Enhancing self-confidence through creative reading and writing activities in primary school

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the effectiveness of creative reading and writing in enhancing students' self-confidence in primary school. It includes a survey, which was conducted during the academic year 2023-2024 in primary schools in Greece and in which 1020 students and 71 teachers participated. The students were divided into two groups: Intervention group, which included students who applied creative reading and writing activities, having as a stimulus a variety of textual genres and textual types, and Control group, which included students who did not participate in the aforementioned activities and followed the school curriculum. This research/intervention project was approximately four months long and the evaluation was achieved through an impromptu weighted questionnaire. The results, which showed a positive correlation between creative reading/writing and students' self-esteem in primary school, are presented and analysed in the paper.

Keywords: creative reading/writing, self-confidence

Introduction

The term self-confidence relates to the everyday life of a person and can take various forms in many situations. We could even say that it is the most important aspect of human nature, as it is a prerequisite for a person to be able to cope with any condition. It is based on self-acceptance and enables a person to have a sense of control over his or her life. As far as school is concerned, it is closely intertwined with the formation of students' critical thinking (Laird, 2005), their ability to solve problems (Otacıoğlu, 2008), as well as the development of their communication skills (Park & Lee, 2005). Besides, children who display high levels of self-confidence are very likely to display correspondingly high levels in their later adult life.

On the other hand, creative reading, in which the reader goes beyond the mere comprehension of a text, creating personal meanings (Adams, 1968), and creative writing, which is a powerful stimulus for self-expression and self-understanding, can help to enhance it. Besides, creativity, a characteristic of creative reading and writing activities, contributes to the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment for children, which enhances their self-confidence through the adoption of diverse forms of expression in the educational process (Lozančić & Tot, 2020).

In this article, in the theoretical part, the concepts of creative reading and writing, self-confidence, and the related activities are briefly described, while in the research part, the results of a survey conducted during the academic year 2023-2024 in primary schools in Greece on a sample of 1020 students of the last two grades of primary school are presented, aiming to assess the enhancement of their self-confidence through creative reading and writing activities.

Theoretical part

Creative reading

Creative reading enables the reader to create their own meanings and make their own additions to what the author expresses, always, however, in the light of their own experiences and feelings (Adams, 1968). For Emerson (1837), essayist, poet and philosopher, it is an active

reading, productive and original, and it is not a mere quotation of what each reader reads. Indeed, for him (Emerson, 1844), it gives the opportunity to learn more about ourselves and others, as it is not a passive consumption of the words on a page.

To this we should add that for Ada (1988), a children's book author and professor at the University of San Francisco, creative reading includes the following four phases: a) descriptive phase, b) personal interpretation phase, c) critical analysis phase and d) creative action phase. Any text can be used as a stimulus for creative reading and the methodology is applicable to any age group. Note that the phases seem to be distinct from each other, however, they are often interrelated and implemented simultaneously. More specifically, the phases are as follows:

Descriptive phase: the content of the reading is shared with the students by the teacher. This phase works as a stepping stone for students' interaction with the new knowledge.

Personal interpretation phase: Students approach the new information based on their experiences. The teacher's questions are not only aimed at what, who, where, when and how, but also at the children's general reflection.

Critical analysis phase: after understanding the new knowledge and making connections with the pupils' lives, children are encouraged to reflect critically, draw conclusions, seek consequences and analyze.

Creative action phase: this is the phase of learning that relates to how children can use the new knowledge to improve their own lives and the lives of others. In other words, how learning can be moved from the classroom to the real world of students.

Creative writing

Creative writing is a stimulus for self-expression, but also for self-understanding (Anae, 2014), as it is not only an educational tool in the teaching of literature (Ramey, 2007) and language (Ghani & Din, 2017), but also a form of treatment for various psycho-emotional problems (Smyth, 1998). Complementarily, Oral (2008) emphasizes that creative writing develops the personality of each person involved, providing them with the opportunity to capture thoughts and feelings on paper, but also to use them to understand the world around them. Besides, the experiential and playful nature of the exercises (Simeonaki, 2013), the discussion and interaction between children in the context of group creative writing activities (Guillen & Bermejo, 2011), and the students' own contact with art, the art of words (Tulgan, 2015), transform their experiences into skills, attitudes, values, emotions and beliefs (Ling, 2016).

