

The Hero's Journey in 10 steps A therapeutic writing intervention for teachers' well-being

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Abstract

This article explores a psychoeducational intervention study aimed at enhancing the well-being of secondary school teachers through therapeutic expressive and creative writing exercises. From an ecosystemic perspective, teachers' well-being plays a critical role in shaping the school environment and influencing students' academic performance. Empowering teachers to manage the high-pressure demands of their roles is essential for reducing stress and burnout, yet the responsibility for their health often rests solely on their shoulders. The intervention, titled *Your own Hero's Journey*, is grounded in the archetypal framework of Joseph Campbell, as adapted by Holger Lindemann informed by Systemic Therapy principles. The intervention also integrates elements from Positive Psychology, and other humanistic approaches.

The program has evolved through workshops with various educator groups, showing promising results. Findings indicate a positive correlation between participation in *Your own Hero's Journey* and improvements in teachers' emotional literacy, emotional intelligence, and the development of supportive professional networks. By focusing on teachers' well-being, the intervention not only benefits educators on a personal level but also holds potential to positively impact the broader school environment and improve student outcomes. The study highlights the importance of nurturing teacher well-being and presents *Your own Hero's Journey* as an effective strategy for promoting resilience and enhancing the educational climate.

Keywords: psychoeducational intervention; expressive writing; teacher well-being; emotional literacy; emotional intelligence, resilience; *The Hero's Journey*

Introduction

Creative and expressive writing has been shown to be a vital tool for students in maintaining resilience during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kolovou, 2023). This experience shed light on the multiple aspects of applying therapeutic writing techniques also regarding educators' biopsychosocial balance. This article discusses a mixed-methods intervention study with the title *The Hero's Journey: A Psychoeducational Intervention Study Using Therapeutic Writing to Promote the Well-Being of Secondary Education Teachers in Greece and Cyprus* conducted in the first half of 2024 (Kolovou, 2024). To begin with, the theoretical framework regarding health as a biopsychosocial constellation, research questions, and objectives are presented, followed by a description of the intervention, with particular emphasis on the therapeutic writing tasks informed by the archetype of the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1949; Lindemann, 2024). Finally, significant findings are discussed, and

conclusions are drawn regarding the efficacy of the intervention in enhancing teachers' well-being, resilience, and overall professional satisfaction.

The School as Ecosystem

The school environment can be conceptualized as an ecosystem, defined as a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical surroundings. In this context, a school functions as an interconnected system, where every element—whether visible or not—affects and influences the others. From this perspective, the well-being of each member, particularly educators, is critical to the overall functioning of the school as a whole. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a useful framework for understanding this dynamic, emphasizing the significance of the quality and context of a child's environment. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), as a child matures, the interactions within these environments become increasingly complex, reflecting the growing sophistication of both the child's physical and cognitive structures. Within this ecosystem, teachers serve as key protagonists, playing a central role in shaping the educational experience and environment. However, research consistently highlights teaching as one of the most stressful professions globally, with educators facing mounting pressures that can significantly impact their emotional and physical well-being (Kyriacou, 2001). This underscores the need to address teacher well-being as a critical factor in fostering a healthy school ecosystem and promoting positive outcomes for both educators and students (Carroll, 2021).

Burnout in Teachers

Burnout among teachers has long been a subject of research (Kyriacou, 2001; Yilmaz, 2015), yet there remains significant potential for innovation in addressing it. While many studies focus on describing burnout as a static, fixed problem, they often neglect to explore the underlying dynamics and systemic factors that contribute to its development. A holistic approach, which considers the broader context in which burnout occurs, is seldom incorporated (Demerouti et al., 2001). Furthermore, while existing tools such as the WHO well-being scale (WHO, 1998) provide a framework for measuring well-being, research often measures well-being indirectly through burnout indicators rather than directly promoting it. This tendency to focus on understanding burnout in isolation, without providing actionable solutions to foster well-being, underscores a key issue in the field. Burnout itself is often defined from two main perspectives: one conceptualizes it as a gradual process of disappointment (Freudenberger, 1974), while the other views it as a fully developed, debilitating state (Maslach et al., 2001). The established condition of burnout is typically characterized by three core dimensions—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, which are measured individually (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

