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Envisaging intergenerational spaces for co-creating creative writing: developing reflective functioning for positive mental health

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we take an ecological view of children's development to argue that preventive interventions should move beyond separating the microsystems of school and home to create new intergenerational spaces for nurturing mental wellbeing. Using the 5A's theory of creativity, we draw upon our experiences of creative writing to explore how intergenerational spaces that facilitate co-creating creative writing between parents and carers and their children as actors develops reflective functioning, secures attachment and promote positive mental health. This original idea is explored further with experts from diverse landscapes of practice through a World Café and focus group discussion. Thematic analysis of these discussions conceptualises intergenerational spaces as complex, contradictory and dynamic: addressing potential barriers to actor participation caused by the microsystems of school and home; creating emotional and physical security; being underpinned by pedagogical freedom and structure; involving the writing of different artefacts for competing audiences. For those, including schools, looking beyond performativity and neoliberalism to promote positive mental health in more holistic ways, this paper offers a useful starting point for thinking about what intergenerational spaces that facilitate co-creating creative writing might look like.

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization WHO (2021), globally "one in seven 10–19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder" with "depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders" among the leading causes of illness and disability. Within the UK, where this research takes place, social disadvantage is a key contributor to poor mental health with "socioeconomically disadvantaged children and adolescents . . . two to three times more likely to develop mental health problems" than their more privileged peers (MHF 2022, 19). This mental health inequality is likely to become more pronounced: the UK government reports that "the percentage of children (aged under 16) in relative low-income

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families increased from 15.3% in 2013 to 2014 to 18.5% in 2020 to 2021" (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2023).

In their Guidance document, the WHO focuses on the ways in which parents, schools and other services can work together to avoid a narrow approach to tackling children's poor mental health. Suggested interventions focus on "social and emotional learning, which may include components such as: emotional regulation, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, mindfulness, assertiveness and stress management" (2020, xi). This emphasis on both intra- and interpersonal development underlines a "psychosocial" approach to securing positive mental health, a key dimension of which would include reflective functioning (RF). RF is defined as an individual's ability to understand the behaviour of others "in terms of underlying mental states including thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and intentions" (Anis et al. 2020, 1). There is now considerable evidence to show how parental RF positively affects children's mental health and development as early as infancy (Camoirano 2017; Fonagy et al. 2002; Stuhrmann et al. 2022).

Given this context, the established link between positive mental health and engagement in the creative arts (Fancourt and Finn 2019) offers a new approach to developing parental RF. More specifically, our practice and research backgrounds in creative writing led us to appreciate how creative writing workshops allow participants to explore different points of view and understand the behaviour of others in a way that is like RF. Prior to conducting this research, two members of the team drew upon research showing that parental RF can be improved through intervention (Sadler et al. 2013; Suchman et al. 2010) – Curtis and Davis ran creative writing workshops with parents about childbirth and early parental experiences. The workshops attempted to develop RF through encouraging participants to explore different points of view and the resulting work is published in an anthology (Curtis 2023).

Whilst there is a range of research showing how creative writing positively impacts on extreme mental disorders (e.g. Mundy et al. 2022), there is no research focusing on creative writing as a preventive activity for positive mental health through RF. Furthermore, there is no research which explores the development of RF through parents, carers and children co-creating creative writing.

In this paper, we begin by reviewing the relevant literature to put forward an argument for the development of co-creating creative writing workshops for parents, carers and their children of primary (5–11 years) and secondary school age (11–16 years), particularly in areas of social disadvantage, to develop RF for positive mental health. We use this review to frame research questions about co-constructing creative writing with parents, carers and children for RF, including how the workshops should be delivered. We explore these questions using the World Café methodology with experts from the fields of mental health, education and creative writing. Finally, we use the literature to analyse these discussions to identify key themes for the development of effective co-creating creative writing workshops for parents, carers and children. These themes will help us to develop our own co-creating creative writing workshops and we hope they will help others, including those working in schools, who are also interested in developing similar activities.

