

Reading and creation. A study on literary reading and creativity in initial teacher training

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Abstract

This proposal is part of research that explores the learning possibilities of creativity in literary education for teachers in initial training. This is a qualitative research that compares two didactic experiences conducted by two groups of students of Didactics of Children's and Young Adult Literature from the Primary Education degree, at Universitat de Barcelona in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years. From the reading of 3 works of children's and young adult literature and their corresponding reading seminars, one of the groups had to make a review with the assessment of each reading, while the other group had to elaborate a creative rewriting for each work. and accompany it, also, with a reading assessment. From the data collected, it was possible to establish a comparison of the reading responses between one group and the other. This way, it was verified how the participants showed more depth when constructing the meaning of the work read through a creative activity.

Keywords: Creativity; literary education; teacher training; reading motivation; children and young adult literature.

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Lectura y creación. Un estudio sobre lectura literaria y creatividad en formación inicial de docentes

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Resumen

La presente propuesta se enmarca en las investigaciones que exploran las posibilidades de aprendizaje de la creatividad en la educación literaria de los docentes en formación inicial. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa que compara dos experiencias didácticas llevadas a cabo por dos grupos de estudiantes de Didáctica de la Literatura Infantil y Juvenil, del grado de Educación Primaria, de la Universidad de Barcelona durante los cursos 2020-2021 y 2021-2022. A partir de la lectura de 3 obras de la literatura infantil y juvenil y de sus correspondientes seminarios de lectura, uno de los grupos debía realizar una reseña con la valoración de cada lectura, mientras que el otro grupo debía elaborar una reescritura creativa para cada obra y acompañarla, también, de una valoración de lectura. Con los datos recogidos, se pudo establecer una comparación de las respuestas lectoras entre un grupo y otro. De este modo, se constató hasta qué punto a través de una tarea creativa las personas participantes mostraron mayor profundidad a la hora de construir el significado de la obra leída.

Palabras clave: Creatividad; educación literaria; formación del profesorado; motivación lectora; literatura infantil y juvenil.

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By way of introduction: reading again

According to the philosopher Gregorio Luri, “learning to read is not like learning to ride a bike” (2019, p. 47). People do not learn to read one day and lasts forever, but people learn to read by reading, which lasts a lifetime. Reading means more than giving sounds to writing. Reading means interacting with a text in order to understand it, interpret it and construct its meaning in order to make our own assessments and reflections. Reading is the gateway to the world of knowledge, the cornerstone of our own knowledge.

For decades, reading has been the subject of much research from different fields of knowledge, and yet interest in it continues. With the advent of reception theories, interest focused on the role of the reader and the processes of generating meaning in literary works. Beyond the discussions on the limits of interpretation, which range between preserving the author’s intention and vindicating the reader’s freedom of interpretation, what is certain is that these theories opened up an extensive field of study on the role of the reader and his or her ability to construct meaning.

As happened on other occasions, the new conception of the literary fact, which was much more complex, and the different theories of reception contributed to renewing the didactic treatment of reading education. This new approach involved analysing the conditioning factors and factors involved in the formulation of the phases of the reading process, and redefining the concept of reading from a passive activity to one of interaction between reader and text (Mendoza, 1998).

Literature teaching and learning of literature consequently underwent a paradigm shift. In 2004, Professor Mendoza stated that “literary education (education in and for literary reading) is the preparation for knowing how to participate effectively in the process of reception and interpretative updating of literary discourse” (p. 16), which conceives this discourse as a complex web of linguistic, aesthetic, historical, cultural, etc. relations. This line of research intensified after the entry into force of the competence system, whose concept of competent reader qualified the current postulates, insisting that reading and literary education should enable students to “understand and interpret the literary text and value and appreciate the creations of aesthetic-literary sign” (Mendoza, 2010, p. 27).

For more than half a century, research has focused on the reader, on literary reception and the reading process. However, the results of the latest PISA tests show a trend towards superficial reading for practical purposes (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2020), which is of concern both to the educational community and to the rest of society. Although it is true that formats and media, social uses and reading habits have changed, it is still important to pay attention to reading responses (Fittipaldi, 2012), in order to improve the training of readers because “without reading there is no literature, no education possible” (Ballester-Roca & Ibarra-Rius, 2020, p. 208).