As a continuation of the above, it is important to emphasize that the process of implementing creative writing activities includes the following stages: a) Students discover knowledge and techniques through the reading of any form of text, b) They apply the above knowledge to a written text, transforming it into new knowledge under the influence of a stimulus and based mainly on their own experiences, c) They receive feedback by communicating their texts to the public, even giving their opinions, announcing the processes of writing, and finally d) they receive feedback on their texts. To conclude, another evidence about the effectiveness of creative writing is that it enhances the skills of self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, decision-making and planning (Gündüz & Şimşek, 2016).

Self-confidence

Self-confidence is the confidence people have about their abilities and is 'built' through significant experiences during childhood or through messages received by the individuals themselves about who they are (Efstathiou & Lekka, 2020). For Dubrin (2017), self-confidence is influenced by an individuals' experiences and achievements, but also by the comparisons they make in relation to other people in their environment and in relation to themselves. Indeed, since comparison is involved in the formation of self-confidence and given that this

comparison involves value judgments, we could classify it in the conceptual field of self-esteem, without, however, implying that these are identical concepts (Varfi, 2005).

Following on from the above, for Shrauger and Schohn (1995), the factors that can influence an individual's perception of their abilities are: (a) objective abilities in one or more areas for which the individual receives often feedback; (b) selective praise associated with a distorted image of one's self-esteem that may lead to over or underestimation of the self; (c) self-presentation, the way in which people try to present themselves, while disregarding their feelings and abilities and finally d) time, since very often people tend to ignore the changes in time and persist in judgements about themselves that are in line with their general image of themselves.

Self-confidence is also linked to the development and cultivation of a variety of skills. Otacıoğlu (2008), for example, points out its close relationship with the ability to solve problems, while Laird's (2005) research highlighted its connection with enhancing students' critical thinking and thus improving their academic performance. Complementarily, Park and Lee's (2005) study focuses on the contribution of self-confidence in enhancing students' communication skills.

It would be remiss not to emphasize that the foundations of self-confidence are built from infancy, as it is very difficult to change one's beliefs once an individual reaches adulthood. Children with low self-confidence do not try new things, cannot handle disappointment, give up easily and have a negative self-image. In contrast, confident children enjoy interacting with others, are adaptable to different environments and do well in both individual and group activities. In fact, they try to face any difficulties with optimism without underestimating themselves or others and are well aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Araujo, 2023).

Brief literature review

It is particularly important to enhance students' self-confidence in school as it will enable them to believe in their abilities, not to give up easily, try to solve a variety of problems and perform the tasks assigned to them to the best of their capacity (Goel & Aggarwal, 2012). In fact, Norman and Hyland (2003) state that self-confidence is an important learning factor that influences students' participation in school and their own progress. According to Akbari and Sahibzada (2020), a large part of the crisis that education is going through is the low self-confidence in many students which leads them to not participating adequately in school and also not making progress despite spending a lot of time in the classroom.

As a continuation of the above, it is worth highlighting that various studies have shown the low self-confidence of students at school (Ballane, 2019; Diniyah et al., 2018), but also of students at university (Laird, 2005). For Eccles (2004), in middle and high school, students' achievement is closely related to their grades, which plays an important role in their opinion of themselves. In fact, students perceive their performance in school as an indicator of their abilities, which has a strong impact on their self-confidence (McMahan & Thompson, 2015). Moreover, other studies (Fatma, 2015. Verma & Kumari, 2016.) have shown the important role of self-confidence in students' learning, emphasizing the importance of enhancing it.

Creative reading and writing activities

In the context of creative reading and even during the descriptive phase, the students of the Intervention Group watched from YouTube the short film "Pip" related to self-confidence and then they were divided into groups of two, so that in each pair, one student would present to the other what the film mentions and what are the interesting points in his/her opinion. The students then returned to their seats and through a short plenary discussion they all summarised the main points of the film together.

