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School Social Work with the Use of Arts in the Context of a Participatory Action Research: Enhancing a Roma Student's Educational Inclusion during COVID-19

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School Social Work with the Use of Arts in the Context of a Participatory Action Research: Enhancing a Roma Student's Educational Inclusion during COVID-19

Abstract

This article presents an arts-based systemic school social work intervention that contributed to the educational inclusion of a primary school Roma student who exhibited unstable school attendance and was excluded from tele-education during COVID-19. The intervention was part of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project conducted by the researcher (first author) in collaboration with 13 School Social Workers (SSWs) from Greece and Cyprus. After performing an original video-song entitled "*We've not forgotten you*", the SSWs used it as a tool in arts-based, tailor-made interventions with socially isolated and marginalized students and members of their systems (parents, classmates, teachers) to help enhance their educational inclusion. One of these interventions is presented here. It was initiated by the SSW (second author) during quarantine and evolved within the school after its reopening, utilizing collective story-writing, theatre "from within the school community", songwriting, drawing, and craft making. The intervention contributed to the target student's empowerment, equal participation in peer and class groups, regular school attendance and sense of belonging, along with improving his family's relationship with other student families and the school. It also promoted interdisciplinary and inter-school collaboration and fostered a climate of inclusion and resilience in the school community during the pandemic, opening up prospects for ongoing change towards inclusion in the future.

Keywords

School Social Work, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Arts-based Systemic Intervention, Roma Student, Educational Inclusion, COVID-19

Cover Page Footnote

Statements & Declarations Ethics approval The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Democritus University of Thrace, Greece (approval#56463/480/2020). **Consent** Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and from the participating children's parents. **Acknowledgements** This work as part of the first author's PhD thesis was supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI) under the HFRI PhD Fellowship grant (Fellowship Number: 560). **Competing Interests** The authors declare no conflict of interest **Data availability statement** Research data from discussions, interviews, and notes are not shared to protect the privacy of the participating children, in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Artworks are shared since specific permission has been obtained from their creators, under the condition that any identifying information about them will not be disclosed. **Author contributions** The article is part of the PhD thesis of the first author, Styliani Farmaki, under the supervision of Agapi Kandydaki, the third author and Professor of Social Work and Multiculturalism. Styliani Farmaki and Konstantinos Kaplanis served as co-researchers in the PAR project and conducted the data collection and analysis. Styliani Farmaki wrote the initial draft, with all authors providing comments on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Introduction

Shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, School Social Workers (SSWs) focused on finding ways to reach students, respond to their needs, and enhance their well-being and learning progress (Kelly et al., 2021). For instance, in the USA, it is reported that SSWs strengthened their relationships with students' families by actively involving them in interventions and helping them access resources (Daftary et al., 2021). In Korea, besides providing emergency relief, SSWs made home visits, leaving handwritten notes with suggested family activities at the students' front door, and organized singing, dancing, and gaming activities online (Park, 2020). In Finland, in addition to using technology for counselling, SSWs carried out walks and discussions with students in neighborhoods to empower them (Huxtable, 2020).

This essay focuses on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, which was implemented in Greece, to enhance the educational inclusion of students facing social isolation and marginalization challenges during school closures and re-openings (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020) and strengthen resilience and social-emotional connectedness among school community members (Page et al., 2021). Thirteen SSWs¹ —11 from Greece and two from Cyprus— participated as co-researchers, collaborating with the researcher (the first author) to implement interventions. Initially, they collectively performed an original video-song composed by the researcher, titled *We've Not Forgotten You*, which was publicly displayed to convey messages of empowerment to all students during the lockdown. The video-song can be found in Farmaki (2020) on [We've not forgotten you - School Social Workers from Greece & Cyprus - YouTube](#).

The SSWs were then asked to use this video-song as a tool in tailor-made, music- and arts-based systemic brief interventions with students from their educational settings to enhance their inclusion in education. Inclusion was understood as a process of increasing meaningful participation in education while reducing barriers and pressures of exclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The arts were integrated into systemic strategies aiming to enhance inclusion by expanding social networks and strengthening social bonds (Lubben et al., 2015), empowering students and amplifying their “voices” (Messiou, 2013), promoting collaborative

¹ This article uses the term “School Social Worker” (SSW) to describe the role of Social Workers providing services within the school setting and the educational system. In Greece, these professionals are employed by the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in mainstream and special education primary and secondary schools, as well as in the Centers for Educational and Counseling Support, which are responsible for assessing students' educational needs (Eurydice, 2021). A prerequisite for employment in these roles is holding a degree in Social Work and a professional license to practice. In Cyprus, Social Workers work as members of District Committees of Special Education and sporadically in schools under pilot programs (Panagiotopoulos, 2016).

and interdisciplinary initiatives, and enhancing the quality of interactions within or between sub-systems (e.g. class group, school-family) (Openshaw, 2007).

As it stands, 15 interventions² were implemented, deeply engaging 26 students, mostly with diverse cultural backgrounds (e.g., Roma and migrants) or special educational needs and disabilities, attending both general (mainstream) and special education schools at primary and secondary levels. The interventions were based on a systemic assessment of the unique challenges of each case, involving additional members of the target students' systems (e.g., classmates, family, teachers, school principals, community members), and utilizing music and art according to the interests and strengths of the participants (e.g. storytelling, songwriting, drawing, craft-making, comics, collage, photography, dance, music, theater). The interventions were introduced through phone calls, video calls, emails, chats, and neighborhood meetings and continued within the schools after their reopening. As a result, the PAR project and the collective video-song managed to reach and creatively mobilize hundreds of other school community members.