Based on these considerations, this article is framed within the different research on literary education and creativity in initial teacher training (Bordons & Cavalli, 2012; Contreras-Barceló & Torrents-Sunyo, 2020). This is a qualitative study comparing two didactic experiences carried out with two groups of future primary school teachers. In both cases, an experience based on the reading of 3 classic and/or contemporary works of Children’s and Young Adult Literature was proposed, with the aim of developing their reading and literary training, as foreseen in the teaching plan. However, after the readings and a literary discussion, one group had to carry out a more conventional activity, such as a critical review with a personal impression

of the readings, while the other group had to produce a creative rewriting for each of the readings, also accompanied by an assessment of the readings. This study aimed at making a comparison between the reading responses of one and the other, in order to identify similarities and differences both in the categories of reading responses and in the level of reading depth (Fittipaldi, 2012).

Literary reading and initial teacher education

A few years ago, several studies in literacy education found that pre-service teachers were aware of the reading trends shown in reading test reports such as PISA (Larrañaga & Yubero, 2005; Colomer & Munita, 2013; Dueñas et al, 2014; Contreras & Prats, 2015; Ben-Amram, Aharony & Bar Ilan, 2021). According to Aguilar-Ródenas (2020) in a publication updating the state of the art, the situation has not improved much since the first investigations:

the students' reading habits (show) a weak reading profile in relation to reading which, moreover, once again reveals an alarming coincidence: future teachers show their disaffection for reading and make merely instrumental use of it (p. 32).

However, the current paradigm of literary education has objectives that require teachers to have a good knowledge of the literary fact and a solid didactic training in order for students to be able to appreciate literature (Mendoza, 2004). In order to achieve these objectives, a gradual and cumulative literary education that allows learners to progress will be key, considering literary reading as a complex process that requires the instruction of an expert reader who mediates learning, organises activities, selects readings and systematises knowledge (Munita & Manresa, 2012; Munita, 2014).

It should also be noted that a considerable number of studies show a direct link between teachers' personal reading experiences and their subsequent teaching practice (Trotman & Kerr, 2001; Aguilar-Ródenas, 2020). If future teachers do not previously receive enough literary education, training in the didactics of Children's and Young Adult Literature during the degree will not be effective (Colomer & Munita, 2013). Therefore, without wishing to be discouraged, it seems that we are in a circular situation of impoverishment of reading and literary education (Contreras-Barceló, 2021) and it is urgent to start asking ourselves how this circle could be broken. To that end, Colomer and Munita (2013) suggest offering students a direct encounter with literary works and promoting spaces for socialising around these works, so that future teachers have a starting point on which to build their future teaching practices.

Creativity and education

One of these spaces of encounter with literary works can be promoted through creativity. Creativity is in fashion. According to Cropley (2011), it is a polysemous concept that has evolved throughout history, always linked to terms such as originality, novelty, success and transformation. It is not so much a concept linked to aesthetics and discovery, but rather to novelty, relevance, effectiveness and even ethics in order to achieve the objectives pursued.

We have recently witnessed an increase in creativity in different educational contexts. Many researchers (Piaget, 1969; Cropley, 2011; Padget, 2013) claim that the use of creativity is a learning opportunity, through which higher forms of knowledge can be achieved (Piaget, 1969). Creative activities stimulate curiosity, the ability to reflect, connect, create and innovate, as well as foster higher order cognitive skills and abilities related to creative thinking: originality, flexibility,

fluency, imagination, associative thinking, metaphorical thinking and attributional hierarchies (Cropley, 2011).

Padget (2013) states that when a creative activity is proposed, with clear objectives, learners must think critically, especially before starting the creative process and at the end, when they reflect on whether they have achieved what they set out to do with their work.

This way, creative teaching and learning experiences allow for more effective learning outcomes, knowledge construction and the development of thinking skills (Padget, 2013).

In fact, in the case of literary education, several creative experiences have recently been collected, be it the writing of short stories, poems or hybrid genres, which in turn allow us to show a broader and more transversal vision of literature (Bordons & Cavalli, 2012; Contreras-Barceló & Torrents Sunyol, 2020). These studies confirm their effectiveness in the development of skills, attitudes and competences inherent to literary learning, both in reception and production: reading, interpretative and writing skills, attitudes such as a taste for reading or the reading habit, the stimulation of the imagination and the development of the reading intertext; as well as other issues inherent to linguistic, artistic and personal growth learning (Naji et al., 2019; Almeida et al., 2020). But to what extent are such creative experiences really more beneficial for literacy learning?