Literature review

An ecological view of creativity and development

Following on from the pilot workshops with parents, this project aims to explore the nature of our co-creating creative writing workshops. This practical aim shapes our conceptualisation of creativity, development and mental health, which is psychosocial, bringing together the individual and RF with an ecological view of social structures impacting on the psychology of the individual.

In terms of the individual, we draw upon the Four C's theory of creativity (Beghetto and Kaufman 2007), where everyone is held to be creative. Rather than focusing on Big-C (eminent) creativity and Pro-C (expert) creativity, we are interested in little-c (every day) creativity and mini-c creativity. Mini-c is a development of little-c, as the individual gains personally insight from their creative act and their creative output is recognised as "creative" by others. In terms of social structures, we situate creative writing within Glăveanu's (2013) 5A's model, where the Four C's theory is actualised through actors, audiences, actions, artefacts and affordances. This model draws attention to "the underlying structure of how creativity is operationalised" (Kaufman and Glaveanu 2019, 28) and involves: actors, who have "personal attributes in relation to a societal context"; actions, which are "coordinated psychological and behavioural manifestations"; artefacts, which are produced by the actors and which include the "cultural context of artefact production and evaluation"; and audiences and affordances, which are "the interdependence between creators and a social and material world" (Glăveanu 2013, 71).

Social spaces for parents, carers and children to be actors experiencing mini-c creativity, who co-create creative writing artefacts with each other as audiences, are few and far between. This is because such interactions do not occur in the social contexts inhabited by these actors. Where such workshops do take place, the emphasis has been on teachers supporting parents and carers to support children at home (Albee and Drew 2001; Camacho and Alves 2017; Zurcher 2015) and teachers supporting parents and carers to support older children in preparation for college (Fleischer and Pavlock 2012).

From an ecological perspective, we draw upon Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (1979, 22–5) to understand how development is influenced by interconnected systems: the microsystem of home and school as experienced through "activities, roles, and interpersonal relations"; the "interrelations" between school and home in the mesosystem; the exosystem of wider social relations; and the macrosystem of economics, politics and culture.

From an ecological perspective, the mesosystem does not facilitate co-creating creative writing between parents, carers and their children, which in turn restricts the nature of their wider relations in the exosystem.

The macrosystem and creative participation of children as actors for positive mental health

Whilst the research base values parental engagement as a high impact approach for schools (EEF 2021), the mesosystem between school and home is influenced by a broader macrosystem which places limits upon mini-c creativity. Analysis of

government education policy in EU countries, for example, demonstrates how the word "creativity" is marginalised due to a focus on knowledge rather than skills (Bamford 2014; Wyse and Ferrari 2015). Globally, the marginalisation of creativity in policy should be seen within the macrosystem of performativity. Performativity is a "technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions" (Ball 2003, 216). The commodification of educational outcomes through performativity, therefore, results in a narrowing of school curricula where more measurable knowledge-based outcomes are given precedence over creativity. In relation to the teaching of writing in England, a policy focus on the technical aspects of writing makes children's engagement with writing less creative (Lambirth 2016), with children unlikely to experience mini-c creativity.

Despite the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF 2021) seeing parental engagement in UK schools as essential in raising attainment and ensuring personal development for children, they do not consider how engaging parents and carers in mini-c creativity promotes positive mental health for young people within the mesosystem – a gap in the research identified by Dobson (Dobson and Stephenson 2022).

Despite this, the wellbeing benefits of the creative engagement of children in the microsystem of school is well documented. With younger children, the EU Early Childhood Education and Care Project (Slot, Lerkkanen, and Leseman 2016) demonstrates how creativity fosters selfhood for 3–7-year-olds; with older children 8–16 years, research show how creativity impacts positively on mental health (Carson 2019; Fonagy et al. 2002), promoting engagement in school which prevents early school leaving (Chemi and Du 2018). More broadly, a literature review of 900 research articles commissioned by the WHO (Fancourt and Finn 2019, 7) puts forward evidence that the creative arts improves mental health for all age groups by affecting "social determinants to health including social cohesion and social inequalities" (Fancourt and Finn 2019, 7).