This article presents and analyzes one of those multi-level interventions that was initiated during the lockdown by the SSW (the second author) and the researcher and evolved constructively within the school after its reopening. It examines the case of Simon, a 7-year-old Roma boy and primary school student in a provincial town. Before the pandemic, Simon experienced unstable school attendance, and during the lockdown, he faced exclusion from tele-education. This article explores how systemic social work intervention, incorporating arts such as collective story-writing, drama, songwriting, drawing, and craft making, enhanced Simon's educational inclusion and contributed to a more inclusive school climate.

Methodology

Drawing on her background in social work, music education, and systemic therapy, and under the supervision of a Professor of Social Work (the third author), the researcher initiated the PAR project as part of her doctoral research. PAR methodology was chosen as an empowering, democratic, and inclusive framework to bridge practice with theory and action with reflection. Qualitative methods such as discussions, interviews, notes from participatory observation, and artworks were utilized. As an applied social science research approach, PAR enabled the researcher to collaboratively generate knowledge with the SSWs and other participants to address real-life school challenges and foster educational inclusion for socially isolated and marginalized students (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

² Of the 13 SSWs, one withdrew after the public display of the song due to health reasons related to the pandemic and did not implement any interventions, while three other SSWs contributed with two interventions each.

The Research Question

After performing and publicly displaying the video-song *We've not forgotten you*, to be used as the main tool of intervention, the researcher and the SSWs collaboratively explored and took action on the research question: *How can music- and arts-based systemic social work interventions contribute to enhancing the educational inclusion of socially isolated and marginalized students during COVID-19?* To delve deeper into this overarching question, the researcher developed four sub-questions:

1. What are the challenges of social isolation and marginalization faced by the target student?
2. How are music and other forms of art integrated into systemic intervention to achieve meaningful goals for the case towards inclusion?
3. What changes are observed, how do music and art contribute to these changes, and what is their impact on inclusion?
4. What reflections and proposals emerge for further enhancing inclusion in the future?

From identifying challenges and integrating the arts into systemic intervention to observing changes and proposing future strategies, these sub-questions aligned with the core processes of social work intervention, approaching educational inclusion from a holistic perspective and highlighting how professional practice can be combined with PAR.

PAR Process and Data Collection Methods

Each sub-question was directly linked to a specific research axis and corresponded to a distinct stage of the PAR process. This structure ensured a coherent and systematic approach to addressing the overarching research question. The PAR process, along with the tools used for data collection at each stage and axis, is presented below. Since these procedures were common to all participating SSWs, the following also pertains to the specific case analyzed in this article.

➤ Stage 1: Case Assessment

Axis 1. Social Isolation and Marginalization Challenges Faced by the Target Student

Each SSW and the researcher discussed how the pandemic impacted school operations and the challenges it posed for both the students and the SSW's role. This led to identifying a target student from the SSW's caseload whose pre-existing challenges of social isolation and marginalization were exacerbated by the

pandemic (in this case Simon). The SSW obtained consent from the student and their parents to join the PAR project and gathered updated information on their condition during quarantine, documenting it in notes. Based on these notes and a review of older case files, the SSW and the researcher co-conducted a systemic assessment. They examined the inter-systemic factors at the emotional, social, and educational levels that contributed to the challenges the student faced, and considered the needs, strengths, interactions and relationships of the student with various systems (teachers, classmates, family, school, community), along with the broader socio-cultural conditions. Thus, they made sense of the challenges the student faced within their context, outlining the groundwork on which the intervention would be designed (Constable, 2016).

➤ **Stage 2: Intervention Design, Implementation and Evolution**

Axis 2. Integration of Music and Art into Systemic Intervention to Achieve Meaningful Goals Toward Inclusion

The SSW and the researcher jointly set systemic goals for inclusion and co-designed an arts-based intervention inspired by the SSWs' video-song to be implemented during quarantine. As part of this process, they involved other members of the student's systems, obtained their consent to participate in the PAR project, selected art forms that aligned with the interests and strengths of the participants, determined the communication methods for conducting the intervention, and decided whether and how the researcher would contribute musically. This design led to the implementation of the systemic intervention and provided information on how music and art were initially integrated into it.

The intervention was open to redesigning, modifications, and enrichment based on the participants' ideas and creative contributions, meaning it was participatory and constructively evolving. During its implementation, both the SSW and the researcher kept a diary of activities and maintained a written feedback discussion with each other. They also kept notes from their participatory observations of the arts-based meetings and initiatives, a record of the artworks created, and notes from their feedback discussions with the participants on these artworks and on the course and outcomes of the intervention. These methods provided information on how the arts continued to be integrated during the implementation of the intervention.

When schools reopened for the remaining month until the end of the school year, an online group meeting of all the participating SSWs, coordinated by the researcher, was held, where they exchanged ideas on further developing their interventions within their schools to maximize their impact toward inclusion at multiple levels (class group, school, community). Following that, the SSWs

continued intervening within their schools independently of the researcher. The decision was made to promote the autonomy of the SSWs (Greenwood & Levin, 2000), empowering them to act with self-determination and integrate the arts into school settings to foster inclusion, drawing on their own strengths and the resources of their schools. At the end of the school year, each SSW was interviewed by the researcher about how they developed their interventions, the actions they followed, and their observations, focusing on how the arts were integrated into the intervention during its evolution within the school.

➤ **Stage 3: Impact Assessment**

Axis 3. Changes Observed, Music and Art Contribution to These Changes, Impact on Inclusion.

The SSW and the researcher engaged in a reflective discussion on the progress of the intervention from its inception during the quarantine to its completion within the school, reviewing the notes they have kept from their participatory observation and discussions with the participants in the interventions, the artworks (exploring their functions and meanings while considering the responses of their student-creators and others to them) (Huss & Bos, 2022; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019), and the transcribed texts of the discussions/interviews between them. Their goal was to identify changes for the target student and other systems, specifying the unique role of the arts in these changes and their impact on inclusion. This review was not meant to be an in-depth data analysis, but rather an additional reflection, serving both the next stage (proposal development) and the strengthening of the researcher's analysis, who was expected to revisit the research material later.

