EUROPEAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE 2011
"Perspectives of Creativity and Learning in Early Childhood"

ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΟ ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟ ΟΜΕΡ 2011
«Δημιουργικότητα και μάθηση στην πρώτη σχολική ηλικία»

AVRUPA KONFERANSI OMEP 2011
"Erken Çocuklukta Yaraticilik ve Öğrenme"

Conference proceedings
Πρακτικά Συνεδρίου
Konferans Bildirisi

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Young children make their own picture books in a resource room

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Abstract

This paper advocates creative writing as an effective tool in special education. It can provide a new approach both to developing students with Learning Disabilities a more positive stance towards writing and to helping them to improve their oral and writing expression. However, no research exists regarding the efficacy of this strategy. Therefore an intervention program had been implemented in a resource room setting in order to help students with writing difficulties to write stories. The intervention had positive results as we realized that students tried to use their writing skills, a field where they had experienced only failure. There was a significant difference in the writing products of the students but the most important fact was that their self-concept boosted because they had tangible evidence that their effort was valued as they had the opportunity to publish their work.

Learning Disabilities, picture books, art and literacy

Introduction

Writing comprises a fundamental part of the school curriculum because it is a vital and indispensable skill, as well as a long–lasting tool which can be used in many different everyday situations, as a means of expression, communication and proof of learning and understanding. More specifically, when it comes to writing stories, the related process is not only conducive to understanding the significance of written production and the way it functions but it is also a challenge for students, since they need to use their imagination in order to create something new, ie a world of their own. However, the production of stories within the daily school program is rather limited, as educators report that not enough time is devoted to teaching creative writing (Colantone, Cunningham- Wetmore, & Dreznes, 1998) and research has proven that very little time is devoted to the writing process generally (ie planning, text processing, reviewing) (Fink – Chorzempa, Graham & Harris, 2005; Troia 2006). Students write mainly in order to be assessed and they are only concerned about correct spelling, punctuation and the "length" of their texts, despite the fact that the cross–

thematic frame of studies clearly specifies that students should, among other things, be encouraged to create and write their own stories. It is obvious how hard this process can be for students with difficulty in writing –since they are not only unable to compose a text but also to just write down some of their thoughts (Graham & Harris, 1989), but also their texts usually remain unfinished and are very short, without any coherence and cohesion (Troia, 2006).

The aim of education is to provide all students with equal opportunities, which will enhance their academic performance. Therefore, several programs as well as interventions are being developed, which are adjusted to the particular needs of each child; many of them are based on the principles of creative education. The incorporation of creative activities into the school curriculum has made educators quite optimistic about the future, since creative work is closely related to higher grades as well as higher success rates at schools tests. A reason for that is the fact that students seem to be more interested in school and less in spending hours in front of the TV screen (Catterall, 1998 in Bolt & Brooks, 2006). Creative activities have also been proven to promote the development of social and mental abilities and the ability to manage one self. Furthermore, research has proven that the integration of creative work into the school curriculum has significantly contributed to the behavioral adjustment (Baum & Owen, 1997 in Bolt & Brooks, 2006), as well as the enhancement of the positive image students with learning difficulties have of themselves (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 2000).

Taking the aforementioned parameters into consideration, we attempted to organize a creative writing workshop, which have been a widespread method of cultivating creative writing for many years (Fenza, 2002), for students with difficulty in written expression. The main objective of the workshop was to cultivate the ability to produce a story and the secondary aims were to activate the students' imagination, create a positive attitude and boost their self–confidence towards the writing process as well as the possibility of writing a text meant to be announced and received by certain recipients.

Students with Writing Difficulties

Learning difficulties cover a wide range of special educational needs and, following extensive research, it has been found that students with learning difficulties share some common characteristics which concern their perception, memory, attentiveness, as well as some social and emotional particularities (Bender, 1985; Bender, Rosenkrans & Crane, 1999; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Maag, Irvin, Reid & Vasa, 1994, in Bender, 2004), which, oftentimes, influence their academic progress (Coleman, 1985; Rothman & Cosden, 1995; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982, in Bender, 2004). Poor performance at school often leads certain students to problematic behavior in class, which consequently results in

increased failure due to problematic interaction with the educator. Eventually, a vicious circle of rejections and failures is created. Accumulation of failure in combination with the increasing demands of the school curriculum leads to low self-esteem, and to a sense of personal rejection and inferiority. One of the factors that exacerbate the situation is the lack of incentive, as these students are unable to control things and just let them happen (Hallahan et al, 2005); in other words, they expect others (teachers, parents) to motivate them, to organize and assess them, when the rest of their classmates are capable of doing these things on their own, without any external interference (Hallahan et al., 2005). It is remarkable that, they never brag about their success, they attribute it to somebody else's help, whereas they willingly assume responsibility for any failure (Tabassam & Grainger, 2002, in Hallahan et al., 2005). All in all, the lack of incentive in students with learning difficulties can be observed in their abstinence from active learning procedures, their refusal to resolve a problematic situation and their conviction that their success is attributable to external factors, whereas their failure is always caused by their inability or low IQ. That's why they tend to seek help immediately, a tactic which enhances their low self–perception and low–esteem (Ryan, Short & Weed, 1986; Graham & Harris, 2000; Coplan, Findlay, & Nelson, 2004; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007; Hallahan, et al., 2005; ValAs, 1999; Gans, Kenny & Ghany, 2003)