Creative writing for positive mental health

Going beyond mainstream educational contexts, this research uses the terms "expressive writing" and "journaling" to talk about writing which allows for an exploration of self. We see creative writing as always involving an expression of self (Smith 2017) and affording insights through mini-c creativity (Beghetto and Kaufman 2007). As a result, we do not draw attention to distinctions between these types of writing and we use the term "creative writing" throughout this paper.

With regard to mental health, most of the recent research with adults focuses on creative writing interventions for extreme disorders. This includes: a review of literature that shows how creative writing helps individuals recover from mental disorders by promoting identity (Mundy et al. 2022); a qualitative study that shows how creative writing promotes mutuality between staff and patients in a mental health ward (Chatterjee and Turri 2023); a qualitative study that shows how creative writing helps the processing or trauma (Deveney and Lawson 2022); and a review of literature that shows the physiological benefits of creative writing.

There is also an emerging evidence base of creative writing as an intervention for parents and carers who have experienced trauma or issues in relation to their children.

This includes: a systematic review of the use of creative writing for traumatic births (de Graaff et al. 2018); creative writing for bereavement (Barak and Leichtentritt 2017); creative writing to support parents and carers of children with cancer; creative writing for fostering wellbeing for parents and carers of children with autism (Da Paz and Wallander 2016); and creative writing to help Latinx parents accept LGBTQ children (Abreu, Riggle, and Rostosky 2020).

None of the research, however, focuses on the ways in which creative writing can promote positive mental health through developing RF.

Reflective functioning and positive mental health

RF originates from Fonagy et al'.s London Parent-Child Project (1991). The project built upon attachment theory by recognising the relationship between parent and child patterns of attachment. A hypothesis was developed: "the parental capacity to see the child as a psychological entity with a mental experience, as well as to attune with the child's mental states, plays a central role in parenting, thus contributing to the development of child attachment security" (Camoirano 2017, 2). This resulted in the identification of a direct relationship between parental RF and child attachment (Fonagy and Target 1997), with children whose parents had high RF experiencing more positive mental health than children whose parents had low RF. Accordingly, the reflective functioning scale was developed (Fonagy et al. 1998) and RF became a measure of attachment security.

Camoirano's (2017) subsequent literature review establishes a correlation between parental RF, adequate caregiving and children's attachment security, with higher parental RF both impacting positively upon children's mental health and resulting in higher child RF. Low parental RF was found in parents and carers whose children suffered from specific mental health disorders and more research was identified as being needed into the relationship between parents carers' ability to reflect upon their own childhoods and parental RF. Recent research has focussed on specific parent and children's groups. In terms of parent groups, Berthelot et al. (2019) in part addresses the gap identified by Camoirano by demonstrating how new parents who experienced maltreatment in childhood benefit in their relationships with their children through developing RF, and Esperanza et al. (2018) shows how RF can help adoptive parents have more constructive interactions with their children. In terms of children, Steele and Steele (2022) build on the work of Fonagy et al. (1991) to show the importance of RF in parenting 5-year-olds and Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2019) show how this can be enhanced through parents and children playing together. Borelli et al. (2016) identify the need to research parental RF with older children (8–12 years old) and Camilla and Wong's (2022) meta-analysis demonstrates how parental RF interventions are more effective with children in middle childhood (6–12 years old) than with younger children.

The case for co-creating creative writing workshops

The interpersonal dimension of RF indicates that a co-creative writing approach to workshops might have positive outcomes for RF and mental health. In England where this research takes place, the Arts Council England has noted a rise in the popularity of co-

creation within the creative arts (Heart of Glass & Battersea Art Centre 2021). Co-creation is described as a "collaborative methodology", which promotes student agency and equality in children's creative participation with adults (Heart of Glass & Battersea Art Centre 2021). Research into co-creation is still relatively new, but, as Dobson has experienced, co-creation is a complicated process, involving shifting power dynamics between adult and child actors and audiences (Dobson, Stephenson, and De Arede 2019, 2021).