Method

Based on all these considerations, this article proposes a comparative study of reading responses in two groups of students who developed different didactic proposals, within the framework of the subject Didactics of Children's and Young Adult Literature in the Primary Education degree course at Universitat de Barcelona. 96 students aged between 19 and 25 took part: 52 (43 women and 9 men) during the academic year 2020-2021, and 44 (33 women and 11 men) during the academic year 2021-2022.

In both cases, the experience took place over 3 months. At the beginning of the course, the proposal was presented, which consisted of the reading of 3 works of Children's and Young Adult Literature to be chosen from a selection, their corresponding reading seminars and the completion of a different individual activity for each group. In both cases, the activities were designed on the basis of the learning objectives set out in the teaching plan, but one was more conventional in nature and the other more creative.

Below you can see the selection of classics and contemporaries from which the participants had to choose 3 works (table 1). These works were selected for their suitability to the subject matter.

Table 1. Selection of books

Titles
<i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> , by L. Carroll
<i>Peter Pan</i> , by J.M. Barrie
<i>The Little Prince</i> , by A. de Saint-Exupéry
<i>L'illa de la Paidonèsia</i> , by O. Canosa
<i>Pippi Longstocking</i> , by A. Lindgren
<i>Anne of Green Gables</i> , by L.M. Montgomery

Titles
<i>Duna: diari d'un estiu</i> , by M. Villanueva
<i>The Secret Garden</i> , by F.H. Burnett
<i>The Wonderful Wizard of OZ</i> , by F. Baum
<i>The Impossible Boy</i> , by B. Brooks
<i>The Beast of Buckingham Palace</i> , by D. Walliams
<i>Arriba el senyor Flat</i> , by J. Copons and L. Fortuny
<i>Charlotte's Web</i> , by E.B. White

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Six weeks after our proposal was presented, four reading seminar sessions were held in a format similar to a literary gathering, with the aim of creating a space for socialising around the literary works that had been read, sharing impressions and accompanying the participants in the process of the didactic proposal.

From this point on, the students could begin to carry out the assigned activity, which was different for each group. In the first group (hereinafter, the “control group”), the proposal was to write three critical reviews -one for each work-, in which their personal reading assessments were to emerge; in the second group (hereinafter, the “experimental group”), the proposal was to rewrite each of the works in three different formats: a visual poem, an object poem and a micro-story, also accompanied by a personal assessment of the books. Therefore, while one group carried out a more academic activity, the other did a more creative exercise.

The research follows a qualitative design (Sandín, 2003) whereby data were collected from a single instrument: personal reading ratings, with the following objectives:

- 1) To analyse reading responses in both the control group and the experimental group.
- 2) To compare the reading responses of the two groups.
- 3) To explore whether or not, through creativity, participants' reading responses show greater depth in the construction of meaning.

The qualitative data collected were processed using the [Atlas.ti \(version 22.0.1\)](#) software. Categories were created on the basis of an inductive-deductive process in order to analyse them. On the one hand, we used [Martina Fittipaldi's \(2012\)](#) proposal for categorising children's responses to literary texts, which considers four categories of reading responses: referential, compositional, intertextual and intercultural and personal, with two levels of reading (literal and inferential) each. On the other hand, a further level was added: the reflective level, in order to categorise those reading responses in which, based on some referential, compositional, intertextual and intercultural or personal element, the participant addressed the reflection on some topic beyond the personal or literary, normally of a social, cultural or educational nature. The categories of analysis were as follows ([table 2](#)):

Table 2. Categories of analysis of reading responses.

	Levels		
Categories	Literal Identification, description and establishment of simple connections.	Inferential Speculation, prediction, inference, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and critical awareness. Proposal for interpretation.	Reflective Based on the interpretation proposal, reflection on different social, educational or cultural issues.
Referential (on the narrative).	Identification of elements such as characters, actions or environments.	Interpretation of the elements of narrative construction.	Reflection on a social, cultural or educational issue based on narrative elements.
Compositional (about the book as an object).	Identification and description of the book as an object, visual or paratextual elements, the communicative situation and the concept of reading.	Interpretation of the various visual and situational elements of the communicative situation. Awareness of the author's artistic intention and the implicit role of the reader.	Reflection on a social, cultural or educational topic based on visual elements specific to the communicative situation, the book or the reader.
Intertextual and intercultural (connections between texts and cultures).	Identification and mention of intertextual, metaphorical, symbolic, cultural and representational references.	Establishment of intertextual relationships. Use of intertextual knowledge to interpret the text.	Reflection on a social, cultural or educational theme based on intertextual elements (metaphors, symbols, types of characters, etc.).
Personal (on one's own experience).	Making simple connections between the text and the readers' life experience.	Making complex connections between the text and the readers' life experience.	Reflection on a social, cultural or educational issue by establishing elaborated connections between the text and life experience.