The number of students with writing problems is not exactly known. In addition to students with learning disabilities, there are students with behavioral problems, hyperactivity etc., who also have difficulties in writing (Gilliam & Johnson, 1992; Nelson, Benner, Lane, Smith 2004; Newcomer & Barenbaum, 1991; Resta & Eliot, 1994 in Graham & Harris, 2005). For many years though, problems in writing were considered to be one of the characteristics of students with learning disabilities (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2005) as most of those students had no motive or confidence to write (Tompkins, 2002). In any case, students with writing difficulties set out to write with few or no ideas, which they try to come up with while they are writing. As a result, they pay very little attention to the development of objectives, the organization of the text or the needs of the reader (Troia, 2006).

Given the fact that writing is a tool with which students investigate, organize and articulate their ideas on any subject, it is essential that a very well–organized and structured teaching be employed so that positive results can be maximized and the number of students facing difficulties minimized (Graham & Harris, 2005). Besides, the learning process is quite complicated and highly depends on the changes that take place in the teaching approach as well as on the students' motivation (Alexander, Graham & Harris, 1996). According to Johnson (2007, in Conroy et al., 2009), what we can do in order to motivate our students and hold their interest is to teach writing in many different ways, thus increasing their interest and

enhancing the results of the process. Only if the writing process is treated as an interactive process which involves the students, teaches them the significance of reviewing, correcting as well as editing their piece of writing (Calking 1986; Graves, 1983; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007), are the students motivated to try and succeed.

Creativity and Creative Writing

It is hard to define creativity as a concept, as each scientific discipline uses different criteria in its interpretation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Reid & Petocz, 2004). In education, creativity is not thought to be a characteristic of an elite group of particularly gifted students, but an innate quality which can be cultivated and developed, as long as strong motivation for each emergence is provided (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; NACCCE, 1999; Sternberg, 2001). It is regarded as a thinking process which helps students to learn "how to think", in the sense that it trains them in the development of different thinking dimensions, since scholars involved in the subject, mainly focus on the development of the students´ vivid imagination, which in turn offers originality to thinking. This is believed to contribute to an unobstructed production of ideas, to flexibility in the articulation of ideas on various subjects, as well as originality, so that these ideas can be unusual and unique.

The acquisition of skills like the ones described above is fundamental. And if we accept that the relation between a student and language can evolve, we will also accept the need to discover alternative strategies which will enable us to assist our students. One of these strategies is students´ active involvement in a creative writing workshop where writing texts can be produced.

Creative writing is a form of apprenticeship on writing in workshops in which a group, guided by a person who specializes in creative activities, produces written texts in order to discover and exploit the potential of writing and speculating about them, yet without bridling its imagination and creativity (Reuter 1989; Rossignol 1997; Voltz 2002). The writing process itself, as well as the discovery of personal means of written expression, is both encouraged within a similar framework of a creative approach to written expression. At the same time, the production of the texts is seen as "the free expression of a child's personality, the verbal enunciation of their individual creativity" (Dawson, 2005:21), on condition that a considerable amount of time is available for the realization of the process, that there is a range of topics to choose from, an exchange of authentic transactions between the teacher and the rest of the participants, and the freedom to adopt individual and/or unique writing processes.

Tompkins (1982) stresses the significance of creative writing for the mental development of the child as well as the development of communication skills and gives seven reasons for which children should write their own stories 1) to entertain; 2) to foster artistic expression;

3) to explore the functions and values of writing; 4) to stimulate imagination; 5) to clarify thinking; 6) to search for identity; and 7) to learn to read and write. Advocates of the particular writing approach believe, more generally, that a basic reason why the techniques of creative writing enable the teacher to train his students to write better is the fact that this particular approach encourages the students to actively participate in the process of written communication, that is to express their own feelings in written form and to realize how important the preparation, the reviewing and the publication of their creations are (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986 / 1991).

