

The Creative Poland Program: Developing Creativity and Cross-Cultural Competencies in Primary School Children

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ABSTRACT

The *Creative Poland* program represents a large-scale, evidence-based educational initiative designed to foster creativity and cross-cultural competencies in primary school children, aged 8–9. Developed by a team of psychologists and educators, the program integrates structured creativity training with exposure to diverse cultural practices, promoting divergent thinking, narrative imagination, cognitive empathy, and openness to experience. Over the course of one academic year, 100 trained teachers implemented the program in their classrooms, engaging over 2,000 students across urban and rural schools throughout Poland. Teachers received a two-day workshop, ongoing online support, and detailed instructional materials to ensure fidelity of implementation. Program effectiveness was rigorously evaluated in a longitudinal design using a control group of similar size, confirming positive impact of the training on students' creative and cognitive-empathic abilities. Program structure combined motivational, creative, and exploratory stages, emphasizing active participation, idea generation, and cultural reflection. Dissemination included freely accessible manuals and resources, conferences, and presenta-

tions to educators, ensuring sustainability and scalability. Preliminary observations indicate high levels of engagement, enhanced creative expression, and increased cognitive empathy among students, highlighting the program's potential as a model for applied interventions that simultaneously cultivate creativity and intercultural understanding in primary education settings.

KEYWORDS:

creativity training; cross-cultural competence; primary education; cognitive empathy; program evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

Fostering creativity in children is recognized as a critical educational goal, as it underpins problem-solving, innovation, and adaptive thinking in a rapidly changing world (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Equally, development of intercultural competencies has gained prominence due to increasing globalization, migration, and multicultural interactions (Leung et al., 2008). The current project, *Creative Poland* (Polish: *Kreatywna Polska*), sought to integrate these two domains by designing and implementing a school-based program aimed at enhancing both creative thinking and cross-cultural understanding in children, aged 8–9. This brief report aims to present the program's design, rationale, and practical implementation, highlighting general insights and experiences from applying research on creativity in educational settings, rather than providing a full empirical analysis.

The theoretical foundation of the program draws upon established models of creativity, including the Four-C Model of creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009), which distinguishes between everyday creativity and professional or eminent creativity, emphasizing the potential of early interventions to nurture lifelong creative skills. Simultaneously, the program incorporates elements of multicultural education (Banks, 2015), exposing children to cultural artifacts, ideas, and practices from a diverse set of countries, thereby stimulating cognitive flexibility and perspective-taking. By combining creativity and intercultural awareness, the program aims to cultivate skills essential for 21st-century learners, including divergent thinking, narrative imagination, cognitive empathy, and openness to experience. Recent research further suggests that fostering creative thinking in culturally rich contexts may also reduce stereotypes and prejudices, offering a theoretically and empirically grounded rationale for integrating intercultural perspectives in creativity training (Groyecka-Bernard, Karwowski, & Sorokowski, 2021; Groyecka-Bernard et al., 2024).

PROGRAM DESIGN

The Creative Poland program was developed by a team of psychologists and educational researchers with extensive experience in creativity research. The project was led by Piotr Sorokowski and organized in close collaboration with Agata Groyecka-Bernard, and, in the final stages, Wiktoria Jędryczka. It benefitted from substantial expert and practical support from Maciej Karwowski (who contributed significantly to the conceptualization of the project), Izabela Lebuda, Aleksandra Zielińska and Edyta Karwowska. Creativity workshops were designed and implemented by Aleksandra Gajda and Dorota M. Jankowska. The entire team received additional support from doctoral students and students of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Wrocław, to whom we express our deepest gratitude. Its design was guided by evidence-based principles to maximize engagement, efficacy, and scalability. The program consisted of a year-long intervention implemented by trained teachers in primary schools across Poland. The overarching goals were threefold:

(1) to foster children's creative potential, (2) to enhance their understanding of cultural diversity, and (3) to promote positive educational experiences that strengthen children's self-efficacy and motivation for learning.

Program structure was carefully adapted to the developmental level of second-grade pupils (8–9 years old). Drawing on pretests and pilot sessions, activities were designed to stimulate curiosity, imagination, and reflective thinking while remaining age-appropriate. Each session followed a structured, three-stage format: interest, searching, and exploration, each targeting specific psychological mechanisms. The interest phase introduced topics in a playful and intellectually engaging manner to activate intrinsic motivation. The searching phase employed problem-solving and idea-generation exercises designed to stimulate divergent thinking and creative imagination. Finally, the exploration phase encouraged children to engage with cultural artifacts and reflect on similarities and differences across societies, promoting cognitive empathy and awareness of diversity.

A full training program included 30 hours of workshops (one hour per week), organized into 17 lesson scenarios of 45 minutes, 10 lesson scenarios of 60 minutes, and 3 extended lesson scenarios of 90 minutes each. The content focused on 16 countries, spanning Europe and beyond, providing children with opportunities to encounter a rich variety of cultural knowledge, from literature and music to rituals, sports, and social practices.

TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Recruitment and preparation of participating teachers was a key component of the program's success. Recruitment targeted teachers across urban and rural settings to ensure diversity and generalizability. Initial outreach included email invitations to all regional educational authorities and teacher training centers in Poland, promotional campaigns *via* social media, informational videos on university channels, and presentations at national scientific conferences. This multi-channel approach ensured widespread visibility and engagement, ultimately leading to the enrollment of 100 teachers.

