, before the beginning of the intervention and after its completion.

Reliability and validity testing of the questionnaire was piloted on 30 students. Reliability was assessed using the test-retest procedure and the calculation of Cronbach's alpha to determine the internal consistency of the measurement scales. In addition, Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated for each question separately.

The research was approved by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece, specifically by the Directorate of Primary Education Studies, and was subsequently approved by the Department of Research, Documentation and Educational Technology of the Pedagogical Institute of Greece.

3. Results

First of all, it should be clarified that frequency distribution tables were constructed to describe the teachers' ratings and the students' demographics, specifically the marital status of interest in this study, and the answers to the questions were presented with the corresponding values of average (A.T.), standard deviation (SD), median (D.) and range (R.).

The results of the statistical comparisons showed that the intervention group and the control group showed statistically significant changes in the following skills: adaptation to instructions ($Z=-3.30$, $p<0.001$), self-regulation ($Z=-2.66$, $p<0.01$), convergent/divergent thinking ($Z=-3.25$, $p<0.01$), attention ($Z=-2.77$, $p<0.01$), creativity ($Z=-4.10$, $p<0.01$) and metacognition ($Z=-3.42$, $p<0.01$). Table 1 shows that the change (improvement) between the final and initial assessment of students in the intervention group on average is greater in the above skills.

Table 1: Comparison of the change in students' ratings between the intervention and control groups in terms of skills

Skills	Group	A.T.	S.D.	M.	R.	Z	p
Adaptation to instruction	control	0,18	0,79	0,00	5,40	-3,30	<0,01
	intervention	0,40	0,84	0,40	5,40		
Self-regulation	control	0,34	0,83	0,17	5,17	-2,66	<0,01
	intervention	0,53	0,93	0,50	6,67		
Convergent /divergent thinking	control	0,38	0,84	0,33	5,67	-3,25	<0,01
	intervention	0,58	0,91	0,58	6,50		
Attention	control	0,28	0,79	0,17	5,83	-2,77	<0,01
	intervention	0,50	0,87	0,50	5,83		
Creativity	control	0,34	0,89	0,33	5,83	-4,10	<0,01
	intervention	0,61	0,90	0,50	6,83		
Metacognition	control	0,32	0,86	0,29	6,00	-3,42	<0,01
	intervention	0,58	0,91	0,57	6,71		

Below are the results of the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), which was applied to investigate differences between the two groups in terms of average improvement in their skill assessments after the intervention was implemented. At the same time, the effect of marital status on this improvement was investigated. Children who participated in the study were grouped according to their parents' marital status into two groups 1-married and 0-other

(unmarried, divorced, other). Table 2 records the findings of the analysis.

Table 2: Results of the Analysis of Covariance with change in improvement in a skill after the intervention as the dependent variable, Group (control-intervention) as the independent variable, and marital status as the covariate

S. No	Skills	F	p	i
1	Adaptation to instruction			
	Group	F(1,562)=8,48	p<0,01	0,22
	Marital Status	F(1,562)=4,94	p=0,03	-0,25
2	Self-regulation			
	Group	F(1,562)=4,42	p=0,04	0,17
	Marital Status	F(1,562)=4,43	p=0,04	-0,25
3	Convergent /divergent thinking			
	Group	F(1,562)=5,65	p=0,02	0,19
	Marital Status	F(1,562)=4,52	p=0,03	-0,25
4	Attention			
	Group	F(1,562)=7,54	p<0,01	0,21
	Marital Status	F(1,562)=7,21	p<0,01	-0,30
5	Creativity			
	Group	F(1,562)=9,79	p<0,01	0,25
	Marital Status	F(1,562)=5,24	p=0,02	-0,27
6	Metacognition			
	Group	F(1,562)=9,10	p<0,01	0,24
	Marital Status	F(1,562)=9,81	p<0,01	-0,37

The main effect of the intervention is statistically significant [$F(1,562)=8.48$, $p<0.01$] in improving the assessment performed for the skill of adapting to instructions after controlling for the corresponding effect of marital status. Marital status was significantly associated with the improvement in this assessment [$F(1,562)=4.94$, $p=0.03$], specifically children from married parents showing less improvement ($i=25$) than children from parents who were single, divorced or of other marital status.

The main effect of the intervention is statistically significant [$F(1,562)=4.42$, $p=0.04$] in the improvement of the self-regulation skill assessment after controlling for the corresponding effect of marital status. Marital status was significantly associated with the improvement in this assessment [$F(1,562)=4.43$, $p=0.04$], namely children from married parents showing less improvement ($i=25$) than children from parents who were single, divorced or of other marital status.

The main effect of the intervention is statistically significant [$F(1,562)=5.65$, $p=0.02$] in improving the assessment performed for the skill of convergent/divergent thinking after controlling for the corresponding effect of marital status. Marital status was significantly associated with improvement on this assessment [$F(1,562)=4.52$, $p=0.03$], specifically children from married parents showing less improvement ($i=25$) than children from parents who were single, divorced or of other marital status.

The main effect of the intervention is statistically significant [$F(1,562)=7.54$, $p<0.01$] in the improvement of the assessment performed for the skill of attention after controlling for the corresponding effect of marital status. Marital status was significantly associated with improvement in this assessment [$F(1,562)=7.21$, $p<0.01$], specifically children from married parents showing less improvement ($i=30$) than children from parents who were single, divorced or of other marital status.

The main effect of the intervention is statistically significant $F(1,562)=9.79$, $p<0.01$] in improving the assessment performed for the skill of creativity after controlling for the corresponding effect of marital status. Marital status was significantly associated with the improvement in this assessment [$F(1,562)=5.24$, $p=0.02$], namely children from married parents showing less improvement ($i=27$) than children from parents who were single, divorced or of other marital status.

The main effect of the intervention is statistically significant [$F(1,562)=9.10$, $p<0.01$] in improving the assessment performed for metacognition skill after controlling for the corresponding effect of marital status. Marital status was significantly associated with the improvement in this assessment [$F(1,562)=9.81$, $p<0.01$], specifically children from married parents showing less improvement ($i=37$) than children from parents who were single, divorced or of other marital status.

4. Discussion

Several studies have shown that in families with divorced parents, the problems faced by young members may be related to their cognitive development^[15], as well as to various psycho-social problems^[16]. Indeed, they often experience difficulties in adapting^[17], school dysfunction^[18] and attention deficit disorder^[19].

The present study showed that after the creative writing program, children in the intervention group from parents who are single, divorced or other marital status showed the greatest improvement in their skills assessment. Specifically, marital status was significantly associated with improvement in the assessment of adaptation to instructions, self-regulation, convergent/divergent thinking, attention, creativity and metacognition, whose improvement remained statistically significant even when the effect of marital status was taken into account.

The above results agree with studies evaluating similar creative writing programmes^[20, 21], but also with results of other studies showing the benefits of writing poems^[22, 23] and the effectiveness of creative writing in children with socio-emotional problems.

The present study showed that writing a story or a poem, basic creative writing exercises, can help a child experiencing a particular social situation, such as a divorce, to talk about their feelings of grief, connect with a character's feelings and express similar emotions. In other words, creative writing can enable children of divorced or unmarried parents to write about the things they care about, express their opinions, develop their creativity and, indeed, become better writers in a fun and playful way.

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