The contribution of the creative writing workshops to the educational process has not yet been satisfactorily investigated. However, a review of research studies depicts that the use of creative writing techniques has quite promising results. The data collected on completion of a program followed in three different schools in the U.S.A, which was aiming at the improvement of student's creative writing, explicitly showed that the students who had participated were able to use creative writing techniques more skillfully and understand the practice of creative writing more fully (Collantone, Cunningham – Wetmore, & Dreznes, 1998). The creative writing techniques proved to have contributed to the enhancement of students writing skills, after an indervention in 4th, 7th and 8th grades (Bartscher, Lawter, Ramirez & Schinault, 2001). The aim of the research program entitled "The Writer's Workshop", which was conducted from September 2008 to January 2009, was the creative encouragement school students to develop initiative and through insight into writing. After the workshop, the number of students positive towards writing expression increased from 55% to 72% and the number of students who enjoyed writing on any subject, particularly stories and letters, increased from 21%to 34%. Moreover, after a thorough analysis of the texts, it was found that the students had overall improved significantly by 25% as regards their creativity, sentence structure and the enrichment of their stories with extra details (Conroy, Marchard, & Webster, 2009).

Nevertheless, studies designed to investigate the effects of teaching students with learning disabilities writing using creative writing strategies are very limited. Taking into account this gap, the aim of our study is to examine the efficacy of a creative writing workshop as a method for helping students with writing difficulties to increase competence on writing stories. More specifically, our research is mainly focused on the organization of a written text, the production of ideas as well as the presentation of an end-product with coherence and cohesion (Gersten & Baker, 2001; Baher et al, 2003). What is particularly stressed is the use of techniques which enhance a text (Graham & Harris, 1989; Graham, Schwartz & McArthur, 1993; Baker et al, 2003; Deatline-Buchman & Jitendra, 2006), the development of a more

positive attitude towards writing (Solomon, 2005), and, finally, the creation of visual images (Olenchalk, 2005).

Methodology

Participants: The intervention took place in a resource room at a school in an urban area. Four students, two boys and two girls were chosen. One of these students (B Grade) has been diagnosed to be hyper-active and unable to concentrate on a task for more than 10 minutes. His performance is inconsistent while copying a text and he writes phonologically. Another student, a girl, has gaps in her knowledge which do not correlate to her age (C Grade) and need to be eliminated otherwise they will further impede her progress at school. She finds it particularly difficult to write. During the assessment of the third student (C Grade), serious spelling errors were observed, as well as difficulty in processing ideas and in his text structure and syntax generally. The fourth student (B Grader) has not been officially assessed by any authorized centre, but she seems to be unable to write coherently despite her extremely vivid imagination.

Tools: To record observations, an evaluation tool was devised, which facilitated the process. There was an informal evaluation of the participants as regards their reading ability as well as their ability to comprehend reading texts, with the help of selected texts, since, as it was mentioned above, three of the research subjects had already been evaluated by an official state institution. For the particular research, an intervention program was also designed, called "We create our own books", which consisted of designated stages and activities. In order to test the validity of the intervention's results, the students were asked to produce written texts before the intervention, during the intervention, as well as completion of the intervention, all of which were later assessed. For the assessment of the written texts produced by the participants, the criteria used were the ones used by Brown (1977) & Tway (1980 in Cole, 1995) and assessment methods which have been validated by Miller & Crocker (1990) according to which, what is mainly assessed is originality, explicit character description and the use of dialogues, similes, vivid pictures, etc. On completion of the intervention program there was a semi–structured interview of the participants, aiming at finding out whether they had enjoyed participating in the program if they were stressed, if there was anything they did not like and if they would like to add or change anything in the whole process.

Intervention: A 'fairytale workshop' was set up in a corner in the classroom. We had everything we needed, such as paper, pencils, rubbers, colorful pencils. Knowing in advance, that students usually focus on the length of their written text as well as grammatical and syntactic rules, thus failing to use their imagination creatively, we provided them with tools which enabled them to use their imagination without restrictions and come up with ideas. We

had lots of material at our disposal, such as dictionaries, cut-outs from newspapers and magazines, which the children could be inspired from so as to start writing.

The students' ability to read and their ability to comprehend what they read were both assessed with the help of an extract from the school's textbook entitled *Anthology of Literary Texts*. The selected extract was read out loud by the researcher and a series of reading comprehension activities, accompanied by artistic activities, followed. For our next meeting, what had been selected was another extract, from the same textbook, and what was read to the students was its introduction, which ended with the phrase "that's how a long journey started". The students were given a few minutes to think about what could have happened during that journey. Each student presented a different version, to which the other students added or charged something. In the end, the researcher wrote down all the possible endings to the story on a big piece of paper and she asked the students to draw a picture for any one of the endings they preferred. Then, each student told his own story, based on the drawing he/she had made. In our third meeting, the course of the procedure changed. Each student was asked to select four pictures from a number of pictures given to him and try to create and tell his own story with the pictures he had chosen. Next, with the help of the pictures, the students created a story as a group. Each student brought his own personal style into the story with the sentences he structured, while the final text was organized and paragraphed with the help of the pictures.