Our Systemic Understanding of Health, and the Impact of Burnout

To better understand the dynamics of burnout at workplace, it might be useful to apply the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, which examines the balance between job demands and resources to predict burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to this model, burnout shall

not be described as a static condition but rather as a continuum that can shift depending on the resources available and the demands placed on an individual. When resources are strengthened and overwhelming demands reduced, the trajectory can shift towards greater well-being. This aligns closely with Antonovsky's *salutogenesis* theory that emphasizes the processes by which health is maintained and promoted, rather than solely focusing on illness prevention (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky's model incorporates a broad range of factors, including psychological, socio-cultural, genetic, and biochemical stressors, providing a more holistic view of health. This approach supports the World Health Organization's definition of well-being, which frames it as a state of balance between physical, mental, and social dimensions of health. Since it is not always feasible to eliminate stressors entirely, the focus shifts to equipping individuals with the skills and attitudes necessary to build resilience across biological, psychological, and social domains—thus fostering well-being despite the presence of challenges. The present intervention study assumes that workplace burnout is the primary factor negatively affecting well-being. Therefore, psychosocial support and psychoeducation are essential for promoting teachers' well-being (Emerson, 2017). To design and implement an effective prevention intervention, it is crucial to clarify the key concepts that serve as job resources, which the intervention aims to strengthen.

Methodology

This mixed-methods design intervention study examines the impact of a psychoeducational intervention using therapeutic writing on the well-being of secondary education teachers in Greece and Cyprus. Concretely, there are three main research questions to be examined:

Research Question 1: What differences can be observed in mindfulness, empathy, psychological resilience, occupational burnout, well-being, and sleep quality before and after participation in the intervention?

Research Question 2: How does the mode of participation, online or in-person, influence the effectiveness of the intervention for participants?

Research Question 3: How does prior experience with psychosocial support services affect the impact of the psychoeducational intervention on participants?

To evaluate its effectiveness, validated questionnaires measured well-being, occupational burnout, mindfulness, empathy, psychological resilience, and sleep quality before and after the intervention in 36 participants. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through session observations and participant feedback.

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, which conceptualizes the school as an ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and regards well-being/burnout from a systemic perspective (Demerouti et al., 2001), the proposed intervention incorporates therapeutic writing techniques grounded in a modified version of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 1949).

Working with Therapeutic Writing Techniques to Foster Well-being

Therapeutic writing encompasses a range of writing techniques used in therapeutic contexts, including both expressive and creatively reflective writing, which can be self-initiated or

guided by a trained counselor or therapist (Pennebaker, 1997; Heimes, 2015). In countries such as the United Kingdom, therapeutic writing is integrated into the national healthcare system, while in Germany, it is used as a complementary form of therapy. This intervention study combines both humanistic and scientific approaches to therapeutic writing. On one hand, it is a human-centered, evolving process that fosters personal expression and emotional release, while on the other, it emphasizes the measurement of biopsychosocial functions to analyze the phenomenon and derive measurable conclusions that can inform future practices (Kolovou, 2024). The benefits of therapeutic writing are well-documented and significant; it enhances individuals' metacognitive functions and contributes to long-term positive outcomes, including improved emotional regulation, stress management, and overall well-being (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Additionally, therapeutic writing is a creative process akin to children's play, providing participants with problem-solving strategies, opportunities to develop social skills, emotional catharsis, and the cultivation of empathy (Smyth, 1998). Early research by Pennebaker & Smyth (1986) demonstrated that expressive writing led to improvements in a variety of clinical populations, including those with asthma, cardiovascular issues, and PTSD, highlighting the therapeutic potential of this technique (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

The “Hero’s Journey” Writing Intervention

When working with individual clients, therapeutic writing often centers around specific personal issues or requests. However, in therapeutic writing groups designed for personal development, broader themes are typically established to guide the activities. In this intervention, the central goal chosen is well-being. To approach this goal, we have deliberately framed our work within the structure of the *Hero’s Journey*—a concept originally popularized by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949). Campbell's *Hero’s Journey* represents an archetypal narrative that appears across cultures, from ancient mythology to contemporary storytelling, exemplified by works such as Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This narrative framework typically involves a path of adventure, challenge, and transformation. Beyond its literary applications, the Hero’s Journey has been widely adapted in psychotherapy, personal development, and life coaching, offering a structured way to help individuals navigate their own life challenges (Campbell, 1949; Vogler, 1992; Rebillot & Kay, 1993). For this present intervention, we apply a 10-phase model of the Hero’s Journey, adapted by Professor Holger Lindemann, a German expert in developmental psychology and systemic therapy (Lindemann, 2024). This condensed version provides a practical roadmap for personal growth, which will be explored in greater detail within the framework of the following therapeutic writing activities especially designed for this very psychoeducational intervention.

