

Ways of self-improvement in reading and writing creative activities: The case of primary schools in Greece

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Abstract

Personal development is related to ways of improving the self, as it enables us to understand our abilities and achieve our goals. It thus includes those activities that help us to realise our identity, develop talents, improve the quality of our lives and fulfil our dreams. On the other hand, creative reading and writing activities promote self-awareness and self-improvement as a means of self-expression, empathy and connection with others. The above is confirmed by a survey conducted in 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 including students who participated in creative reading and writing activities and a control group with students who followed the school curriculum. The duration of the creative activities was for about four months, and the evaluation of the students' personal development skills and the effectiveness of the activities were assessed through two questionnaires. The results, which showed a positive correlation between the enhancement of personal development and creative reading and writing skills, are presented and analyzed in this article.

Keywords: Personal Development; Creative Reading/Writing; Primary Schools; Greece

1. Introduction

Personal development is part of the 'Health Cycle' [1], which emphasises different ways in which an individual can develop in different areas of their life, such as education, managing finances, creativity, achieving goals, etc. It refers to the ideal self, i.e. a self that the individual desires to become and as he gradually approaches it, he gains confidence [2]. Elements that can help in this direction are adaptability to change, avoidance of past bad habits, an 'open mind' and general self-care [3].

On the other hand, creative reading, i.e. the interaction of the reader with any text and not just understanding it [4], and creative writing, i.e. the art of finding ideas [5] and then putting them down on paper, are useful tools to enhance 21st century skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, problem solving, etc. [6], but also social learning skills such as self-regulation, creativity, attention, metacognition, etc. [7]. Personal development belongs to soft skills and especially to intrapersonal skills, and in this intervention research, a variety of educational films, poems and questions related to self-improvement were used as a stimulus for creative reading and writing activities.

This paper attempts to highlight creative reading and writing as tools to enhance students' personal development, as it is a skill closely related to self-actualization, which is at the top of the hierarchy of needs for every individual [8]. As it belongs to the soft skills that students seem not to have acquired when they graduate from school or university, it seems imperative to strengthen it in a school that is still largely oriented exclusively towards the transmission of knowledge.

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objectives

The specific objectives of the research are

- Whether students improved in setting goals they can achieve
- Whether students have improved in taking on a task even when they know there is a chance they will not succeed.

2. Material and methods

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 personal development skills. Relevant literature was reviewed to create these questions [9] [10]. 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 reading and writing activities, while 341 followed the school curriculum. One tool used to evaluate the effectiveness of the creative reading and writing activities was the “Teacher Satisfaction Form”, which consisted of 13 closed-ended questions, one of which was related to personal development skill. 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 reading and writing activities with their students.

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 and 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 [11].

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.

3. Results

Teachers' ratings of students' personal development skill are presented in the table 1 in the form of means and standard deviations for each assessment (before and after creative reading and 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

		Group	
Skill	Assessment	Intervention	Control
		Average/Standard deviation	Average/Standard deviation
Personal development	Initial	3.46/0.89	3.45/0.96
	Final	3.66/0.89	3.52/0.99

It is observed 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).

Table 2 presents the results of ANCOVA and adjusted means for the post-intervention assessment scores obtained after controlling for (removing) the effect of the pre-intervention assessment on the post-intervention assessment.

Table 2 Results of the comparisons between the two groups of students (control and intervention) in relation to teachers' post-intervention ratings of personal development skill and with the corresponding pre-intervention ratings as covariates (ANCOVA)

Group						
Skill	Intervention		Control		F (1,1017)	p
Personal development	Average	Standard error	Average	Standard error		
	3.66	0.03	3.52	0.04	10.34	0.001

According to the adjusted means, teachers have assessed the personal development skill 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 3 shows the level of teachers' satisfaction with the improvement of students' personal development skill, 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 in personal development skill

Skill	At all	A little	Enough	Very	Total	Total (Enough-Very)
Personal development	0.0	13.6	54.5	31.8	100	86.4

Among the 44 participating teachers, 86.4% reported notable improvement in students' personal development skill.

4. Discussion

The results of the study showed that creative reading and writing activities can enhance personal development skill, which can be confirmed by other similar studies. First, the study by Sexton and Pennebaker [12] showed that expressive creative writing has multiple health benefits. Specifically, a group of people were asked to write in a few lines the most tragic event that happened to them, accompanied by their thoughts and feelings. Compared to another group that simply described the event without expressing their feelings, this group appeared to have a higher tolerance to illness and therefore better health. In fact, Pennebaker in his other study [13] concluded that expressive writing reduces the need to use medication, improves blood pressure, as well as the quality of sleep and memory.

In addition to the above, Connolly Baker and Mazza's [14] research showed that expressive writing helps the individual to overcome life's challenges by transforming the meaning of events and connecting the past with the present. To conclude, research by Forsell and colleagues [15] showed that creative writing, and therefore creative reading, which is a fundamental prerequisite, helps the individual to recognize any uncertainty in their life, to take advantage of the opportunities available to them, and ultimately to transform themselves through the management of their pain.

It should of course be clarified that there were some limitations during the implementation of the research. First of all, the non-random division of the students into an intervention group and a control group, as a large number of teachers declared from the very first moment their desire to join the intervention group due to the many lacks of their students in intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. An additional limitation was the long duration of each workshop, approximately 3-4 hours, which made it difficult for the teachers to follow their school curriculum after the completion of the workshop. Continuing, another limiting factor was the difficulty of repeating this research the following year, as a large number of students would be attending high school. Finally, a limiting factor was the dual role of the teachers who participated in the intervention group, namely as observers and as evaluators, which gave a subjectivity to their judgments and to the evaluation of their students.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study provides strong evidence that creative reading and writing activities have a positive impact on students' personal development. Teachers observed improvements in students' ability to set goals they can achieve and, in their ability, to take on a task, even if there is a possibility that they will not succeed. Despite any limitations, the findings highlight creative reading and writing as effective pedagogical tools.

Compliance with ethical standards

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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