In our next meeting, a decision was made by the researcher and the students to write and illustrate a fairytale, which was then bound as a book and kept in the class library. Each student had his own idea and after agreeing on the plot and the characters of the story, they were then asked to make some drawings related to the plot (pre-writing stage). They then added a short text to each drawing and the draft was read out loud. There were some necessary changes and corrections and the illustration of the story was completed. The text was added at the end. The students were narrating the events while the researcher was writing, and they read the text several times before actually deciding on its final form (writing stage). To avoid spelling errors, the end-product was written on the whiteboard, corrected and then copied. Many images that the students could not draw were made cut'n'paste. Thick, colorful cardboard was used for the cover with a picture on, which was made by all the students together. The students with the best handwriting were responsible for writing the title of the fairy tale as well as the names of the writers. Finally, there was some editing, initially by the students and then by the researcher, just in case there were errors or omissions. At this stage, what was more important was not so much error correction as the need for students to realize how important it is to edit what they write, a process which students often tend to neglect, with students with writing difficulties hardly ever doing it.

The next phase was the composition of individual stories. The students could select a title or a set of four pictures from a wide range of ideas and could compose their own story based on what they had selected. The procedure was repeated four more times and in the end, each student had four stories of his own. Each story was read out loud and assessed by all the participants. This procedure motivated the students and made them compete for the most original and action-packed story. The final assessment of the end-product led to the realization that the students' writing skills had significantly improved, as the final written texts were longer, more original and richer in character description and action than the initial ones.

Results – Discussion

It has already been established that students with learning difficulties depict low self-esteem because of their constant failure and expect others to motivate them. Therefore, the use of teamwork combined with the guidance offered by the researcher gave these students a sense of security and the confidence that they would achieve their aims, on condition that there was guidance and external control. It has to be noted here though that any help students sought was given to them indirectly, since the researcher was just a coordinator, not the one to always give answers, which were elicited during the discussion and the exchange of ideas by the team members. In this way, students realized that they already knew a lot of things but found it difficult to retrieve them from their memory or they were insecure about whether what they knew was right or not. Furthermore, based on the conviction that although students may be unable to write a story, they can tell it in different ways, we did not discourage them. On the contrary, we provided them with alternative solutions, such as to record the story or to draw it.

As regards the effectiveness of the intervention, we consider the results to be very good, given the fact that the particular students would not write anything, made a lot of spelling errors and the handwriting of one of the students was illegible before the program. More specifically, the fairytale workshop contributed to the development of the participants' writing skills and gave them the opportunity to read their stories to one another, to comment on them and to say what they liked and didn't like, as the fact that the results of the students' work were tangible, long-lasting and addressed to recipients, motivated them to participate in and complete the activities. The particular approach had multiple benefits, since, not only did students have a motive to write and express themselves but they also exercised their ability to focus on and assess a piece of writing. Moreover, they learned to use a dictionary and to co-operate with their classmates. Therefore, they realized that writing is not necessarily a lonely process but can be done with group work. They also got used to being more tolerant of peers' comments

and, through their classmates' writing, discovered techniques which they might not have been able to discern by just reading a well-written text.

Planning is a basic part of writing, which ineffective writers always omit (Graham, 1990; McCutchen, 1998), in contrast to effective writers who devote quite a lot of time to planning (Kellogg,1987). That is why during the intervention, a significant amount of time was spent planning, initially with sketches and then with continuous correction of the text. In this way, students learnt the importance of editing and realized that grammatical rules are not the most significant feature of a test. Moreover, while they had never bragged about a success before, as is usually the case (Hallahan et al., 2005), writing a book from scratch made them feel proud of themselves, because it was their own creation and the result of individual as well as team effort.

Interventions made in order to tackle writing problem students with learning difficulties face are undoubtedly a complex and difficult procedure. There has to be co-ordinated and continuous effort for the intervention to bear fruit, while the repeated use of practices each of which completes and perfects the rest is considered to be a necessary prerequisite for the success of the project. Therefore, creative writing activities and procedural writing practices have to be interchangeable, and, in any case, students' individual needs and skills have to be taken into consideration, whereas writing itself has to be diverse, varied and meaningful to the students themselves. For this reason, it is imperative that students learn strategies and techniques which enhance their creativity (Baker et al., 2003) and augment their basic writing skills (Gersten & Baker, 2001). Finally, we reckon that the particular intervention would be much more interesting if it was implemented in a general class, as each group would consist of "sufficient" as well as "insufficient" students, who would have to co-operate towards their goal. Detached students would, thus, be integrated in the group, display some form of latent skills or even make friends. In any case, however, procedures like the one we materialized explicitly depict the satisfaction students feel when playing with ideas and words, as well as the sense of fulfillment they derive from such creative procedures.

Acknowledgements

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