➤ **Stage 4: Future-Oriented Reflection**

Axis 4. Reflections and Proposals for the Future of the Case Toward Inclusion.

Each SSW and the researcher jointly reflected on the intervention, discussing the obstacles and challenges they encountered, as well as the ways in which they addressed them. However, the focus was placed on developing proposals for the future of the case in terms of inclusion, based on the principle inclusion is not an ideal that can be fully achieved, but rather a continuously evolving process with room for improvement (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). They then presented the intervention briefly in an online meeting of the SSWs' group, coordinated by the researcher (as was done with all interventions), where they collectively reflected on how the arts could be further utilized to promote inclusion

for the case in the future and to enrich school social work practice during the pandemic and beyond (Kelly et al., 2020). As a result, the SSWs' group also developed specific proposals for the future.

Ethical Issues

The PAR project's design was reviewed and approved by the Democritus University's Research Ethics Committee in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants and from the parents of the participating students. Due to the pandemic and associated health and safety concerns, all discussions between the SSW and the researcher, as well as those within the SSWs' group, were conducted online and recorded for transcription and later analysis by the researcher.

The parents were informed about all remote meetings with their children and had the option to be present alongside them. Since recording students was not permitted under the remote conditions due to privacy concerns related to the use of technology, note-taking was employed as an alternative method for documenting discussions and observations. Although the identities of the SSWs involved in the PAR project were known due to their participation in the video-song, confidentiality was strictly maintained by ensuring that no identifying details, such as the names of schools, students, or other participants, were disclosed. Participants also gave permission for their artworks to be published as part of the PAR project, on the condition their anonymity would be preserved in any published material.

Data Analysis Methods

Data collection and analysis were intricately woven into the PAR process, with each stage building upon the insights gained from the previous one (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Upon completing all four stages, the researcher revisited the collected materials for each intervention, including notes, artworks, and transcribed discussions/interviews, and conducted a qualitative thematic analysis, treating each intervention as a case study (Crowe et al., 2011). Coding was employed to identify key points and emerging themes within each PAR axis. Triangulation was achieved by synthesizing various data sources, ensuring the validity of the findings and minimizing the risk of misinterpretation (Patton, 2002).

The central themes and key points from diverse sources were integrated into a cohesive narrative. This narrative followed the chronological sequence of events, incorporated theoretical connections, and was enriched by relevant data extracts, such as participant quotes and artworks, ultimately presented in a case study report. The report was structured into four sections corresponding to the four PAR axes: the first included the systemic assessment of the challenges of social isolation and

marginalization faced by the target student; the second explored the ways in which the arts were integrated into the systemic intervention from its initial implementation to its completion; the third examined the changes observed, the role of the arts in these changes, and their impact on inclusion; and the fourth focused on the reflections and proposals for further enhancing inclusion in the future. The SSWs provided feedback on the reports further enhancing their credibility (Creswell, 2014).

Limitations and Challenges

The unpredictable course of the pandemic, with sudden lockdowns and school re-openings, made it challenging to maintain a consistent meeting schedule with the participants, requiring each phase of the intervention to be shaped by close collaboration, flexibility, adaptability and creativity. Given that the PAR project was part of the researcher's doctoral thesis, there was also a risk it could overshadow the SSWs' priorities (Gosin et al., 2003). To mitigate this, the researcher promoted open communication with the SSW and fostered mutual support within the SSWs' group. Additionally, she encouraged the SSW to take independent initiative in developing the intervention during the school re-opening (Isenberg et al., 2004). Since recording discussions with students was not permitted, notes were taken instead. Furthermore, the researcher's background might have influenced the framing of themes and the interpretation of qualitative data. This potential bias was addressed through ongoing reflection and feedback with each SSW throughout the process (Tuckett, 2005).

Findings

A detailed presentation of the findings from Simon's case is outlined below, as documented in the case study report.

1. Social Isolation and Marginalization Challenges Faced by the Target Student

Simon Faced Unstable Attendance, Limited Educational Opportunities, and a Diminished Sense of Belonging at School

Simon, a 7-year-old boy from a large Roma family, attended 2nd grade at a primary school in a Greek province where approximately 30% of the student population was Roma. The SSW had been employed at this school on a fixed-term contract by the Hellenic Ministry of Education, under an EU co-funded program aiming at the educational inclusion of Roma students. The frequent relocations of

Roma families, their distinct lifestyles and attitudes toward education, and high intergenerational illiteracy often led to irregular school attendance. This situation was further exacerbated when the school failed to consider these factors, as the educational system was not adapted to their socio-educational needs, and discriminatory attitudes prevailed (Munn & Lloyd, 2005).

In Simon's case, his family did not prioritize schooling and frequently moved for agricultural work, which contributed to unstable attendance. This situation negatively impacted his social relationships and motivation to learn, and led to poor use of the Greek language, and to a lack of sense of belonging at school. A gap also existed between his teachers' expectations for his learning outcomes, and the opportunities available to help him meet those expectations (Razer et al., 2013). The less effort his teachers made to engage him despite the obstacles, the more his participation in education diminished, creating a "vicious cycle" of disengagement and resignation for both sides (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2016).

Simon Was Excluded from Distance Education During the Lockdown

The lockdown exacerbated the situation. Simon faced a sudden and severe disruption in learning and participating in education (World Bank, 2020a), losing even the minimal contact he had with other members of the school community. He was further excluded from distance education due to a lack of technological equipment and internet access. Neither his class teacher nor the school principal made any effort to involve him in the educational process through alternative means. Even the SSW, who had been consistently supporting him throughout the school year to enhance his access to education (Constable, 2016), followed the school's strategy, focusing efforts on students who had the ability to work with him online.