The Intervention

The ad-hoc designed intervention is divided into several parts, taking place both synchronously (in real-time via Zoom) and asynchronously.

Bio-psychosocial Preparation

Recent findings in educational psychology suggest that the initial phase in a lesson plan, broadly known as *introduction and engagement* should not involve merely prior knowledge

but rather previous cognitive and social-emotional and physical experiences too. This said, the participants started with a bio-psychosocial preparation at two levels:

Asynchronously: Prior to the meetings, the participants got acquainted with some expressive writing tasks on a padlet, such as creating an acrostichon with the letters in their own name, while reflecting on their experiences as educators inside and outside school.

Synchronously: In person the participants tried out mindfulness techniques, in order to get connected with their own body and emotions, and strengthen the team feeling. This preparation also includes a thematic introduction to the notion of a *journey* and of a *hero*.

After the preparation is completed, the participants are ready to immerse in their own *Hero's Journey*. Therefore, the participants have the opportunity to travel by writing through the 10 revised stages of the Hero's Journey:

1. The ordinary world
2. The call to adventure
3. The refusal
4. The meeting with the mentor
5. Crossing the threshold
6. Allies and enemies
7. The final confrontation
8. The reward
9. The return
10. The new world

The Hero's Journey in 10 Steps for Teachers' Well-being

Phase 1: The ordinary world

At this stage, the participants investigate the systems within which they already operate in their lives. They describe their comfort zone, the usual space they move within, and roles they take on in their everyday life. The participants come to conclusions such as: "I forgot to mention my own self. I'm still trying to connect with myself." "I'm not just a mom anymore." Others draw conclusions like: "There's no adventure in my life." "I'd like more companionship and company."

Phase 2: Call to adventure

Here, our participants reflect on the call to their own adventure. Calls to adventure include, among other things, school evaluations, which are described as stressful situations, with the aim of it being unclear, often marked by ambiguity and ambivalence, regarding the intentions of the institutions. Additionally, teaching from the position of a teacher or assistant in front of the new generation also seems to invoke anxiety and fear as a new adventure ("I was scared, anxious, I wanted to cry..."). Other participants refer to personal challenging adventures, such as engaging in drama classes or staying abroad for internships or postgraduate studies.

Phase 3: Refusal of the Call

At this stage, they discuss possible limiting factors that may hold a hero back in their comfort zone or push them into the panic zone. Here, we introduce a psychoeducation part regarding

the architecture of stress, showing the comfort-zone, the knowledge-zone, and the panic-zone respectively. Regarding the reasons why a hero might resist the call to adventure, participants referred to the refusal against change and the fear of the unknown, instability, being unsettled, insecurity, lack of confidence and resources. Furthermore, conflict with personal morals, values, and principles was mentioned, along with the fear of new knowledge. Finally, difficulties in adaptation, hesitation about separation, and common sense, rationalization as a resistance mechanism, were also mentioned.

Phase 4: Meeting the mentor

At this stage, the participants reflect on their role as mentors themselves. Practically, they try a perspective-shifting method. They are asked to encourage a new hero who faces ambivalence about engaging in education as a teacher. The responses were of particular interest. Some stated that the adventure of education would bring renewal to the new hero, that it would be a great life school, and would contribute as a “small part” to making the world a better place, fostering their empathy and concern for the environment. They also mentioned that “you’ll put effort, but you’ll feel fulfilled...” An important addition was the condition “Only if you like it...” or “Only if you want it...” as well as the advice “ask for help if you get tired. Take a step back. Consider whether you want it.”

Specifically, the participants in the in-person group struggled to formulate encouraging prompts in direct speech and instead offered advice on how to become a good teacher. This implies they either did not get the task or lack concentration, since they attended the intervention in their school building.

Break: There is usually a pause at this stage. Already at the closure of the first part, the sense of calm, serenity, and comfort experienced within the group was emphasized. The exercises were described as a “beneficial release” and a “positive exposure of vulnerability,” while it was often mentioned that “I felt like crying from relief.” Finally, the need for organizing team-building activities at their workplace was confirmed, ideally with the participation of all colleagues. This need for team-building was once again emphasized, with comments such as, “We need to do something for ourselves... I can't wait to do the rest,” and “It should be in our mindset to do this regularly.”