As well as providing a fruitful space for RF in the equalisation of power structures, the use of co-creation as a methodology for creative writing for parents, carers and their children provides a research context for furthering research knowledge about co-creative processes involving adults and children.

Research questions

Given the lack of research into creative writing for developing parental RF and co-creating creative writing for developing parental and child RF, we framed two key research questions, which we posed to experts from the fields of mental health, education and creative writing.

(1) Could engaging parents, carers and children in co-creating creative writing workshops help develop RF and positive mental health for all actors?
(2) What should creative writing programmes look like to optimise RF and positive mental health for all actors?

Methodology

World café and focus group discussion

Thinking about the development of co-creating creative writing workshops for parents, carers and children, we considered the disciplinary practices that could inform this development. We drew upon Wenger-Trayner's and Wenger-Trayner (2015, 19) concept of "landscapes of practice": the idea that different practitioners participate in different ways with different professional identities within their respective landscapes. For us, this meant harnessing the expertise of health, education and creative writing practitioners to answer our research questions. In light of the meta-analysis into the effectiveness of constructing parental RF for 6–12-year-olds (Camilla and Wong 2022) and research into the mental health benefits of creative writing for school-aged children (Carson 2019; Forgeard, 2019), we invited education practitioners from both primary (5–11 years) and secondary schools (11–16 years).

We used the World Café (WC) method because WC facilitates the exploration and discussion of topics within a "heterogeneous" group through a structured but conversational process (PresBrown and Isaacs 2005). The conversational process is achieved through creating a café style atmosphere where participants feel comfortable enough to participate in structured discussions, making WC participatory (Löhr, Weinhardt, and Sieber 2020). As participants were unfamiliar to each other prior to the WC, the potential for high levels of participation among participants from different landscapes of practice was appealing.

We devised four rounds of discussion that would enable us to answer our research questions. These rounds were structured around four key topics with related questions that were asked by facilitators from the research team: parenthood and creative writing; co-creation; pedagogy; and recruitment and impact. We had 16 participants for the WC meaning there were 4 participants from different landscapes of practice plus a facilitator on each table. After each round, the participants moved tables to discuss the next topic with different participants.

The WC participants were UK-based but we also valued the perceptions of practitioners from other countries and ran a focus group discussion (FGD) with 3 international participants the following week. Like the WC, the FGD is useful in bringing together participants from different landscapes of practice to yield a "collective rather than individual view" and "orientate to a particular field of focus" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018, 532).

Participants and recruitment

The research team comprises researchers from different landscapes of practice, including creative writing, psychology and education. We used our experiences of these practices to target specific participants to take part in the WC and FGD. This was an informal approach via email to practitioners in our respective landscapes of practice, outlining the rationale for the project. In total, 31 emails were sent out (25 for the WC; 6 for the FGD) with 21 respondents declaring an interest. For those declaring an interest, an information sheet and consent form were sent to be returned prior to the WC and FGD. This included confirmation that the project followed the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (2018) and had received institutional ethical clearance. Participants were ensured anonymity through a number/letter system allowing them to withdraw their data from the project at any time without penalty. Due to the time commitment involved in participating in the WC, all participants external to the University were offered a payment.

Sixteen participants ultimately consented to participate in the WC (see Table 1). Whilst we tried to ensure a balance of participants from different landscapes of practice, this was difficult and we acknowledge that more health practitioners may have been beneficial.

Table 1. WC Participants.

Participant	Professional Roles
1A	Education Consultant
1B	Children's Author
1C	University Teacher Educator
1D	University Mental Health Specialist
2A	School Mental Health Specialist
2B	Poet and Writer
2C	University Creative Writing and Education Lecturer
2D	Breastfeeding Charity Worker
3A	Primary School Teacher
3B	Poet
3C	University Teacher Educator
3D	Midwife
4A	Secondary School English Teacher
4B	Performance Poet
4C	University Teacher Educator
4D	University Psychological Therapies and Mental Health Lecturer

Three participants consented to take part in the FGD: an Editor working in Latvia (5A); a University Teacher Educator from the US (5B); and a Primary School Teacher from Iceland (5C). 5A and 5B both had English as their first language. For the WC and the FGD, we did not gather data relating to ethnicity or gender and, along with the FGD comprising participants from the global north, we recognise this as a limitation.

