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Therapeutic Writing in the Personal Development of Children: An Applied Study in an Educational Context

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Abstract: *This paper is a pilot study exploring the role of therapeutic writing in the personal development of primary school children, analyzing the effects of a 16-session program based on expressive and narrative techniques. The aim of the study was to observe the impact of these activities on well-being, engagement, and emotional self-regulation. The research was conducted on a sample of 16 students and used The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being (pre–post) questionnaire alongside systematic qualitative observations. Activities included therapeutic letters, emotion-centered stories, narrative writing exercises, and gratitude journaling. The results showed increases in engagement, social connection, and perseverance, confirming the hypothesis that therapeutic writing supports personal and emotional development. Although exploratory, the study provides a solid basis for applying expressive interventions in educational settings and for expanding research on the psychological benefits of writing in children.*

Keywords: *therapeutic writing; personal development; children; emotional regulation; EPOCH; emotional education; expressive writing.*

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Introduction

In an era marked by information overload and emotional pressure from an early age, education can no longer be reduced to the accumulation of knowledge, but must include the dimension of psychological and emotional training. The concept of *personal development* in school involves cultivating intrapersonal skills, empathy, and self-regulation. In this context, therapeutic writing emerges as a method with significant potential for stimulating self-reflection and emotional balance.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of expressive writing on physical and mental health. Pennebaker & Chung (2011) was the first to highlight the link between written expression of emotions and stress reduction, improved immunity, and cognitive. Subsequently, Baikie & Wilhelm (2005) showed that expressive writing activates complementary cognitive and affective processes: on the one hand, it facilitates emotional release; on the other hand, it stimulates the narrative organization of experience.

In children, writing can become a form of affective self-regulation, providing a symbolic space of safety. Through stories, diaries, and letters, children can put into words what they often cannot express verbally. From an educational perspective, this means a bridge between cognitive learning and emotional development.

Therapeutic writing aligns with contemporary paradigms of positive psychology, which support the cultivation of personal strengths and well-being (Seligman, 2012). Reflective activities based on emotional expression contribute to increased engagement and a sense of meaning. At the same time, the method can be naturally integrated into school counseling and social-emotional development programs without requiring a formal psychotherapeutic setting.

Theoretical foundation

Therapeutic writing is based on the idea that narrative language has a transformative function: by telling stories, people structure their internal reality and give coherence to their identity (White & Epston, 1990). From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, the act of writing involves restructuring irrational thoughts and identifying emotional patterns. Thus, the diary, letter, or story become tools for *cognitive self-observation* and *emotional regulation.*

In narrative therapy, writing has the function of externalization: the problem is placed "outside the self" and analyzed with distance and clarity.

In an educational context, this externalization supports self-reflection and develops metacognitive skills—children learn to recognize emotions, name them, and connect them with their own actions.

Kern et al.'s EPOCH model (2015) offers a modern perspective on well-being in adolescents and preteens, integrating dimensions relevant to early emotional development: **engagement, perseverance, optimism, connection, and happiness**. These correspond to the fundamental psychological needs described by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000): competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Through expressive writing exercises, students can practice precisely these dimensions: engagement in the process, perseverance in reflection, optimism through reinterpretation of experiences, and connection through symbolic sharing.

Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 16 students (8 girls and 8 boys), aged between 8 and 11, from the primary cycle of an urban school. Participation was voluntary, with parental consent. None of the participants had diagnosed emotional disorders or cognitive difficulties reported by teachers.

I chose the age group 8–11 years old, considering that 8 years old is usually the youngest age at which children can include therapeutic writing in their routine. Since cognitive development has individual implications and is not solely dependent on age, I chose to use the 8–11 age range so that I could observe the results in the lives of several children of similar ages.

These sessions cannot be held in very large groups, because each participant needs time and space to share their writings, and ideally for the study it would have been better to run several groups in parallel, but as I said, this is a pilot study.

Furthermore, children within this developmental stage are at an optimal point for fostering the socio-emotional skills reflected in the EPOCH model—such as engagement, optimism, and connectedness—through reflective and narrative-based interventions (Seligman et al., 2009).