Phase 5: Crossing the threshold

At this stage, the participants explore their resources by composing a more creative text based on a semi-structured short form called Zevenaar (Kolovou, 2025). During the presentation of their Zevenaar texts, the participants eagerly engaged in the analysis of their writings, expressing fears and desires. During the feedback session, it was mentioned that sharing within the group and opening-up ultimately holds therapeutic value. The participants appreciated the understanding and respect for their emotional opening-up on the part of the facilitator, as well as the sense of security she provided, “as if having coffee together.” This unit is usually given as homework.

Phase 6: Allies and Enemies

Now they start to describe what makes a good ally and what makes an enemy. *The virtues of an ally and the characteristics of an enemy discussed, resulted in the following schema:*

Ally: Empathy, supportive, safety, trustworthy, genuine, sincere, transparent, companion, helpful, understanding, listens, uplifting, optimistic, shares a common vision, present, open to understanding, reliable, calm, objective, hardworking.

Enemy: Negativity, critical, toxicity, lack of self-awareness, evil, malicious, jealous, arrogant, deserter, faint-hearted, envious, pessimistic, miserable, deceitful, unclear intentions, hesitates on purpose (pretending), two-faced, conservative, lazy, resists change, sabotages, dogmatic.

Afterward, they were asked whether they could classify certain people from their close environment as allies, and the importance of a social support network was emphasized.

Phase 7: The final test

Here, the participants try the *reverse thinking* method, while they list what may go wrong for a hero to achieve their goal: *going off track, having little faith in oneself and the goal, losing interest, an inability to reschedule, disappointment, weakening, being irreparably wounded (emotionally/physically), falling into depression, losing the will to fight in life, becoming miserable, getting sick and giving up, lacking patience, being rude, critical, infallible, dogmatic, offensive, not examining things from multiple perspectives, being tired, staying stuck in the past, not changing, not assessing one's own strength or that of their opponent, and not resting.*

The human brain, biologically programmed in a flight or fight modus, has the tendency to think about what can go wrong, in order to protect themselves. Therefore, the participants may count all possible mistakes and dangers in a flash, before they proceed with a positive reframing, in order to get some steps to do right. Moving on to the positive reframing of these thoughts, examples were mentioned such as *good planning, having an alternative action plan, psychotherapy, working on oneself, good friends, the reminder not to let oneself go, maintaining priorities, thinking that things are temporary, resting, starting to say no, and taking a break to regain strength.*

Phase 8: Reward

At this stage, participants are asked to recall gifts they have received and to choose one that is special to them or one that makes them feel special. This exercise not only prompts them to relive the pleasant feeling of receiving a gift but also introduces the concept of the gift as a psychosocial model of gratitude and motivation. The participants repeatedly take on the role of both the gift recipient and the gift giver, recalling acts of kindness and sharing that contribute to building positive relationships, while simultaneously strengthening their social support network.

Phase 9: Gratitude

Building upon the previous stage, participants explore further a core value in Positive Psychology, by reflecting on moments and items of gratitude. In sharing their thoughts about what they are grateful for, participants mentioned the value of patience and the importance of people and what they have to offer. Gratitude was also explicitly expressed for participating in the intervention, getting to know and working with the group members. What is more, they expressed gratitude for experiences and all the lessons learned, for collegiality, for technology that facilitates work, for family, professional career, and health, for life, and for the fact that “I love, I am loved, I achieve goals, I learn.”

Phase 10: The new world

At the final stage of the intervention, the participants explore the hero's next day, regarding attitudes, values, and personal characteristics. According to their input, the next day for the hero, their qualities, values, and activities are shaped as follows: *they listen actively, give others space, have patience and perseverance, try and show gratitude, positively interpret their reality, take care of their safe network, and accept that nothing is taken for granted. It is understood that the hero "returns having grown and continues" stronger, braver, with knowledge and the self-awareness gained from their experiences, while the slogan "Let's aim for bigger, different things!" was also heard, along with the line from Odysseus Elytis, "If you don't find spring, you make it."*

Closing the intervention, the participants described the activity as a "journey of heroic self-awareness" marked by a high level of quality, allowing introspection and promoting empowerment. Significant content was found in the exercises for the promotion of emotional intelligence, while the musical accompaniment that was chosen also made a positive impression. It was noted that the facilitator's questions were helpful for introspective work, to the point where "now I am not afraid to open-up." As one participant mentioned, the expressive writing exercise according to Pennebaker, which she applied for four days between the two sessions, worked as a *relief*.