Data collection

Prior to the WC and FGD, a briefing was delivered by the project team, including an overview of the key background literature, a definition of RF and our research questions. During WC discussions, participants were given time to write their responses to the topic questions on large pieces of paper, using their own number/letter identifiers. Alongside this, table facilitators wrote reflections based on similarities and differences in participants' responses. Following the four discussions, all 16 participants were given the opportunity to feed into a whole-group discussion on each topic, with key points written down by one of the facilitators. The data were typed up by the project team. The FGD was audio-recorded with a transcript generated by Microsoft Teams. The discussion facilitator typed reflections relating to similarities and differences in participant responses.

Data analysis

The data were kept by the team on a password-protected shared drive. In line with Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2020), our approach to data analysis involved immersion in the data, coding the data, and establishing patterns to identify themes. Immersion took place individually, with each team member reading through the data and recording initial thoughts prior to a research team analysis meeting. During the analysis meeting, we discussed our initial thoughts and began coding collaboratively. This was a dialogic and messy process, which was abductive as we generated and synthesised our emerging codes with our overarching research questions and the literature. Involving all members of the team in data analysis ensured we did not misinterpret the contributions of participants already known to us from our landscapes of practice, mitigating confirmation bias.

To give an example of our coding process, for theme 1 the term "creative writing" was identified in the WC as being a potential barrier to parents, carers and children volunteering for workshops. This was coded as a "negative term" and was then grouped with other obstacles noted by the research team, which included "holding the workshops in schools". During this process, therefore, we began to engage in Miles, Huberman and Saldana's third stage, drawing upon our theoretical framework to establish the theme of "Existing microsystems as barriers to actor participation" and grouping the relevant codes.

The team went away to reflect upon this initial analysis, reading through the coding and how we established patterns. We then held a second data analysis meeting to revisit our coding. This helped us articulate three key themes relating to our overarching research questions: existing microsystems as barriers to actor participation; creating a new intergenerational space for actors; competing audiences for actors' artefacts.

Findings and discussion

Existing microsystems as barriers to actor participation

Two potential barriers to children and parents and carers participating as actors in co-creating creative writing workshops were identified by participants. These barriers related to actors' prior perceptions and experiences of creative writing in the microsystems of school and home.

To start with the microsystem of school, this was seen as a barrier to the participation of children, parents and carers and specific families due to the negative experiences and connotations that school and creative writing hold. Interestingly, this barrier to actor participation was mainly emphasised by participants whose sole job was not currently school-based and who occupied different landscapes of practice to schoolteachers. Fundamentally, it was felt that the term "creative writing" is part of the discourse of schooling, with connotations that might preclude actors from participating in workshops. As 2A commented, "creative writing is part of GCSE and is taught, which badges it as schoolwork". For this reason, 4D felt that we should consider using a term other than "creative writing" and in the whole group discussion at the end of the WC it was agreed that "creative writing" was a "potentially alienating term". The reasons given for "creative writing" alienating actors were multifaceted and drew on negative connotations of both terms "creative" and "writing" in relation to the microsystem of school and wider policy and society.

To start with "writing", it was felt that the ways in which children and parents and carers as actors experienced "writing" in the microsystem of school would predispose them to negative connotations: "not all people like writing at school – they hate spelling and grammar" (2B); "writing could become a barrier for some people" (4C). These negative connotations also included writing as a "formal process" (2A), with 1C, 2C, 3B and 4B citing the "positionality" of actors in the workshops as problematic. This was emphasised in the WC whole-group discussion, with an agreement that breaking down the "hierarchies" of roles attributed to teachers and students as actors was key to ensuring the co-creating creative writing workshops facilitated actor participation. In relation to this, discussing the example of redrafting in schools, 5B spoke of the "formal structures of schooling" and how "revision of writing" is often conceptualised by teachers as "fixing your mistakes" due to a "power dynamic" where children are made to feel that the artefacts they produce are "appropriate for the adult". 1A, 1C, 3C and 4C all spoke of the importance of moving away from a "deficit model" of writing associated with the microsystem of school, where in the production of artefacts "you feel like you should be writing properly" (5A). In the WC whole-group discussion, it was agreed that actors in co-creating creative writing workshops should not experience that hierarchy and "didn't feel like they were being taught".