Simon Was Left Out of the Story-Writing Project Initiated by the SSW

The SSW had invited all 1st and 2nd grade students attending online classes to participate in an original story-writing project he had designed, with the notable exception of Simon. The project, titled *Staying home with Zach*, was intended to enhance the resilience of students and their families during the lockdown. Zach, the fictional child-hero of the project, was borrowed from William Mulcahy's (2018) storybook *Zach Stands Up*, which the SSW had incorporated into classroom activities before the pandemic. Zach was a character already familiar to the students, providing a relatable foundation for them to express their personal thoughts, experiences, and emotions about the pandemic through his story (Hacker, 2009).

Ultimately, six students participated in the story-writing project: two girls, who were students in the 1st grade and four students in the 2nd grade, who were Simon's classmates, including one girl and three boys. One of the boys exhibited traits of attention deficit, while another had difficulties with social skills. The students worked individually and were unaware of which of their peers were also involved in the project, as there was no interaction or collaboration between them during the story-writing process.

The project lasted for six weeks. Each week, the SSW sent an email to the participating students, featuring a theme related to Zach's experiences during the lockdown, along with specific keywords which were supposed to be included in the stories. The students discussed each theme with their parents, wrote and illustrated their stories, and sent them back to the SSW via email. The stories were about Zach staying home and talking about the coronavirus; continuing school remotely; spending free time creatively; maintaining communication with relatives; preparing surprises for grandparents; and inventing new games with friends.

Although many of Simon's classmates chose not to participate in the project, Simon was not even given the opportunity to join in, as the SSW had assumed he would not be able to engage remotely. This exclusion could have been perceived by the student and his family as indifference on the part of the school, leading Simon to disengage from key aspects of school life (Petkovska, 2015). Influenced by the teachers' stance, the SSW did not consider alternative ways to include Simon. COVID-19 crisis disorientated and constrained his actions, placing him within the "system around the problem" of Simon's social isolation and marginalization (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2016).

2. Integration of Music and Art into Systemic Intervention to Achieve Meaningful Goals Toward Inclusion

➤ During the Lockdown

Disrupting the Vicious Cycle of Social Isolation and Marginalization

The SSW's participation in the collective video-song as both a co-lyricist and co-performer, along with his collaboration with the researcher and the vision of the PAR project for inclusion, reconnected him to his role as a frontline professional during the crisis, and broadened his perspective on the potential use of alternative ways to intervene during the lockdown. Since he had already been using the arts through the story-writing project, he was encouraged by the researcher to explore alternative ways to get Simon involved. The SSW thus disrupted the vicious cycle of social isolation and marginalization by introducing new perspectives and opportunities to the system (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2016).

Transforming the Context Rather Than Adjusting Simon to It

He therefore chose to “transform the context” toward inclusion, rather than expect Simon to adapt to it (Yadav, 2016). Instead of asking him to write a story of his own, the SSW shifted the project from an individual to a collective task, by bringing together the participating students and their families in a collaborative story-writing process, which would include Simon and his family. Simon’s involvement activated a new student sub-system that enabled the collective sharing of thoughts and emotions on COVID-19 through the arts. By addressing barriers of exclusion for Simon, additional opportunities for resilience and social connectedness emerged among all participating students (Padhi, 2016).

Co-Creating a Collective Story

In the revised project, the seven participating students and their families were invited to co-create a story titled *Zach goes back to school after the lockdown*. The theme was related to the second verse of the SSWs’ song and was highly relevant to their shared experience of anticipating the reopening of schools. The story would be narrated following a constructivist approach, meaning each student would write and illustrate a sub-story, which would then be passed on to the next student to continue the narrative. This approach mirrored the SSWs’ video-song, where each participant contributed their own part to complete the final piece.

Taking on the Role of the “Postman” of the Collective Story

The SSW created a book in which the collective story was written. Taking on the role of a “postman,” he transported the storybook from one family to the next, by arranging meetings outside the school with each family. Each family received the book; they took it home and read it to the point where the story was written and they then continued by further constructing the narrative. This time, the students were not given specific key words to include in the story. Instead, they were asked to watch the SSWs’ video-song for inspiration. They were also encouraged to discuss the theme with their parents before writing and illustrating their part of the story. Each family was given a two-day deadline to complete their part and return the book to the SSW. In Simon’s case, the writing of the story took place in person, outside the school, as will be explained later.

Promoting the Systemic, Constructivist, and Inclusive Nature of the Story

Each sub-story was discussed with the researcher before the storybook was passed on to the next family. The SSW and the researcher added “bridges” (phrases) between the sub-stories, which served as semantic links, emphasizing key points or introducing new plot elements that highlighted the hero’s interactions with family, classmates, friends, and teachers across different settings (e.g., classroom, schoolyard, home). Functioning as “transitional spaces,” the bridges provided additional stimuli while ensuring structure and coherence in the collective narrative. Based on the unique contributions of all participants—sub-stories, illustrations, and bridges—the story was inclusively composed.

Choosing the School as a Transfer Point to Ensure Equity in Participation

As Simon didn’t have internet access, he wouldn’t have been able to join the project if the storybook had been shared via email. Therefore, the school was chosen as the transfer point for the storybook. This adjustment ensured Simon’s equal participation in the process and helped all participating students reconnect with the physical school environment, preparing them for their eventual return to school after the lockdown. What began as a solution for Simon ultimately benefited the other students.

Fostering Stereotype-Free Collaboration by Maintaining Co-Writers’ Anonymity

Although every student knew it was a collective story, no one knew the identities of the other participants. Maintaining the co-writers’ anonymity added a playful element of mystery and fostered stereotype-free collaboration. The co-writers remained focused on the shared goal of completing the story, building on each other’s ideas and creativity. The storybook was completed within two weeks, during which no additional assignments were given to the families. Everyone eagerly awaited the “revelation meeting,” where the co-writers would be introduced, and the “whole story” would be presented by the SSW and the researcher.