Source: [Fittipaldi, 2012](#); Prepared by the authors.

Results

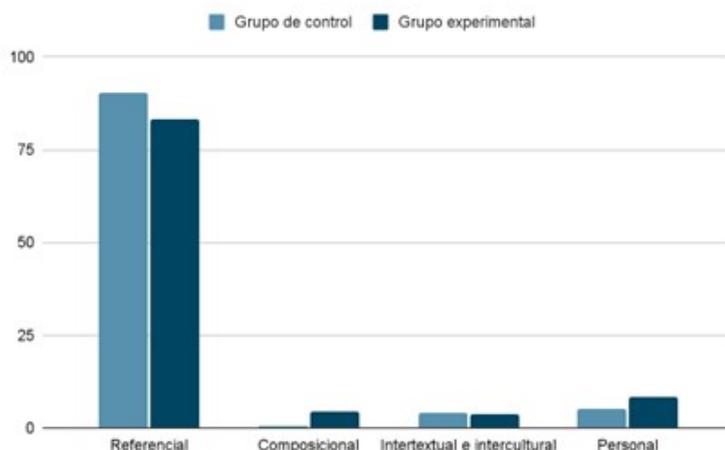
The results of the research were constructed from the qualitative data collected from the three personal reading assessments made by the 96 participants, with the result that 288 reading responses were analysed. The data were categorised and analysed using the [Atlas.ti version 22.0.1](#) software.

Categorisation of reading responses

When analysing the different types of reading response developed by the participants in their personal assessments of reading, it can be seen how [Fittipaldi's \(2012\)](#) four categories are present: referential, compositional, intertextual and intercultural, and personal.

In both the control group and the experimental group, the most common type of reading response was referential: 90.20% in the control group and 83.21% in the experimental group. From here, we find personal responses in 5.23% of the cases in the control group and 8.40% in the experimental group; intertextual and intercultural responses with 3.92% in the control group and 3.82% in the experimental group; and, finally, compositional responses in 0.65% in the control group and 4.58% in the experimental group. See the graph ([Figure 1](#)) which summarises the different categories of reading responses in both the control and experimental groups.

Figure 1. Categories of reading responses.

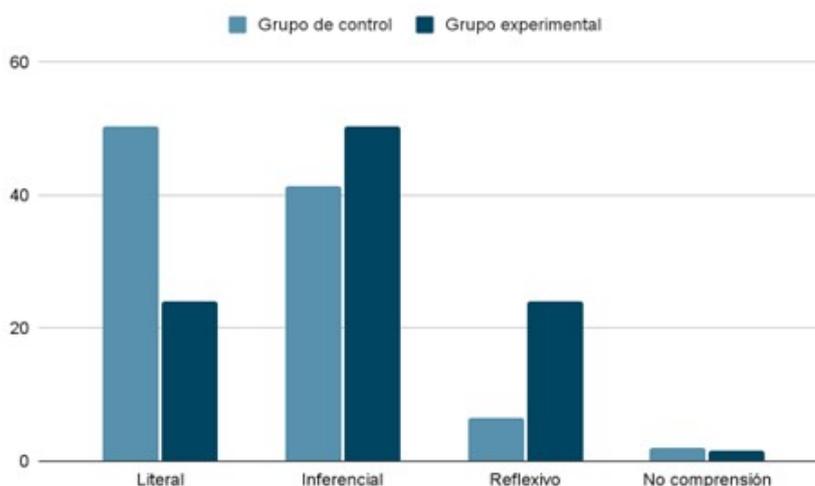


Source: Prepared by the authors.

