

## Positive Psychology and Creative Writing in Education

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**Abstract:** The 21st century is marked by a plethora of social and economic changes worldwide. Psychology, the science that studies human intelligence, emotions and behavior, is called upon to deal with issues related to people's mental and emotional development, helping them improve their abilities and find meaning in their lives. Positive Psychology, a rapidly expanding field of cognitive psychology, studies the impact of positive emotions, thoughts, and knowledge within education, work, and physical/mental health. This article examines the reinforcement of “positive variables” such as hope, joy, optimism, psychological resilience, interest, and happiness at school through creative writing.

**Key words:** positive psychology, creative writing, education

### 1. Introduction

A number of positive variables, such as joy, interest, pleasure, finding meaning, and optimism, enhance and increase the feeling of satisfaction with life and help build strong interpersonal relationships. In addition, they lead to increased productivity, a greater likelihood of accomplishing one goal and a boost in altruistic behaviour. At the same time, those experiencing the above emotions appear to be healthier and in a better physical condition (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001, pp. 804–813). Consequently, experiencing the above positive emotions among students in the field of education implies experiencing a balanced school life, developing students' potential and at the same time eliminating negative and problematic situations at individual and social level. On the other hand, creative writing, as a means of communication and expression, is particularly effective in preventing, promoting psychosomatic health and enhancing one's mental well-being. Indeed, in the field of education it can help students to express themselves, to develop feelings and experiences, to improve their relationships with others and to enhance their self-esteem (Antonopoulou, 2013). So, in other words, it can become a useful tool of Positive Psychology, in order to help the pupils at school to experience positive emotions and to use their potential to achieve goals, not only for their own benefit, but also for their service of their classmates.

### 2. Positive Psychology

The field of Positive Psychology is concerned with the scientific study of human abilities, strengths and virtues. Its main purpose is to understand what works for the “average normal” person, how he develops and how he can improve. It also tries to examine the nature of his adaptability as well as his abilities. Finally, it explores

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how the majority of people, despite the adversity they face, are finally able to live with dignity, even for a purpose. In other words, it is an attempt to urge psychologists to appreciate human potentials, motives, and emotions (Sheldon & King, 2001, pp. 216–263).

According to Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), positive psychology extends to three areas: a) psychological well-being and life satisfaction (past experience), b) optimism and hope (future experience), c) flow and happiness (present experience). At the same time, it extends to the following two approaches: a) The individualistic approach, which includes variables such as interpersonal abilities, positive personality traits, the ability to love, offer, forgive, talents, wisdom and perseverance. b) The altruistic approach, which includes variables such as social responsibility, accountability, moderation, tolerance, altruism and work ethics.

It should be emphasized at this point that the development of positive psychology, especially nowadays, is considered necessary, as it has now been recognized that positive emotions are essential components of happiness and mental health. As Fredrickson (2000) remarks, positive emotions broaden the scope of attention as well as the thought-action repertoires and behavioral and cognitive responses to environmental conditions, resulting in either positive or negative adaptations. In addition, Izard and her colleagues (2002) believe that positive emotions promote the development of social competences and prevent the emergence of psychopathological problems.

It is worth adding the basic assumptions of positive psychology, as reported by Buss (2000) and Seligman (2002): a) People are adaptive and seek social interaction. In other words, man is a social being and develops meaningful bonds with other members of the group to which he belongs. b) People can thrive and grow. Positive psychology does not emphasize the problematic aspects of human existence. c) The abilities and virtues of the individual are the main areas of psychological well-being. That is to say, man must first understand his virtues and, above all, integrate them into his daily life. d) Happiness is a social virtue. In other words, the social environment must also be “positive”. e) Experiencing positive emotions has specific causes, which are unique, stable, and different from those that cause negative emotions. In other words, the elimination of negative emotions does not lead to positive emotions. f) Positive emotions are distinguished on the basis of different characteristics and lead to different results. That is, not all positive emotions are the same. g) Hedonism is not in itself a positive condition for psychological well-being. Positive psychology differs from hedonism, from the point of view that only the emotions that contribute to a “meaningful and purposeful” life are relevant. h) Negative emotions are just as important as the positive ones, taking into account the fact that studying positive emotions without previously studying the negative ones may end up being partial and involves methodological risks.