Providing Personalized Support and Music-Based Empowerment in Simon’s Case

Given that Simon and his family lacked internet access to watch the SSWs’ video-song from their place and they needed additional support to write the story, a personalized approach was introduced. Their meeting with the SSW outside the school was organized as an on-site intervention. The SSW welcomed Simon, his mother, and his two sisters and showed them the video-song on his mobile phone. He then video-called the researcher to meet the family and perform the SSWs’ song

live with her guitar. They all sang the song together and then the SSW assisted Simon in the story-writing process. When Simon was asked how he felt about continuing the story of another classmate, he expressed curiosity about who the other students were, reporting: “I want to know who the other kids are. I can’t wait to be meeting them.”

Connecting with the researcher on the spot and singing the song together motivated the whole family to get creatively involved in the project by collaboratively illustrating Simon’s sub-story. Simon’s mother mentioned: “No similar project has ever included us before. Simon felt like he was part of the school, just like all the other children. Please let me know if these activities are to continue, so that he keeps participating. Thank you for not forgetting my son.” This demonstrated her appreciation for her child’s inclusion in the story-writing project and marked the beginning of his further involvement in school activities.

Discovering the Therapeutic Value of the Collective Story

Once the collection of all sub-stories was completed and the collective story was finalized, the SSW and the researcher reviewed it together before presenting it to the group of co-writers. They observed that, while each sub-story highlighted a different aspect of Zach’s return to school after the lockdown, the overall narrative brought together and emphasized the collective “voice” of the participating students. Approaching the story as a cohesive narrative document, the SSW and the researcher identified key themes and trends. One notable theme was ambivalence: on one hand, there was fear of the coronavirus and the unpredictable conditions at school; on the other hand, there was a longing for closeness and a return to “normality.” Another theme was Zach’s “internal conflict” as he struggled between the desire to hug his classmates and the obligation to adhere to the protective measures. *Figure 1* presents one of the sub-stories, specifically the initial one, where these themes are highlighted.

Challenges of social isolation and marginalization relevant to Zach’s experience were also identified in the story. The students described Zach being confined at home for an extended period, experiencing fear about returning to school, showing reluctance to attend school even after its reopening, and feeling frustrated due to the prohibition of physical closeness. The narrative also revealed ways of coping and inter-systemic support resources contributing to resilience and educational inclusion. Zach’s mother played a crucial role in helping him manage his fear and follow protective measures. Zach engaged in his favorite sports with classmates and friends, while maintaining physical distance. The sub-story of Simon, presented in *Figure 2*, is one of the sub-stories that highlight this aspect. Furthermore, the students empowered themselves by collectively writing a poem inspired by the SSW’s song, which was incorporated into the story’s plot and is

shown in *Figure 3*. Their teacher recognized and valued the students' creative initiative. Finally, Zach reflected on the importance of reconnecting with school and reuniting with his classmates, highlighting the significance of rebuilding those relationships.

Beginning with the hero, alone at home during the lockdown, lost in his thoughts and under the care of his parents, the story evolved toward the school "reopening". Zach adapted to the new reality by implementing alternative ways of coping, such as engaging in play and poetry, and ultimately perceiving the pandemic as an opportunity—a life lesson. On an emotional level, a noticeable shift emerged, moving from insecurity, fear, and ambivalence to relief, hope, optimism, and empowerment. The story mirrored the pattern of a story of adversity versus an alternative story of resistance to adversity, as described in narrative therapy (White, 2004), holding therapeutic value as a stand-alone artwork, not only for its co-writers, but also for others who would encounter it.

Confirming the Story as a "Source of Resilience" Based in its Co-Writers' Reflections

Shortly after the state announced the school reopening, the SSW and the researcher organized a video call with the participating students and parents to present the complete version of the story. Arrangements were made for Simon and his mother to join the meeting via the SSW's telephone. The moment the co-writers were revealed, the group responded with surprise and excitement, creating an atmosphere of acceptance and emotional connection. The SSW and the researcher narrated the story in a vivid manner, inviting the participants to reflect on the outcome. All the students expressed joy, with some noting about the resonance of their own experiences with the emotional changes experienced by the hero. One student commented: "The story was very nice. It was emotional. Zach was sad, but afterwards he was happy, and everything went well for him at school," while another said: "Zach went through what we all went through." Simon highlighted the aspect of "working together," stating: "I liked the story that we created with the other kids."

Simon's mother greeted the group and praised the effort of all the children. Other parents also shared their reflections on their children's and their own involvement in the story-writing process. One parent noted: "While writing her part of the story, my daughter kept mixing up the person, saying 'I' instead of 'Zach.' She hadn't expressed her thoughts and feelings about COVID-19 before. She did so through the hero." Another parent commented: "We entered a state of empathy—both us and our children—by understanding how Zach felt and what he was going through." A third parent argued that "The story helped the children externalize pressure, anxiety, and distress. My son benefited greatly, and I believe we, as adults,

did too,” while the fourth parent added: “The evolution of the project from the individual to the collective level and its connection to the SSW’s song had a profound impact on our children. They expressed a much wider range of emotions.”

The children’s identification with the hero, the development of empathy for him, the expression of difficult emotions, and the strengthening of resilience within the family were evident in the students’ and their parents’ reflections (Haine-Schlagel & Walsh, 2015). The story-writing project created opportunities within both the family system and the co-writers’ group to foster communication, connection, emotional sharing, deeper understanding of the situation, and the discovery of meaning and hope—resources that are vital for adaptation to the crisis (Prime et al., 2020).

The Dynamics Within the Cowriters’ Group Inspire the Dramatization of the Story

During the same group meeting, the researcher performed the song live with her guitar, dedicating it to the co-writers to further strengthen their sense of belonging as a group. A student then sang the song acapella, which added an even more emotional and powerful touch to the moment. One parent recalled the song’s lyrics: “*We’ll be back at school; things will be as they were,*” highlighting the need for recovery and normality in the school environment after the crisis. He also reflected: “I hope optimism prevails at school. It’s a challenging time, but let’s hope things will return to how they were, or even better.” The SSW emphasized both the collective song and the story could act as bridges to the recovery process by stating: “The song and the story serve as bridges back to ‘school’s normality’. We were in crisis, but we will return to school stronger and continue doing what we love.”