Levels of reading

As far as the different levels of reading are concerned, in the control group a literal level of reading is found in 50.32% of the cases, compared to 24.03% in the experimental group. In turn, 41.29% of the ratings show an inferential level of reading in the control group, compared to 50.39% of the cases in the experimental group. In 6.45% of the reading responses of the control group, a reflective level is found, while in the experimental group, this level rises to 24.03% of the cases. Finally, in the control group, 1.94% of the assessments explicitly stated that the literary work in question was not understood, compared to 1.55% in the case of the experimental group (figure 2).

Figure 2. Levels of reading



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Triangulation of reading response categories and levels of reading

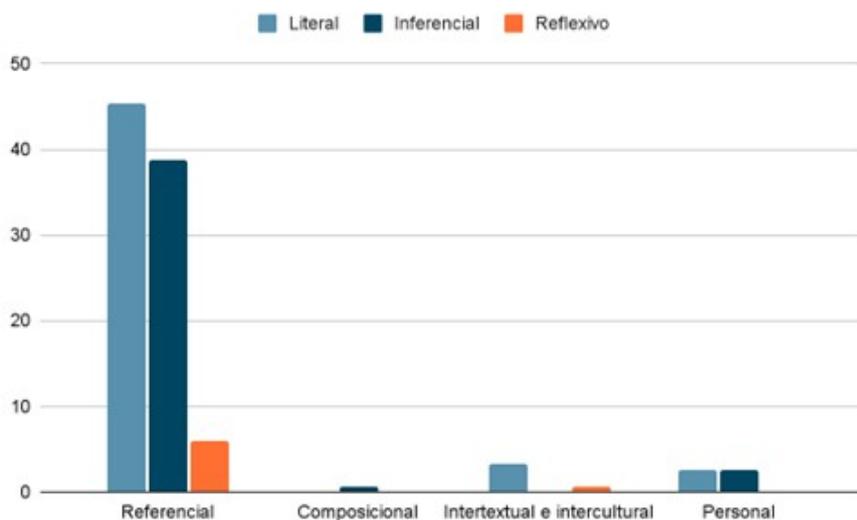
If we triangulate the variables referring to the categorisation of reading responses with the different levels of reading, we obtain a broader and more complex view of the under study, from which we have excluded those cases in which it was explicitly stated that the work in question had not been understood because they did not contain any kind of reading response.

Through this analysis, we find that a large majority of the reading responses in the control group are of a referential nature: 45.39% with a literal level, 38.82% with an inferential level, and 5.92% of responses show a reflective level. Likewise, in the experimental group there is also a majority of referential responses, but with a different distribution of levels of reading: 22.83% literal, 46.46% inferential and 14.96% reflective.

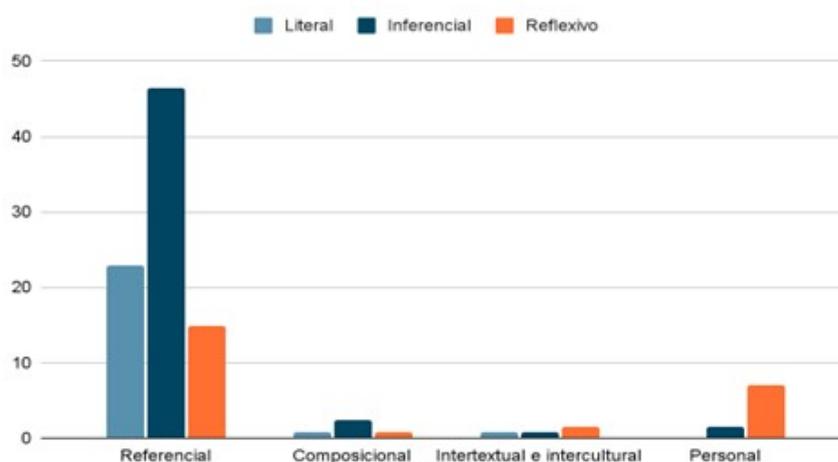
Other categories of reading responses with different levels of reading are also found, both in the control group and in the experimental group: in the control group, 3.29% of intertextual and intercultural responses at the literal level, 2.63% of literal personal responses and 2.63% of inferential personal responses. In the second group, 7.09% of personal reflective responses, 1.57% of personal inferential and 1.57% of intertextual and intercultural reflective responses stand out.

Figures 3 and 4 summarise the triangulation of reading response categories with their corresponding level of reading.