The term "creative writing" was also problematised due to actors not seeing themselves as "creative". For 3C, this was about actors not holding a "creative mindset" and for 2A this posed a challenge to "remove the stigma around creativity", which might put off actors "who don't think about themselves as creative". Interestingly, the reasons for "creative" acting as a barrier to participation extended beyond the microsystem of schooling to the macrocosm of broader influences. For 1C, actors not perceiving themselves as capable of creative actions was due to the microsystem of school being shaped by the macrocosm of

wider policy and "performativity", precluding mini-c creativity. 1C's thinking is influenced by Ball (2003) and the idea that the commodification of educational outcomes marginalises creative actions. This alludes to a wider neoliberal context identified by 1D, where creative actions and artefacts are "not championed by society" as a whole.

Finally, for 2A the whole idea of "creative writing workshops" could preclude the participation of actors from the socially disadvantaged groups, who might well benefit most from taking part: "I work with white working-class families where some would find this difficult to relate to. How do we break down the barrier?" As well as this cultural barrier, 2A also perceived the barrier of material affordances as "some families don't have access to means of writing-paper, IT etc".. For 3C, the lack of affordances extended beyond the material to "confidence" and "literacy skills", and in the WC whole-group discussion it was identified that some parents and carers would feel "anxious" and "inhibited" in co-creating creative writing workshops.

As well as the microsystem of school and the macrocosm of wider policy presenting a range of barriers to participation, the idea of less formal writing taking place in co-creating creative writing workshops was seen as a potential barrier by some participants. Unlike the identification of the microsystem of school as a barrier, the participants who emphasised less formal writing as a barrier included those currently working in schools. In line with our conceptualisation of creative writing (Smith 2017), this was based on the idea that writing would be "expressive" (4B), the implication being that within the microsystem of home, parents and carers and their children might not be used to expressing emotions. In many ways, we see actors struggling to achieve "openness" and "opening a can of worms to deal with challenging thoughts" (4A) as a barrier fundamentally addressed by our project. For 5C it would be difficult for some parents and carers to write about "emotions … things that you may [write about] in relation to your child"; for 4A there was a view that teenage actors "won't be open to writing with parents [as] this is a time where you step back". A key challenge for our workshops was identified by 4D as promoting RF through ensuring the "emotional safety" of all actors.

Creating a new intergenerational space for actors

Overwhelmingly, all participants felt that co-creating creative writing workshops held the potential to increase RF of parents and carers and their children of primary and secondary school ages (5–16 years). What was contested was what the intergenerational space should look like. Three distinct areas for consideration emerged regarding how this space could mitigate the micro- and macrosystem barriers identified above. These were as follows: the physical nature of an effective space for co-creation; how to create a conducive emotional space; and the pedagogical approaches adopted by workshop facilitators.

With the microsystem of school seen by participants as a barrier, it was not surprising that many responses emphasised the importance of spaces that outside of school. For 3B this was about creating "familiar and comfortable setting", which 5B likened to a "sort of homely environment". However, replicating the microsystem of home was problematised by other participants, who saw home as a potential barrier to participation. This point was developed by 5C who highlighted that for some actors the microsystem of home lacks the affordances of "a place where you can sit and write". The importance of using spaces already "embedded in

communities" beyond home and school were emphasised by 1A in order to engage "hard to reach families" (1A). These included community cafes (4D) and informal spaces (5B, 4D) to "break up … [the] formality of the school environment" (5C) as well as the more unusual idea of "creative gyms for families" (1D). 2B was keen to acknowledge that young people may well have different needs to their parents in relation to physical space and 4D suggested that we look at other models where children and adults work together within informal settings such as "church groups, holiday clubs, creative arts sessions and storytelling", where the intergenerational aspects of these often "open, comfy space[d]" (2A) environments diminish power hierarchies and facilitate participation.