## **2.1 Positive Psychology and Education**

The school must support not only the children's intellectual, but also their socio-emotional development, favour a positive climate and promote meaningful relationships between them. The role of positive psychology in education is, therefore, particularly important in the field of prevention, in order to strengthen each child's self-esteem through appropriate programs and to meet their social and emotional needs.

In the last two decades, the number of mental health problems in children and adolescents has been found to be dramatically increasing (Rutter & Smith, 1995). It is therefore imperative that children search, understand and express their feelings. In addition, according to Gottman (2000), children who successfully handle their emotions perform well in school, experience fewer behavior problems, and manage stressful situations more effectively.

In addition, the school should also emphasize the strengthening of students' social skills so that they can deal with conflict situations more effectively. Cultivating empathy, understanding others' feelings about building

healthy interpersonal relationships can be achieved through play. After all, play emphasizes the value of emotions and the students' creativity beyond knowledge (Dallman & Jones, 1994).

Positive psychology, therefore, also focuses on the development of children's creativity, as it is the foundation of a balanced and happy life for both children and adults. According to Parnes (1963), the greatest blocks to the development of a student's creative thinking are lack of love and mental security, fear of mistakes, criticism, fear of failure and diversity.

In addition, the concept of Emotional Intelligence should also be included, which according to Goleman (1995) has the following components: a) emotional self-awareness, b) self-regulation, c) self-motivation and zeal, d) empathy and e) social deftness. Emotional intelligence is closely linked to the above skills. The school should therefore help students understand their emotions and learn more about how to manage them. Experiential learning, that is, the active involvement of the child in the educational process, certainly helps towards this direction, in order to strengthen his positive characteristics and promote his/her emotional well-being and health.

### **3. Creative Writing and Education**

Creative writing is closely linked not only to the teaching of literature, but also to the teaching of a variety of artistic practices aimed at mastering writing skills (Positive Health, 1998). It relies on the restructuring of elements of a word, sentence or text to create new texts (Passia & Mandilaras, 2000). Parnes (1963) believes that creative writing is a process of thought and response that relates to past experiences, responding to various stimulus patterns and resulting in a unique combination. In other words, it is a form of personal freedom.

According to Karakitsios (2011), teaching creative writing involves the following conditions: a) It is necessary to use some techniques and to follow a set of rules and prerequisites concerning style. b) Appropriate instruction is required for a talent to be inspired and cultivated as well as imitation of classic works of literature is essential at an early stage. c) With creative writing, the individual feels released and relieved achieving emotional and spiritual liberation while at the same time his self-confidence is further boosted. d) Creative writing is addressed to all ages.

It is important to emphasize that through creative writing the role of the Creator is assigned to the child and not simply that of a Secretary. In the first case, the student tries to answer "how to express yourself" in writing. Problems to be solved are readability (dysgraphia), spelling (dysorthographia/disorientation), vocabulary, punctuation, syntax, accentuation, and the use of lowercase letters, which are related to the language itself, the meta-language. However, with creative writing, the Creator-child is concerned with generating ideas, creating and organizing the appropriate design for the text, redesigning his ideas, and alternating contexts, goals, the quality and the quantity of writing, the written communication, the self-image, the self-esteem, the reader, his attitude towards the text (Grosdos, 2014, p. 21).