In the personal interpretation phase, they used Rosenberg's "Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale" (1965), which is a tool for assessing self-image, in order to explore what the hero, Pip, might have of himself. In a playful and, most importantly, fun way, the students had a first contact

with the concepts of "low self-esteem" and "high self-esteem", commenting on the results of the questionnaire and reporting their own possible similar incidents. In the next phase, they played experiential group games through which they recognized that each of them not only has flaws, but also many assets, which in most cases are easily identified by the others.

In the context of creative writing and even at the stage of invention they were encouraged to write poems. During the organisation stage, the children were given the poem "When I loved myself enough" by Kim and Alison McMillen, after some of the lines were removed from the beginning in order to be completed by the pupils themselves. It should be noted that this poem is dedicated to self-love, i.e. loving oneself. In the last phase they read their poems in plenary, receiving feedback from their classmates, while several students went on to rewrite their poems a second time according to the comments they received.

Research part

Purpose of the research

This research attempts to investigate whether and to what extent creative reading and writing activities can contribute to boosting the self-confidence of pupils in the last two years of primary school.

The research methodology

The research which was designed and implemented is:
- Applied, as it aims to solve a problem of the modern world.
- Interventionist, since its scientific purpose is to develop techniques for a modifying intervention and for evaluating the results.
- Quantitative, as its data are sought through questionnaires and its findings are subject to statistical analysis.

The research sample

A total of 1020 students and 71 teachers participated in the study, who completed a structured, self-administered, closed-ended questionnaire called the "Soft Skills Assessment Questionnaire for the Evaluation of Soft/ Horizontal Skills in Grades 5 and 6 of Primary School". Of the 1020 students, 679 participated in the implementation of creative reading and writing activities (Intervention Group), while 341 followed only their school's curriculum (Control Group).

Evaluation tool

The "Soft Skills Assessment Questionnaire for 5th and 6th grade elementary school" includes 26 questions to assess soft/horizontal skills as they appear in the students' immediate and wider environment. The following soft/horizontal skills assessment questionnaires were studied to create the questions: a) "Soft Skills Assessment for Secondary Students" by Schochler (2014) and b) "Soft Skills Self-Assessment" by Junior Achievement (2013).

The questionnaire includes 26 statements divided into 13 subscales which are:
A. Communication (2 statements)
B. Communication (2 statements) A. Communication (2 statements)
Γ. Conflict resolution (2 statements)
D. Flexibility (2 statements)
E. Problem solving (2 statements)
Z. Creativity (2 statements)
H. Motivation (2 statements)
Θ. Personal development (2 statements)
I. Time management (2 statements)
K. Self-confidence (2 statements)

L. Leadership (2 statements)

M. Encouragement (2 statements)

N. Interpersonal relations (2 statements)

Students are assessed on the frequency with which they display each skill using a five-point Likert-type scale (a=never, b=rarely, c=sometimes, d=often, e=always).

In particular, the two statements concerning self-confidence are:

Students

1.   Do they express their opinion comfortably?

2.   Do they accept the comments of others without getting angry or upset?

As part of the evaluation, an additional questionnaire was used which was entitled: "Teacher Satisfaction Form". It consists of 13 closed-ended questions and the answers are given using a four-point Likert-type scale (not at all, a little, quite a bit, a lot). The self-esteem related question that the teachers who implemented the creative reading and writing program were asked to answer was: "Have students improved in working comfortably and freely without fear of making mistakes or the stress of criticism?". The questionnaire was completed by the 44 teachers of the Intervention Group, thus giving them the opportunity to evaluate themselves the effectiveness of the creative reading and writing activities in terms of strengthening soft skills and, indeed, in terms of enhancing the self-esteem of their students.

In addition to the above, the "Creative Reading and Writing Workshop Implementation and Evaluation Form" was used as an additional evaluation tool, which was completed by the teachers of the Intervention Group, who answered four closed-ended questions for each workshop out of the thirteen of the research/intervention project. Specifically, the questions were as follows. 2. Did students understand the main objective of the workshop? 3. How effective was the workshop as a whole? 4. Would you as a teacher use the techniques of the workshop again? In the next chapter of the paper, the results of the questionnaire will be presented in detail regarding the workshop on self-confidence.