Linked to the establishment of a physical intergenerational space was the establishment of an emotional space in which actors feel creative and free. For many participants, this was conceptualised as a "safe space for expression" (2C), where actors could "admit…feelings" to reduce "isolation" (5A). Fundamental to this safe space is the "idea of trust, of trusting the situation or feeling comfortable in a situation" (5C) to achieve "generational levelling … where generations reach each other" (4C). Again, connotations of creative writing from school were seen as threatening the creation of this emotional safe space: 1B felt that "taking the heat out of writing" by not worrying about grammar was important; 5C felt that "low stakes" activities would be best; and 1D thought valuing "verbal contributions" before writing would help. For 2C, this emotional safe space should be similar to "Wenger's Communities of Practice" as the workshops could enable actors to identify and establish a common interest. At the same time, 2C also acknowledged that actors who "might be terrified" to write could benefit from privacy and the "choice not to share writing with others".

The complexities of establishing this emotional safe space due potential differences between actors, their previous experiences, and needs, were mirrored in participants advocating a pedagogy of choice. This was about "flexibility" (5C) with actors given "lots of possibilities" (5B) for different means of expression (3D) and writing "what you want" (2C). A pedagogy of choice was underpinned by different forms of writing which focus on process – "free writing, journaling, storyboarding" (2B) – and using different media like "multi-modal creative approaches; drama and writing scripts; using visualisers; and free-form writing" (3C) as well as different material affordances, including "laptops, writing implements, crayons, watercolours, different forms of paper, screens" (5B). At the same time, 5B recognised that choice can become a barrier to participation: "I always try to give free choice while offering a variety of ideas so they don't feel like ohh, I've gotta come up with something big on my own". For 5B, modelling was a good way of both providing ideas and sharing "messiness" of the writing process: "This is how real writers writing in real situations work. They struggle, they think that their writing's terrible. They put it down on the page and they play with it". For 1D, modelling "the process of thinking and writing" could be valuable to actors understanding their writing as a "process full of corrections and drafts" (1D). What was interesting was that this language of freedom and choice and the language of structure and modelling were both valued by participants working inside and outside of schools. This indicates the how the perception of negative connotations of creative writing in school microsystems are not necessarily representative of practice.

Competing audiences for actors' artefacts

The barriers presented by school and home to establishing an intergenerational "safe space" for actors and the pedagogical approaches used played out in how the participants discussed co-creating creative writing in terms of audience. Rather than writing within the hierarchical microsystem of school where the audience might be a teacher and the pedagogy more structured, in intergenerational co-creating creative writing workshops the audience was seen as unstable, competing, and potentially three-fold.

Firstly, the audience for the writing and the actors' production of artefacts was seen as themselves. Pedagogically, this linked to the idea of "free writing", which was "private" (2C), "for their eyes only" (2B). In the WC whole-group discussion, it was agreed the workshops could present a space for actors to "express their feelings". This linked to the idea of writing as therapy, or "learning about yourself" (2C). Again, in the WC whole-group discussion, the writing process was seen to involve "the ordering of thoughts and feelings"; for the actors involved in writing, the artefact produced became an opportunity to "process" thoughts and experiences. For 5C, writing allows processing to take place "kind of unconsciously" and for 5B the benefits included being able to "look at something … more intellectually or more empathetically as well as emotionally". A specific example of "mums who are pregnant and about to give birth" was provided by 3D who saw the action of writing as a chance for actors to "express their thoughts and anxieties" as "hypnobirthing is a narrative form".