As far as language teaching is concerned, creative writing is not identical to it at purely practical level. Trying to acquire metalinguistic skills (learning grammar and syntactic rules) is not actually a meeting point. However, language teaching uses the knowledge and applications of modern linguistic principles of language teaching, that is to say the holistic, functional use of language, and text-centricity (Grosdos, 2014, pp. 31–32). After all, creative writing emphasizes the process rather than the product, that is to say the text. "Teaching writing involves not only the finished product or the final text, but also all the preparatory work and actions the student performs when writing. The first trend focuses its attention on the object and its constituents, its cohesion, etc., by

eliminating the subject and the content, while the second tendency favors the subject and its activities, a primarily psychological approach” (Sorin, 2005, p. 66).

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the activities are designed in such a way as to push children towards individual or group activities. In fact, through these activities they face a problem in which they are asked to provide a solution by producing speech, either verbal/oral or written (Grosdos & Dayou, 2003). In fact, before or after the creative writing activities, creative thematic game-activities are implemented, such as the creation of artworks (paintings, collages, constructions), music games, motion and action games (theatrical events/role-plays) and reading games (Goulis & Grosdos, 2011).

### **3.1 Positive Psychology and Creative Writing in Education**

Optimism, hope, happiness, curiosity, the notion of psychological flow and the mental toughness, important concepts of Positive Psychology, promote the development of positive emotions and thus lead to welfare and well-being. In the field of Education, the emphasis on cultivating the above values can help create happy children and happy and creative future adults. Indeed, according to Stalika and Mitskidou (2011), these terms reinforce one's psychological balance and push him to develop his own separate purposes on his own separate means.

First of all, according to Scheier and Carver (1985), optimism is defined as the ability of a person to have a constant tendency to believe that good things only are going to happen to him, not bad things. Seligman (1995) describes four sources for the origin of optimism: (a) genetic optimism, (b) optimism that comes from the child's environment, in which parents seem to be a strong influence, (c) optimism in the form of criticism that the child receives from the parents and teachers and (d) the optimism that develops through child's life experiences, which also shape their character. Optimism has many effects on individuals, such as low levels of loneliness, low levels of anger, psychological adaptability to new situations, and higher levels of mental well-being (Stalikas & Mitskidou, 2011). Optimism is taught and is a valuable asset for children throughout their lives. On the other hand, creative writing activities at school have a playful character and most of them have a strong element of humor. Laughing brings relief to the child, freeing him from the phobias and hesitations he may experience from dealing with the world. Therefore, it inspires optimism and contributes to psychological and physical health (Kanatsouli, 1993).

What's more, the Psychology of Learning defines hope as the predetermined response to signalling an impending event (Papadopoulos, 2005), while training is associated with high performance, enhanced concentration, high self-esteem and reduced depression (Stalikidis, 2011). In terms of creative writing, hope building and reinforcement can be achieved through a story-telling framework. By giving a different evolution to a story or changing the role of the characters, students integrate hope into their lives through a narrative (Snyder, Mc Dermott, Cook & Raporff, 1997).

Happiness is a primary issue in a person's life and is defined as the individual's overall appreciation for his own life (Stalikas & Mitskidou, 2011). According to Stalikas & Mitskidou, some of the traits attributed to individuals with high levels of happiness are extroversion, generosity, continuous engagement in new things, high self-esteem, and the ability to control themselves. Seligman (2002) states that there are three types of happiness: a) Happiness in the light of pleasure, that is, satisfaction through the attainment of day-to-day pleasures (pleasant life) b) Happiness in the perspective of enriching our lives (good life) and c) happiness in the sense of using our highest talents and strengths in the service of the greater good (meaningful life). According to Seligman, the people who orient their pursuits towards all three elements are those who pursue a “full life”. On the other hand,

creative writing activities at school, as they are relevant to the skills and functions encountered in play, such as the sense of adventure, imagination, experimentation and discovery (Karagiannis, 2010) increase children's happiness levels. By imprinting their emotions on paper, students come in contact with them and move on. They begin with metaphors and examples to reach a more specific definition of their distress (Jacowska, 1997). Self-awareness helps them transform their sadness into something beautiful, deal with problems in the narrative, and so on.