The dynamics that developed within the group, along with the expressed need for recovery within the school, motivated the SSW and the researcher to propose the evolution of the story-writing project within the school. The idea of dramatizing the story emerged as a feasible option, as the narrative contained elements that could be theatrically adapted, such as characters representing members of the school community, scenes set in different school environments, and the recitation of a poem in a circle. The students and their parents embraced the idea, expressing that it would allow them to showcase their collective effort within the school and return to school with a positive mindset, despite concerns related to the pandemic.

➤ When the School Reopened After the Lockdown

Collaborating with the Special Education Teacher to Adapt the Story into a Script

The SSW initiated a collaboration with the special education teacher of the “Integration Class³” to bring the idea of dramatizing the story into the school. The collective story was adapted into a drama script, structured into seven scenes, each corresponding to one of the seven sub-stories from the original narrative. An extract is provided in *Figure 4*. Art became a catalyst for collaboration among school staff (Corbett et al., 2001), enhancing creativity and fostering broader changes within the school (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006).

Drama Promotes Inclusion and Resilience in the Co-Writers’ Classes

The co-writers, including Simon, returned to school motivated to dramatize the story. After sharing it with their classmates from the 1st and 2nd grades and becoming familiar with the script, they encouraged everyone to join the play, creating a supportive and cooperative atmosphere. They took on the roles of peer-trainers and directors, watching their sub-stories come to life in the very spaces they had imagined—the front door, schoolyard, and classroom—except for Zach’s house, which was represented in a corner of the schoolyard. Other participating students naturally connected their experiences and emotions to the unfolding events in the play, which fostered reflection and helped build resilience. The rehearsals were held daily. The classroom teachers embodied the role of the teacher. Simon was cast as Zach to help build his confidence and encourage regular attendance. By acting as a role model, he inspired other Roma students to participate in the play. The SSW encouraged their involvement, both to compensate for the educational opportunities lost during the lockdown and to prevent school dropout (World Bank, 2020b).

Monitoring Simon’s Participation in Education and Social Interactions at School

The SSW closely observed Simon’s participation in education and his social interactions at school. Simon attended school regularly, influenced by his involvement in the play and the strengthening of his family’s bond with the school and other families. His class teacher reported to the SSW that Simon had started participating in lessons in a more organized and diligent manner, showing a noticeable increase in his motivation to learn. Simon’s mother applied for him to attend the “Reception Class of Educational Priority Zone (ZEP)” to improve his Greek language skills, thus increasing opportunities for educational growth (Yadav, 2016). The SSW also observed that Simon’s positive interactions with his

³ Integration classes in Greece operate within general schools, offering a combination of mainstream education, specialized group instruction, and individualized programs for students with special educational needs and disabilities. Special education teachers in these classes also collaborate with classroom teachers to adapt teaching practices and adjust the learning environment (Eurydice, 2024).

classmates extended beyond the rehearsals, occurring during breaks, lunchtime, and free play. Simon shared with the SSW he no longer wished to be absent from school and did not want the school to close again for the summer. The SSW recognized a significant shift in Simon's position within the school system. Empowered through the arts, Simon moved from the margins to the center of attention, remaining connected to the school environment and beginning to learn more effectively during this period (Dreeszen et al., 1999).

Creating Art in Response to the Collective Song and Story Promotes Inclusion and Resilience Across School Classrooms

Parallel to the theatrical action, the SSW visited all school classes, presenting the SSWs' video-song and the collective story, and inviting the students to create artworks of their choice in response. He emphasized the primary focus was on their creative engagement rather than the aesthetic outcome, encouraging them to express themselves freely without fear of judgment. To empower them, he referred to the example of his own amateur participation in the song, motivating them to create art freely as a means of self-expression in the pandemic.

The students learned to sing the song and created drawings and crafts that conveyed messages of empowerment in the face of the pandemic, such as collectivity, hope, patience, teamwork, optimism, love, and strength. All the artworks were embraced and discussed in the classroom in a criticism-free environment. Examples of these creations include a rainbow-shaped envelope, a spring box, boats, and a hot-air balloon, which are presented in *Figures 5 and 6*, accompanied by brief reflections by their student-creators on their symbolism.

Students from all grades sang the SSWs' song daily in the hallways and schoolyard. In this creative environment musical talents emerged: a three 5th-grade female student vocal group, who rearranged the song into a lively pop melody and composed three new songs on the theme of "the power of hope"; a 6th-grade female student who reinterpreted the song in rap style, performing the lyrics over a beat she found on YouTube; and a 6th-grade Roma female student who kept the original melody of the song but replaced the lyrics with her own, reflecting elements of her religious faith. These students rehearsed their songs daily and performed them for their classes, receiving recognition from both peers and teachers.

The SSW inspired the students of the whole school community to become active creators rather than passive recipients of the situation (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005) and express themselves through music and art under adverse conditions (Frost, 2005). The collective song and the story were linked to their interests, strengths and talents that were permeated in their artwork and musical initiatives (Kelly, 2015). Their creativity left the school principal and teachers speechless, as they recognized their hidden potential.

Theatre From Within the School Community Promotes School-Wide Inclusion and Resilience

A final theatrical performance was held with two different casts from the 1st and 2nd grades. The collective story, transformed into a play, evolved into what can be described as “theatre from within the school community” (Barel et al., 2022; Bull, 2005). The location, participants, cast, and script all originated from the school community’s own resources, creatively engaging both students and teachers while conveying meaningful narratives, stories, and messages. The play also incorporated songs created by students from the higher grades, along with drawings and crafts from students across all grades, which were displayed on stage. During the performance, the school principal, despite his concerns about the adherence to protective measures, spontaneously joined the play, embodying the role of the principal and playing the SSWs’ song from his mobile phone as part of the narrative.