The idea of the artefact being written by the actor for the actor was balanced by the co-constructing dimension of the workshops. In this regard, writing was seen as actors producing artefacts with the other family member (parent or child) as audience. This was valued as key in promoting relationships, mutuality and RF – the artefact produced was conceptualised as an intergenerational dialogue. For 5C, this involved "the child bringing the parent into their world" and vice versa, making it "like a conversation … so they would create a valuable memory where they could connect". For 5A, this process would involve "communication and negotiation" between actors to think about each other as audiences and "work towards the same goal". For 2B, this negotiation would not be straightforward, with audiences forced to change and learn through dialogue. Speaking about an experience of writing between parents and children with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), 2B stressed how the writing artefacts brought to the surface how children "did not see the condition of OCD as their parents did". 1D, on the other hand, evoked her relationship with her "nanny" and how this developed through a "shared journal"; this symbiotic relationship through writing was echoed by 1A who was writing "in response to one of [his] children's dreams". For adoptive parents, actors writing for each other was seen by 1C as a "thought experiment to make connections".

As well as writing for oneself and writing for a parent or child, writing artefacts were also seen as shaped by the apprehension of a wider audience. In the WC whole-group discussion, the writing artefacts produced in the workshops were powerful and important ways of "attaching to others" and for 5B this became a chance for a wider audience of "groups of parents" to read the artefacts and feel "relief" at not being so "physically isolated". However, writing for this wider audience was also seen as being in tension with an actor producing an artefact for themselves and/or their parent or

child. 4D highlighted that "writing for literary purposes and an audience is different to writing therapeutically" and that the aims of the workshop "need to be clear". This point was developed in the WC whole-group discussion with artefacts produced for "more public consumption" taking away from the "therapeutic benefits" of actors writing for themselves or their parent or child. The idea of negotiating what this wider audience might look like with the group in the form of "an exit strategy" and "end product" was suggested by 4D and attempting to connect the different artefacts produced by actors through a "central theme", like "spokes of a wheel", was put forward in the WC whole-group discussion.

Conclusion

Participants in this project overwhelmingly agreed that co-creating creative writing workshops have the potential to develop RF for parents and carers and children aged 5–16 years. This adds to the research literature on the mental health benefits of creative writing (Mundy et al. 2022) and is in line with our own practice-based hypothesis (Curtis 2023) that creative writing could be used with these actors to develop RF, secure attachments and improve mental health and wellbeing. Given the current mental health crisis affecting young people (WHO 2021) and growing social inequality, a determinant of mental health (MHF 2022), our research shows there is a cross-disciplinary consensus for exploring the benefits of co-creating creative writing as an intervention – this is what our future practice-based research will do.

Our future research will also explore the nature of the workshops themselves. Whilst participants had a clear consensus in relation to the mental health benefits of this intervention, their views on the nature of the workshops were complex and competing. This included different views of the barriers to actor participation, with participants citing the microsystems of school and home as potentially problematic in facilitating mini-c creativity. It included the nature of the space and its pedagogy, with home and school spaces problematised in the search for a different intergenerational space, where freedom and structure are valued pedagogically. And it also included the audiences for the creative writing artefacts, with actors potentially writing for themselves, each other and wider audiences. These complexities in the challenge of creating a safe and dynamic intergenerational space, which promotes dialogue across the generation, indicate the rich nature of future research.

This paper has implications for curriculum leaders, mental health leaders and teachers in schools. Whilst school was seen by participants not currently working exclusively in schools as a potential barrier to actor participation, the pedagogical approaches espoused by teacher and non-teacher participants indicated that both groups took a nuanced pedagogical approach, valuing freedom and structure in workshops. This suggests that the participants' ideas of how potential workshop actors might perceive school as a barrier could either be erroneous, as practice is often different, or could be based on their own negative connotations of schooling due to occupying different landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). Either way, there is a potential for schools to build on what is already known about barriers to parental engagement in relation to power, experiences and material affordances (EEF 2021) to think about parental engagement differently. Rather than just being about workshops to help parents

and carers support children's literacy development (e.g. Camacho and Alves 2017) and satisfy government performativity targets (Ball 2003), schools could also rise to the challenge of creating intergene (PresBrown and Isaacs 2005) rational safe spaces for socially disadvantaged groups to co-create creative writing, with a focus on writing process over writing for specific audiences. This would represent a holistic response to the mental health crisis through the promotion of RF and mental wellbeing.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [TD], upon reasonable request.

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