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. The reliability of each item was measured by calculating Gwet's (2008) AC2 Agreement Coefficient (AC2), which is used in cases where there is a layout scale. According to Gwet (2014), the value of the coefficient is interpreted according to the following categorization: 0-20: little to no agreement; 20-40: agreement; 40-60: moderate agreement; 60-80: significant agreement; 80-100: almost perfect agreement. For the two statements concerning self-confidence, reliability is considered perfect (agreement rate = 0.90 for the first statement and agreement rate = 0.96 for the second).

Permission

A request was submitted to the Regional Department of Primary and Secondary Education of Central Macedonia to conduct the research. The relevant documents were submitted to the Department in September 2023 for the school year 2023-2024 in order to receive the approval. The documents included: (a) the Application for Permission to Conduct Research in Schools of Primary Education of Central Macedonia, (b) Form with the basic descriptive data of the project, (c) Form with the necessary educational criteria (target group, time of implementation, potential costs, evaluation), (d) Form with the necessary pedagogical and scientific criteria (achievement of goal/actions, knowledge, connection with the Curricula for Primary School, school support, compatibility with the principles of modern pedagogy, promotion of principles of respect, democratic coexistence, non-violent conflict resolution and solidarity, security rules for confidentiality and anonymity), e) Certificate from the Internal

Ethics Committee of the Department of Pre-school Education of the University of Thessaly, g) CV of the researcher, h) Declaration of Participation of the teachers, i) Parental Consent Form, j) Letter/Invitation to participate in the project to the teachers, k) Questionnaire for the evaluation of soft skills in grades 5 and 6 of primary school (for teacher, student, parent).

Results

Teachers' assessments of students in relation to the skill of self-confidence are presented in Table 1 in the form of averages and standard deviations for each assessment (pre- and post-intervention) and for each group of students (Control and Intervention).

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

Skill	Assessment	Group			
		Control		Intervention	
		Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Self-confidence	Initial	3.61	0.85	3.54	0.81
	Final	3.66	0.81	3.77	0.77

It is observed that teachers have assessed students' self-confidence after the intervention with a higher degree, on average, compared to the degree before the intervention for both groups of students.

In terms of pre-intervention assessment, teachers' marks, on average, were higher for students in the Control Group compared to students in the Intervention Group, while in terms of post-intervention assessment, teachers' marks, on average, were higher for students in the Intervention Group compared to students in the Control Group.

It should be clarified that teachers' assessments for the post-intervention students were compared between the two groups of students (Control and Intervention) for each of the thirteen skills using ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance). These comparisons are made after controlling ("removing") for the effect of the pre-intervention assessment on the post-intervention assessment (as would be the case if all students had the same pre-intervention assessment).

Table 2 presents the results of the ANCOVA and adjusted averages for the post-intervention assessment scores obtained after controlling for (removing) the effect of the pre-intervention assessment on the post-intervention assessment. It should be clarified that the average is the adjusted average obtained after controlling ('removing') the effect of the pre-intervention evaluation on the post-intervention evaluation.

Table 2. Results of the comparisons between the two groups of students (Control and Intervention) in relation to teachers' post-intervention assessment scores for each of the thirteen skills, with the corresponding pre-intervention assessments as covariates (ANCOVA)

Skill	Group					
	Control		Intervention			
	Average	Standard error	Average	Standard error	$F_{(1, 1017)}$	p
Self-confidence	3.63	0.03	3.79	0.02	16.18	< 0.001

Regarding the "Teacher Satisfaction Form", Table 3 presents the teachers' level of satisfaction regarding the improvement of students' self-esteem skills. The majority of teachers (93.2%) stated that students' self-confidence improved to a quite or very high degree.