The audience consisted of cast members not performing at the time, with each class taking turns on stage. Students from the “Reception” and “Integration” classes, along with their teachers, also attended. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the performance was not presented to other students, teachers, parents, or the wider community to comply with social distancing and audience size limitations. Nevertheless, music and art provided a foundation for cross-class collaboration, enabling all students to contribute creatively to the final performance, either directly or indirectly (Cologon, 2014).

Establishing an Online Inter-School Collaboration Based on Art

The SSW reached out to another SSW participating in the PAR project, who was working in a primary school attended exclusively by Roma students. The second SSW had implemented an inter-arts project that included photo collages created by students and teachers, SSWs’ song covers in Romani and Latin rhythms performed by a student orchestra and choir, a music-dance performance featuring breakdancing and cheerleading, and murals created by students, teachers, and Roma community members.

Together, the two SSWs organized an online inter-school meeting where students from both schools presented their artworks inspired by the SSW’s song. Through a video call, the schools connected, allowing students to share their arts-based experiences in the presence of their teachers. This created an atmosphere of excitement, acceptance, warmth, and recognition, demonstrating that arts-based inter-school collaborations can enhance the school climate (Dreeszen et al., 1999). Each school leveraged its unique strengths, interests, and resources to foster constructive collaboration, effectively challenging stereotypes that regard art as

supplementary (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006). The SSWs enriched their practice and increased the visibility of their profession within the schools, confirming that the SSWs' group successfully served as a source of mutual support for its members.

3. Changes observed, music and art contribution to these changes, impact on inclusion

➤ *For Simon: Participation, Empowerment, Belonging*

The intervention compensated for Simon's exclusion from tele-education and provided him with opportunities he had been deprived of. He equally participated in the story-writing project, became a member of a newly formed student group with shared purposes and interests—which continued to remain active within the school—and his family was networked with other student families, experiencing acceptance in a safe, discrimination-free context.

Simon's participation in the story-writing project also reconnected him with school, learning, and other aspects of school life. The SSW reported: "The story-writing project helped Simon reconnect with what students were doing before the lockdown, which involved thinking, dreaming, writing, reading, and creating. Beyond providing him with the opportunity to express himself through the hero, participating in the process reminded him that 'we may have been locked down for so long, but our school activities are still alive'."

Upon the school's reopening, Simon developed meaningful relationships based on cooperation, mutual support, and respect within both the co-writers' group and his class group. He assumed roles of responsibility in rehearsals (peer training) and in the theatrical performance (leading role), becoming a role model for other Roma students' active participation. He was granted opportunities typically reserved for others, contributed significantly, and felt a valued member of the school community. This helped boost his self-confidence and strengthened his sense of belonging to the school (Mowat, 2015). During this time, Simon's school attendance, quality of participation in lessons, positive interactions with peers, and his family's trust in the school saw significant improvement. These positive changes paved the way for further educational, social and emotional growth, sparking Simon's renewed interest in school and helping to prevent potential dropout (Prince & Hadwin, 2013).

The SSW reflected: "Simon was on the margins. He had no friends and no desk at school. After the lockdown, he returned to school with renewed enthusiasm. He smiled, sang songs, and actively participated in the theatrical play, lessons, and other school activities. His teacher noticed the change. His classmates embraced him, and he began to feel that he truly belonged at school, just like the other

students.” It was evident that, by the end of his involvement in the PAR project, Simon was in a vastly different place compared to the outset of the intervention.

➤ ***For the Co-Writers’ Group: Collective Sharing, Resilience, Relationship Building***

Focusing on Simon led to a shift in the story-writing project—from an individual to a collective task, and from an online format to face-to-face meetings. This shift provided participating students with opportunities to collectively share their thoughts and feelings about the pandemic, while reconnecting with the school’s physical space despite its closure. The students and their families became part of a co-writing group, where each person’s unique expression enriched the collective work. As the SSW noted: “Co-creating the story strengthened relationships and fostered acceptance among the students and their families, an impact that continued in the school and carried over into their classrooms.”

The collective story captured the uniqueness of expression from Simon and other members of the co-writers’ group, while amplifying their collective “voice”. It was structured to include all the key systems in the life of the story’s hero—family, school, classmates, close friends, and teacher—creating space to address the challenges of the pandemic and promote coping mechanisms. The story’s therapeutic value, its recognition as a source of strength by its co-writers, and the incorporation of stage elements made it well-suited for dramatization within the school. This, in turn, motivated the co-writers to return to school with a positive mindset and to take on active and responsible roles in the theatrical action. The parents mentioned to the SSW that, if it hadn’t been for the PAR project, they most likely would have kept their children at home, or their children would have experienced intense anxiety about returning to school.

➤ ***For The School Community: Creativity, Collectivity, Resilience, Extraversion***

Various school sub-systems were mobilized to participate in the intervention including the co-writers’ group, their class groups, their teachers, students of all grades and the school principal, while art-based interdisciplinary collaboration between the SSW and the school inclusion teacher was also promoted. The school’s community resources were activated leading to “theatre from within the school community”, which was based on original story-writing and poetry, while connecting individual and collective experiences, evoking emotions and reflections, and leading to personal and social change (Heinonen et al., 2019).

The collective song and the story inspired students from all grades to express themselves creatively and unfold their artistic and musical interests. Drawings, crafts, singing, songwriting, and substitution of lyrics enabled the

expression of meanings, feelings, and stories, empowered the students-creators, and enhanced group cohesion (Baker, 2015; Heinonen et al., 2019; Lefevre, 2004; McFerran-Skewes, 2004;). This succeeded in connecting school community members and accompanying significant moments in the school's life, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose (Pearce et al., 2015).