Figure 3. Triangulation of categories and levels of the control group



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 4. Triangulation of categories and levels of the experimental group

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Discussion and conclusions

On the basis of the results obtained, it has been possible to establish a comparison between the reading responses of two groups of students of the subject Didactics of Children's and Young Adult Literature of the Primary Education degree. Although the results are not statistically significant due to the number of participants, they can be considered exploratory and can contribute to reflecting on one's own teaching practice.

In both groups, a direct encounter between the participants and the literary works was encouraged and a space for socialising after the reading was also established, as proposed by Colomer and Munita (2013), so that their reading experiences, at the same time as their training in literary didactics, would be meaningful and beneficial. However, there are some important differences between the results of the control group and the experimental group.

Firstly, if we analyse the results (objective 1), we find that the categorisation of the participants' reading responses does not vary much between the control group and the experimental group. In both cases, most are referential in nature, that is, they focus their reading assessments on aspects of the narrative itself, such as the characters, the environments or the actions (Fittipaldi, 2012). Almost anecdotally, compositional, intertextual, intercultural and personal responses were found. Although these are hardly significant, they do appear more frequently in the experimental group.

However, when looking at the depth levels of these reading responses, a greater difference can be seen between the control group and the experimental group. For students in the first group, most of the answers remain at the literal level, i.e. they "identify, describe, list elements and establish simple relations with other texts" (Fittipaldi, 2012, p.82). Less frequent are inferential level responses, i.e. those who analyse, hypothesise and "make interpretative connections that lead them to construct (...) the meanings for the text". (Fittipaldi, 2012, p. 82). Reading responses with a reflective level are practically anecdotal in this group. In the experimental group, on the other hand, it is found that more than half of the answers show an inferential level of reading, and the other half of the answers are almost equally divided between literal and reflective reading.

On the other hand, the triangulation of the data referring to the categories and levels of reading shows that in the control group most of the reading responses are referential and literal, which means that most of the participants make a superficial reading and their assessment is basically descriptive. Next, there are the referential and inferential ones, i.e., those that approximate an interpretation from the narrative elements. Meanwhile, in the experimental group, the situation is reversed and the reflective referential responses acquire greater relevance, that is, those responses that, starting from an element of the narrative and its interpretation, develop a reflection on a social, cultural or educational topic.

Therefore, the research data show that, in the control group, which performed a more traditional activity, most of the reading responses are referential and at a literal level, which would be in line with the results of the PISA tests and other studies on the reading profile of future teachers (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020; Aguilar-Ródenas, 2020). However, in the experimental group, which performed a more creative activity, the results show an increase in the depth of the level of reading, as most of the reading responses are referential and inferential, and the reflective level responses also increased significantly (objective 2).

The two groups had to choose 3 works from the same selection of books and had the opportunity to share their reading impressions in the seminars. However, those who were part of the experimental group showed a deeper level of reading in their reading responses, so although the results are not statistically significant, we can think that it was the use of creativity that made it possible to achieve this (objective 3). According to Piaget (1969), Copley (2011) and Padgett (2013), the proposal of a creative activity would stimulate curiosity and the ability to reflect, and would also foster higher order cognitive skills. In this case, the results suggest that the challenge of producing a creative rewriting of the play forced them to go deeper into the reading of the play, to associate ideas, to create metaphors, symbols and to be original and imaginative.

Although it would be interesting to replicate the experience with a larger number of participants, it seems that through creativity, learning objectives related to literary reading could be achieved in a more effective and meaningful way, as suggested by previous studies (Bordons & Cavalli, 2012; Contreras-Barceló & Torrents-Sunyol, 2020).

Everything thus suggests that creative didactic proposals can contribute to improving the reading and literary training of future teachers, making their reading experiences prior to their professional practice more beneficial and their future role as mediators more meaningful for their students (Trotman & Kerr, 2001; Aguilar-Ródenas, 2020). It may even be that creative activities such as the one presented here can help to reverse the situation of impoverishment of literary education in which we seem to find ourselves (Contreras-Barceló, 2021).

Beyond this experience, it would also have been interesting to collect data of a more attitudinal nature in order to analyse whether or not the creative proposal also improved attitudes towards reading and literature. It would even be interesting to replicate the experience at other educational levels to corroborate the effectiveness of the creative proposal to improve the reading and literary education of students of other ages.

Finally, the results of the research lead us to make a positive assessment of the experience, as they show that the participants have achieved the learning objectives related to the literary reading of works of Children's and Young Adult Literature foreseen in the teaching plan, although in a more efficient way in the experimental group than in the control group.

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