Table 3. Teachers' level of satisfaction with the improvement of self-confidence skills

Question/Skill	At all	A Little	Enough	Very
Self-confidence	0,0	6,8	50,0	43,2

Regarding the "Form for the Implementation and Evaluation of the Creative Reading and Writing Workshop", Table 4 presents the results of the first question of the questionnaire for the self-confidence skill.

Table 4. Was the workshop implemented as described in the Programme?

Yes	No
95.8%	4.2%

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 4, the vast majority of teachers stated that the workshop on self-confidence was implemented in the way described in the programme at 95.8%.

Regarding the "Form for the Implementation and Evaluation of the Creative Reading and Writing Workshop", most teachers stated that their students understood the main goal of the workshop on self-confidence (Table 5).

Table 5. Did the students understand the main goal of the workshop?

The majority, yes	Some yes, some no	The majority, yes
79.2%	20.8%	0.0

Regarding the "Form for the Implementation and Evaluation of the Creative Reading and Writing Workshop", the majority of teachers said that the workshop on self-confidence was effective as a whole (Table 6).

Table 6. How effective was the workshop as a whole?

Effective	Neutral	Ineffective
87.5%	12.5%	0.0

Regarding the "Form for the Implementation and Evaluation of the Creative Reading and Writing Workshop", the vast majority of teachers said that they would use the workshop techniques again to boost confidence (Table 7).

Table 7. Would you use the techniques of the workshop again?

Yes	No
95.8%	4.2%

Discussion

The present study showed that self-confidence was enhanced by creative reading and writing activities to a greater extent in the Intervention Group students compared to the Control Group students.

The above findings are consistent with many studies (Akkaya, 2014. Chandler, 1999. Fair et al., 2012. Nicolini, 1994) that show the strong relationship between self-confidence and creative writing, describing the latter as an act of personal empowerment. In fact, these studies state that writing in the context of collaborative writing activities is an affirming experience for the individuals that enables them to access themselves and their 'voice'.

In the study by Rizzi and colleagues (2020), 12 students aged 12 to 15 years old took part in a creative storytelling workshop over three consecutive days, creating stories and then recording them. Key elements of the workshop included positive psychology, collaborative experience of small successes, experiential learning, creating a safe environment and the encouraging attitude of the teacher/facilitator. The results showed that various components of self-confidence could be positively influenced by the creative writing workshop with participants reporting not only concrete outcomes (e.g., producing stories), but also enhancing their self-confidence (e.g., overcoming any shyness).

Limitations of the study

A first limitation is the inclusion of students in the Intervention and Control Group, which was done in a non-randomized manner. This is due to the fact that 44 teachers in the Intervention Group asked to participate and implement the programme in the first year, while on the other hand, 27 teachers in the Control Group also expressed from the very first moment their wish not to participate in the intervention, but to "run" the programme in the next school year.

Moreover, the dual role of the teachers who implemented the programme, i.e. as observers and evaluators of their students' skills, was also a limiting factor. These evaluations were carried out by teachers who participated in the intervention, so the presence of a subjective element is evident.

Finally, a further limitation of the study is the lack of repetition of the evaluation (follow-up) in order to investigate the sustainability of the results. The non-execution of the study is also due to the high cost, but mainly due to the difficulty of following the students of the 6th grade in the high schools they would have gone to, as well as the difficulty of evaluation by other teachers in the following school year.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The results of the present study evidence the use of creative reading and writing as an effective tool for enhancing children's self-confidence. Statistical analysis of the results showed that teachers assessed the self-confidence of students in the Intervention Group to a statistically greater extent than the self-confidence of students in the Control Group. It should of course be emphasized that creative reading and writing activities are not intended to enhance children's self-confidence skills in the short term, but to contribute to long-term improvements, provided, of course, that they are the subject of systematic school programme from primary to university level.

It is, however, important to examine further whether and to what extent pupils who appear to have enhanced their existing self-confidence will maintain it over time compared to those pupils who did not participate in the implementation of creative reading and writing activities. Finally, it is important to emphasize that these activities, if implemented in the context of an organized school programme, have the important advantage of being low cost, so they can be used from primary school age and continue throughout the children's academic career, contributing to their academic, social and emotional learning.

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