It goes without saying that mentally retarded children build healthy relationships with their surroundings, set high goals, have motivation, find the positive element in each difficulty, and have a particular ability to solve problems (Higgins, 1994). Mental resilience is, therefore, the positive adjustment of a person despite adverse conditions. Important protective factors associated with creativity are intelligence, high intellectual ability, cognitive flexibility, that is, one's ability to cope with positive negative experiences, self-esteem and self-regulation. According to Hawkins & Catalano (1990) the development of children's mental resilience can be achieved by: a) developing positive emotional bonds, b) establishing clear boundaries, and c) learning social skills. Implementing creative writing activities in the classroom not only presupposes but also enhances the positive classroom climate. In such a climate, students experiment safely and feel free to describe their emotional involvement in the stimulus patterns offered. Group collaborative processes and the teacher's democratic teaching style (Grosdos, 2014) stimulate positive emotions in children and nurture many of their social skills, such as cooperation, empathy, impulse control, anger management and self-esteem.

Continuing with positive emotions, the notion of psychological flow, first introduced by Csikszentmihalyi in 1960, refers to the situation in which the individual is fully absorbed in the object he is dealing with, but without losing contact with space and time (Stalikas & Mitskidou, 2011). An important prerequisite for a person to experience the psychological flow is the belief in their own abilities and the ability to cope with the difficulties presented. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the key elements of psychological flow are: a) The balance between the challenges and the skills of the individual, b) The merging of action and awareness, c) The clear goals, d) The unambiguous feedback e) The concentration on the task at hand, f) The sense of control, g) The loss of self-consciousness, h) The transformation of time and i) The autotelic experience. The role of the school in creating the psychological flow is crucial. In particular, the school must set specific and clear goals, enable the student to make choices, show confidence in their abilities, and finally promote their involvement in complex processes. On the other hand, creative writing, including guided and sometimes relaxed exercises, enables students to become effectively involved in the learning process. Taking into account the interests and abilities of the children, setting specific goals and providing guidance with the teacher gradually moving away from the foreground, provides the opportunity for students to express thoughts, ideas and feelings, transferring them mentally to another place and time. The presentation of the narratives in the class plenary serves as a feedback for students to improve or rewrite their texts.

Concluding the attempt to merge positive psychology with creative writing in the field of education, it is also worth exploring the concept of curiosity. Berlyne (1967) distinguishes two qualitative different forms of curiosity — divertive curiosity and specific curiosity. The first relates to actively seeking out varied sources of novelty and challenge and the second relates to actively seeking depth in one's knowledge and experience with a particular stimulus or activity. From the mobilization of curiosity to the completion of personal growth, there are four stages: a) Exploring the problem orienting oneself toward novel and challenging stimulus b) The development of cognitive abilities and skills in order for the individual to be able to process stimulus appropriately. c) The integration of novel experience through which assimilation is carried out (Kashdan, Rose & Fincham, 2004).

Creative writing provides a variety of stimuli for producing oral and written expression in a playful, enjoyable and creative setting, enhancing students' curiosity. Writing a different ending of a story, changing the place and time, adding new heroes or removing the existing ones and a great number of other activities encourage alternative word usage, language overlaps and divergent writing, enhancing student curiosity. Thanks to creative writing, the student acquires a deep insight of himself and the world around him using his own imagination beyond strict learning contexts.

#### 4. Discussion

The development of positive psychology is nowadays essential, as positive emotions have been found to be essential components of mental health. Specifically, in the field of education they broaden the students' perceptual field and the range of their cognitive and behavioral responses to the stimuli of their environment. Creative writing can be a useful tool of positive psychology to help each student build healthy relationships with themselves and with the world around them. Creative writing is used as a framework for the prevention, improvement and restoration of mental health. What it has in common with positive psychology is the fact that it also emphasizes the subjective level, encouraging the child to outsource his subjective experiences and personal interpretations freely, creatively, without the fear of failure or mistake on paper and sharing them with his peers in a climate of freedom, mutual understanding and mutual acceptance.

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