Instruments

1. The EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being (Kern et al., 2015) – applied before and after the intervention; assesses five dimensions: involvement, perseverance, optimism, connection, and happiness.

2. Qualitative observation sheets, completed by the researcher at the end of each meeting, focusing on participation behaviors, emotional expressiveness, and social interaction.

Procedure

The program took place over a period of 16 meetings, one per week, each lasting 50 minutes. The activities were structured progressively, aiming to:

1. Developing awareness of emotions through free writing and personal stories;
2. Learning to express feelings in a controlled manner through therapeutic letters;
3. Stimulating positive reflection through a gratitude journal;
4. Strengthening personal identity through narrative stories about oneself.

The environment was non-judgmental, based on safety and acceptance. Participants were encouraged to write freely, without censorship, and the written products were not graded, but only discussed if the students wanted to.

We sought to identify recurring emotions in the children's writings and reflections. Each participant showed a certain predisposition to mention certain emotions, situations, or experiences more frequently, while others gravitated toward a different range of feelings. As we know from transactional analysis, depending on their life history, each person tends to experience a certain dominant emotion when faced with discomfort – shame, anger, sadness or injustice (Berne, 1964).

We observed how each child reacted in situations perceived as difficult and considered it beneficial that, throughout the meetings, the participants began to notice for themselves the emotional mechanisms that were repeated in their own writings. We often encouraged them to reread their texts in order to notice the similarities between them. During group discussions, the children said that it was revealing to discover people with similar ways of reacting, but also peers with different attitudes—and yet all of them were accepted as "normal."

The group provided constant support and validation, and the sincerity of expression served as a driver of authenticity. In addition to the qualitative analysis of recurring emotions, we also tracked the evolution of the five dimensions in the EPOCH tool: engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness. For each writing activity, we noted:

1. whether the exercise was done superficially or with care and involvement;
2. whether there were corrections, a desire to improve the written product, or additional questions related to the task (indicators of perseverance);
3. whether the text expressed hope, curiosity, or, conversely, pessimistic tendencies (aspects of optimism);
4. whether participants provided constructive feedback to their peers, listened actively, and showed genuine interest (the dimension of social connectedness);
5. whether the content of the writings included elements of gratitude, joy, and appreciation of positive experiences, or whether the focus was exclusively on negative aspects (dimension of happiness).

These qualitative observations were correlated with the results of the pre- and post-EPOCH measurements to highlight possible socio-emotional development trends generated by the therapeutic writing process.

Hypotheses

1. Participation in therapeutic writing activities increases the level of **involvement and perseverance**.
2. Expressing emotions through writing facilitates **social connection** and **optimizes well-being**.
3. The reflective and secure environment contributes to **the development of emotional self-regulation**.

Results

A comparison of pre- and post-intervention data shows an overall increase in EPOCH scores, particularly in the areas of **Engagement**, **Connection**, and **Perseverance**.

1. Students showed increased interest in creative tasks and an active attitude in discussions.
2. The level of group cooperation and willingness to share personal experiences increased noticeably.
3. There was a decrease in defensive behaviors and more nuanced emotional expression.

Qualitative data confirm these trends. In post-session notes, the researcher noted significant developments in emotional language ("today I wrote about fear, but I was no longer afraid") and in children's ability to link causes and effects ("when I get upset, I can write instead of yelling").

The overall results confirm the hypotheses: therapeutic writing stimulates cognitive and emotional engagement, promotes cooperation, and supports self-regulation.

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and Cohen's *d* effect size) were calculated for the five dimensions of the EPOCH questionnaire: Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, Happiness. The overall results confirm the working hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the research.

Participants scored higher on commitment (M = 3.90, SD = 0.42, d = 0.62*) and perseverance (M = 3.75, SD = 0.48, d = 0. 54*), which shows more consistent involvement, greater ability to concentrate, and an increased desire to see activities through to completion. The level of connection also increased (M = 3.83, SD = 0.44, d = 0.57*), confirming that a safe and empathetic environment facilitated closeness, mutual support, and positive relationships within the group.

Although the dimensions of optimism (M = 2.75, SD = 0.53*) and happiness (M = 3.25, SD = 0.61*) showed smaller increases, they are consistent with qualitative observations, which show greater awareness of emotions and authentic expression rather than an immediate change in affective mood.