Impact on Teachers

The results of the intervention study are encouraging. The answer to the first research question reveals a generally significant positive impact of the intervention on Mindfulness, Empathy, Mental Resilience, Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Accomplishments, Well-being, and Sleep Quality. The significant improvement in mindfulness and empathy, contrasted with the worsening of depersonalization, gains greater value, if we assume that this is a case of a "Socratic bias error," where participants initially did not realize that they did not know, regarding the perception and understanding of their emotions towards themselves and others (Kiosses et al., 2017).

As for the second research question, about how the mode of participation in a writing therapy intervention (online or in person) affects the intervention's impact, the results vary. Online participants benefited particularly in terms of improved mindfulness and sleep quality. Possible reasons for these differences could be environmental factors (Åkerstedt et al., 2004). A familiar environment can reduce anxiety and tension, which can positively impact the cultivation of mindfulness, which in turn improves sleep quality. The fact that the in-person group was in their workplace may have contributed to the tension caused by the involuntary fixation of thoughts on work, a factor associated with mental fatigue and poor sleep quality. Furthermore, the in-person group returned immediately to the routine of the big city, while the online participants had the opportunity to extend relaxation within their familiar environment, allowing reflective thoughts and the therapeutic function of writing to mature .

Finally, it was deemed interesting to examine the effect the intervention had on teachers with prior experience in receiving psychosocial care services (individual therapy and/or participation in therapeutic groups). Those who had stated that they had no prior experience seemed to benefit more from the intervention than the others in terms of Mindfulness, Empathy, Mental Resilience, Personal Accomplishments, and Sleep Quality. In conclusion,

participants without prior therapeutic experience seemed to benefit more from the intervention. This can be explained by various factors. Initially, it is a new experience that they approach with greater curiosity, while their attention and motivation are also stimulated. Additionally, without prior therapeutic experience, there are fewer biases against techniques and methods, and their resources remain largely untapped. The fact that the intervention was even more successful for participants who had not yet received systematic psychosocial support services, and therefore the likelihood of having strongly established predictive factors for burnout is higher, confirms that the intervention can be beneficial not only for prevention but also for managing established predictive factors through training in specific self-regulation and self-care techniques (Shoman et al., 2021).

Regarding the qualitative data that emerged, the participants repeatedly emphasized the value of belonging and connecting with others, as well as the importance of self-care which they admittedly tend to neglect.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the intervention successfully met its primary goal of improving the well-being of secondary education teachers. Participants were able to move towards a greater state of well-being after being provided with tools and methods designed to mitigate the stressors inherent in their profession. This outcome underscores the effectiveness of interventions that combine creative, yet clinically validated approaches in addressing burnout and psychosocial stress among educators.

A key finding was the role of mindfulness as a foundational element for enhancing mental well-being, alongside the recognition of quality sleep as a critical component of physical well-being. These two factors together lay a strong foundation for the development of overall well-being, suggesting that a holistic approach to well-being—integrating both mental and physical aspects—is crucial for sustaining positive outcomes.

Additionally, the intervention's delivery method, whether online or in person, merits further exploration. It is important to consider environmental factors and individual characteristics in order to design a hybrid approach that maximizes the benefits of both formats, thereby offering a more flexible, tailored solution to participants' needs.

Finally, the promotion of positive experiences, particularly within a group context, was shown to enhance mental resilience. This highlights the importance of fostering interventions that strengthen the factors contributing to well-being, with a particular emphasis on future educators. Preparing students in education and teaching departments with the necessary skills for self-care and positivity is critical to ensuring long-term well-being and resilience in the teaching profession.

These findings point to the need for continued research into integrative interventions that focus on enhancing the biopsychosocial factors influencing well-being, not only for teachers but also for those training to enter the profession.

Take home message?

A key future goal is the adaptation of the intervention into a comprehensive program that can be systematically implemented for educators. A hybrid format incorporating asynchronous participation is recommended to enhance accessibility and flexibility for a diverse range of participants. Simultaneously, it is essential to establish a strong sense of community through follow-up activities, which would facilitate communication and interaction between participants from different cohorts. This approach would help cultivate a sense of “belonging” and “relating” within a secure network, promoting peer support and continued engagement.

To achieve this, interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial. Professionals from various fields, including educators, psychologists, psychotherapists, educational psychologists, health professionals specializing in sleep medicine, and occupational and environmental physicians, should work together to design and implement the program. Additionally, relevant authorities responsible for program implementation must be involved to ensure alignment with policy and institutional support. Such a collaborative, multidisciplinary effort will enhance the program’s effectiveness, ensuring it meets the diverse needs of educators and supports their long-term well-being.

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