Teacher training comprised a two-day intensive workshop led by program developers and an experienced educational consultant. The workshop covered theoretical foundations, methodological guidance, and practical implementation strategies. To reinforce fidelity and provide ongoing support, teachers participated in regular online meetings *via* MS Teams throughout the intervention year. These sessions allowed the teachers to discuss challenges, share experiences, and receive guidance, ensuring that program content was delivered consistently across classrooms. Such continuous professional development and support aligns with best practices in educational interventions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), reinforcing both teacher confidence and program effectiveness.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The teachers implemented the Creativity Compass framework (Dziedziewicz et al., 2014; Jankowska, Gajda, & Karwowski, 2022) over the course of the school year. Each teacher conducted the full-year program with their assigned class and recruited a control class from the same school, when possible. Control classes were matched to the intervention classes by age and school year, whenever feasible. In some cases, the same teachers taught both the creativity and control classes, and assignment of classes to the intervention or control condition was based on practical constraints within schools rather than on randomization. Classes in the control condition continued with regular curricula and received no specific creativity training. Monitoring of the intervention included photographic documentation of classroom activities and semesterly reports capturing attendance and engagement metrics. Teachers were encouraged to maintain fidelity while allowing flexibility to accommodate class-specific dynamics, aligning with contemporary approaches to applied educational research that prioritize ecological validity.

EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT

Program effectiveness was evaluated using a pretest-posttest design. Data collection encompassed three key domains of creativity: divergent thinking, narrative creativity, and creative imagination, alongside measures of the personality traits of openness and empathy. Standardized instruments were adapted for developmental appropriateness and instructions were read aloud to ensure comprehension. Divergent thinking was assessed using an alternate uses task (Guilford, 1967), prompting students to generate unconventional uses for everyday objects. Narrative creativity involved storytelling based on visual stimuli, capturing children's ability to construct imaginative and coherent narratives (e.g., Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). Creative imagination and cognitive styles were evaluated through structured tasks, assessing originality, flexibility, and elaboration of ideas (Franck Drawing Completion Test; Anastasi & Schaefer, 1971). Openness and empathy were measured using validated scales adapted for children (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Barbaranelli, et al., 2003). Teachers administered all measures in their classrooms, ensuring consistency between experimental and control groups.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND GENERAL OUTCOMES

Initial observations indicated that the program was well-received by both teachers and students. High levels of engagement and participation were reported and anecdotal evidence suggested that children exhibited increased curiosity, motivation, and willingness to explore unfamiliar con-

cepts. Teachers reported that the program enhanced their pedagogical skills, particularly in fostering creativity and facilitating discussions about cultural diversity.

GENERAL RESULTS

While detailed statistical analyses are presented in a separate publication (Zielińska, et al., 2025), summary findings indicate that the program effectively enhanced children's creativity and cognitive empathy. Students in the training condition demonstrated greater engagement in idea-generation tasks and narrative storytelling compared to control peers. Specifically, preliminary analyses suggest improvements across all measured creativity domains, with the most notable gains in narrative creativity and divergent thinking. Cognitive empathy, reflecting children's ability to understand others' perspectives, also increased, whereas affective empathy did not show significant change. These outcomes suggest that targeted interventions can simultaneously foster creative skills and intercultural understanding, supporting the program's dual focus. In summary, these results offer realistic estimates of the effects of creativity training in everyday school settings, consistent with findings from recent meta-analyses (Sio & Lortie-Forgues, 2024).

DISSEMINATION AND SCALABILITY

The program was disseminated through multiple channels to ensure accessibility and long-term impact. All materials, including training manuals and activity scenarios, were made freely available online, and printed copies were distributed to libraries across Poland. Successful recruitment of 100 teachers from diverse geographic and institutional contexts demonstrates the program's feasibility and potential for scaling. Feedback from participating schools indicated strong interest in continuing the program in subsequent academic years, suggesting sustainability beyond initial implementation.

The project's summary conference, held at Topacz Castle in March 2024, served as a platform for sharing research findings, discussing pedagogical strategies, and engaging with the broader educational community. Guest speakers, including leading linguists, psychologists, and theatre practitioners, emphasized the interdisciplinary relevance of creativity and cross-cultural education, highlighting the program's societal and educational significance. The project's launch and the concluding conference seamlessly integrated research presentations with talks at the intersection of art and creativity (e.g., Karwowski & Kaufman, 2017; Lebuda & Karwowski, 2023; Sorokowski et al., 2025), illustrating how creative thinking can be cultivated and expressed across diverse areas of life and professional practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The Creative Poland program demonstrates potential for structured creativity training to enhance cognitive skills and foster intercultural competencies in primary school children. Beyond improving creative performance, the program encourages curiosity, perspective-taking, and cognitive flexibility, skills crucial for navigating diverse and complex environments. Importantly, integration of evidence-based pedagogy, teacher training, and ongoing support exemplifies a model for applied interventions that balance scientific rigor with practical feasibility (Hattie, 2009).

The program's design allows for adaptation to different educational contexts, age groups, and cultural settings. By emphasizing principles rather than prescriptive exercises, the model offers a scalable framework that can be incorporated into standard curricula or extracurricular programs. Our goal is to further develop and implement the project in additional countries, exploring cross-cultural applicability and potential synergies with other educational interventions targeting social-emotional learning, problem-solving, and civic engagement.

CONCLUSION

The Creative Poland program represents a successful integration of creativity development and cross-cultural education in real-world primary school settings. The initiative demonstrates that carefully designed, evidence-based interventions can enhance creative skills and cognitive empathy in children, while simultaneously supporting teacher development and engagement. By making materials widely accessible and fostering sustainable practices in schools, the program offers a model for future interventions aimed at preparing children to thrive in diverse, dynamic, and interconnected societies.

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