Overall, the results support the hypothesis that therapeutic writing contributed to the development of socio-emotional skills, particularly in terms of engagement, perseverance, and social connection, having a positive impact on children's well-being.

DIMENSION	M_Pre	SD_Pre	M_Post	SD-Post	Cohen's d
Engagement	3.47	0.39	3.90	0.42	0.62
Perseverance	3.61	0.46	3.75	0.48	0.54
Optimism	2.33	0.55	2.75	0.53	0.32
Connectedness	3.50	0.47	3.83	0.44	0.57
Happiness	2.67	0.60	3.25	0.61	0.28

Scores are based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Discussions

The results support international literature attesting to the positive effects of expressive writing on well-being (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). In the case of children, these effects are amplified by the educational context, where an emotionally safe environment plays an essential role.

Writing functions as a form of guided self-reflection, allowing for the reorganization of experiences and emotional integration. The child becomes the author of their own narrative, and this process generates meaning and control over their feelings (Frankl, 2007).

Writing also contributes to the development of mentalization skills—the ability to understand the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Fonagy, 2002). In this sense, the intervention can be seen as a form of indirect emotional training that strengthens resilience and empathy.

The results obtained highlight the potential of including expressive techniques in the personal development curriculum. In addition, the non-evaluative framework of the activities reduces performance anxiety, promoting authentic learning.

The present pilot study is part of a broader research program exploring the psychological benefits of expressive and therapeutic writing in children. A complementary clinical study I conducted on another sample of nine children aged 9–12 years investigated the impact of creative and therapeutic writing on anxiety, depression, loneliness, and aggressive behavior, using the ASEBA–CBCL scales as assessment tools. That study also reported decreases in both internalizing and externalizing symptoms following ten online writing sessions. Together, the two sets of findings suggest that expressive writing can enhance emotional self-regulation and well-being, confirming its applicability across both educational and clinical contexts.

The development of the five essential skills in the Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) model is reflected in the results of therapeutic writing activities, as writing supports both the process of self-awareness and emotional self-regulation. On the one hand, writing about oneself requires an inner exploration, which naturally leads to a better understanding of oneself. On the other hand, journaling and gratitude exercises are presented to children as healthy adaptive mechanisms and are used for this purpose for emotional regulation.

As the participants worked in a group, relational skills such as empathy, active listening, and non-judgmental attitudes also emerged. As for responsible decision-making, this is not always evident in the content of the writings (given that free expression, without formal constraints, was encouraged), but it can be observed in the interactions between participants: even at a young age, children understood that their reaction when a classmate reads a vulnerable text has an emotional impact on that classmate.

Limitations

- The small number of participants (N=16) and the absence of a control group limit the generalizability of the results.
- The only standardized instrument used was EPOCH, which restricts statistical analysis.
- Qualitative observations, although valuable, may be influenced by the researcher's perception.

However, these limitations are natural for an exploratory study and can be overcome by future research with larger samples and complex experimental designs.

Conclusions and implications

Therapeutic writing is an accessible and effective method of supporting children's personal development. The results of the study indicate that integrating expressive writing exercises into educational activities contributes to:

- improved school engagement,
- increased perseverance and intrinsic motivation,
- developing emotional and social skills.

From a clinical perspective, therapeutic writing can be used to complement other emotional regulation interventions, contributing to the prevention of psychological difficulties. In education, teachers and counselors can use reflective writing to promote well-being and reduce school stress.

By combining cognitive, affective, and creative dimensions, writing becomes a form of education for meaning and self-knowledge.

The data obtained in this pilot study can be correlated in the future with the results of previous research and theoretical reviews on expressive writing to outline an integrative model of narrative interventions in children's personal development.

Conflict of interest | *There is no conflict of interest.*

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Data availability statement | *The data are available upon request, especially since this is a pilot study that encourages further research.*

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *No AI tools were used in the writing of the manuscript or in the data analysis. I used AI tools to assist in the accurate revision of the bibliography, as certain missing elements had been signaled, and I was unable to locate them in my personal notes. The manuscript was originally written in Romanian, and I only used translation and proofreading engines to assist with the English version.*

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