All the artworks created were incorporated into the final performance, mobilizing the school community, transforming daily school life, and cultivating a climate of inclusion, resilience, optimism, and collective creative action in the face of the pandemic (Konrad & Sela-Amit, 2024). The arts-based inter-school collaboration enhanced the school's extraversion and contributed to the students' experience of recognition and sense of belonging to a broader educational community beyond their local boundaries (Cologon, 2014; Lubben et al., 2015). The SSW reflected: "Thanks to the intervention, the issue of the pandemic was managed in a more 'painless' way, and the return to school for the students was not linked to anxiety or a heavy atmosphere, but rather to a daily life characterized by creativity, interconnectedness, collectivity, extraversion, and inclusion, despite the adherence to social distancing measures."

4. Reflections and Proposals for the Future of the Case Toward Inclusion

The Teachers' Turn to Continue Supporting Simon's Path Toward Inclusion

According to the SSW's reflection, while the vicious cycle of social isolation and marginalization for Simon was disrupted, it was likely not completely ended. Teachers observed positive changes in his relationship with learning, school, and peers, recognizing both his empowerment and his family's growing support for education. However, more targeted actions were needed to ensure his regular attendance, improve his language skills, and foster better socialization. The intervention provided strategies such as integrating the arts into the educational process, leveraging Simon's contributions to school life, positioning him as a role model, and collaborating with his family. Most importantly, it demonstrated that despite the challenges, the teachers could have a lasting impact on his educational path towards inclusion.

The Importance of Continuing Arts-Based Projects at the School

The SSW reflected on the importance of continuing arts-based projects at the school to build resilience during the pandemic, improve the school climate, and further enhance Simon's educational inclusion and that of other Roma students. He stated: "Without the arts-based project we implemented, the school would have simply focused on reminding students of COVID-19 protective measures or carried

out a one-off activity with no long-term impact.” The continuation of arts-based initiatives could be supported by the school principal, by mobilizing teachers in this direction. The SSW mentioned: “Teachers in our school need more motivation to implement arts-based projects, as they primarily focus on the curriculum. Following the success of the theatrical performance, the principal began encouraging them to undertake a similar initiative in the following school year.”

Developing the Theatrical Play into a Puppet Show to be Performed by a Touring Troupe

During the reflective discussion between the SSW and the researcher about how the project could evolve in the following school year, an idea emerged to transform the play into a puppet show using masks crafted from the students’ faces. The show could be performed by a student touring troupe in each classroom, allowing all students to watch it and reflect on it while maintaining social distancing. Simon and other Roma students could take on leadership roles within the organized and creative framework of the puppet show. Since the SSW was employed at the school on a fixed-term contract for one school year and was unlikely to return the following year, he would leave a detailed description of the proposed project development, providing his colleagues with a clear guide for its continuation. By building on the existing artworks and drawing from prior experience, teachers and students could become further empowered, utilizing the artworks and resources available within the school community.

Arts-Based Strategies for Inclusion Proposed by the SSWs’ Group Inspired by the Intervention

As outlined in the PAR project’ design, the intervention was presented to the SSWs’ group to reflect on how the arts could further be utilized to promote inclusion in the current context and to enrich school social work practice during and beyond the pandemic. Drawing from this reflection, the SSWs’ group proposed several arts-based strategies for inclusion:

- *Collective story-writing:* This inclusive practice can empower and connect students and families, bridge the gap between regular and irregular attendees (due to health issues or unstable attendance), and ease students’ transitions to other school settings.
- *Alternative art forms:* In place of story-writing, students can create, exchange, and communicate through collective collages, poems, lyrics, songs, drawings, crafts, and other artworks. The SSW would act as a facilitator and supporter throughout these processes.

- *Teacher awareness:* Encourage teachers to implement arts-based projects and include each student's unique contributions in both artistic and educational collective works.
- *Inter-arts projects:* Develop projects involving the entire school community that promote interdisciplinary collaboration, enhance student resilience and sense of belonging, foster inter-school partnerships, and strengthen school-community relations. For instance, students from two schools could collaborate to create a joint artwork on a theme of inclusion, which could be presented at a community event. This initiative could be supported by interdisciplinary activities involving teachers and socio-cultural organizations.

Discussion

Responding to the PAR Question

A concise response to the PAR question is that music- and arts-based systemic social work interventions can play a pivotal role in enhancing the educational inclusion of socially isolated and marginalized students during the COVID-19 pandemic, as demonstrated in Simon's case. It emerged these interventions can creatively engage the target student and activate various school sub-systems—classmates, family, teachers, the school principal—thereby fostering participation, self- and collective expression, meaningful relationships, resilience, empowerment, belonging, valuable contribution, and recognition. Additionally, they can promote collaboration across small groups, class groups, interdisciplinary teams, families, and even schools, addressing both school-life challenges and current crises. In doing so, they open pathways for the continuous strengthening of inclusion, both at the individual student level and in terms of the broader school climate and strategy (Ainscow, 1998; Corbett et al., 2001; Messiou, 2012; O'Hanlon, 2003).

In Simon's case, the intervention disrupted the vicious cycle of disengagement and resignation that had been established between the student, his family, and the school, due to unstable attendance, limited opportunities for socialization and learning, exclusion from tele-education and the SSWs' initial story-writing project (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2016). By using collective story-writing as a tool of intervention, Simon was provided with inclusion opportunities he had been deprived of, such as reconnecting with school life, participating equally in a student group, having his family connected to other families in a climate of acceptance, having a specific purpose to return to and remain at school, and experiencing recognition within and beyond the school's boundaries (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Dramatizing the story and applying "theatre from within the school community", including songs, drawings and crafts from students of all

grades, fostered a positive climate of social connection, resilience and inclusion within the school community, benefitting not only Simon but all parties involved (Dreeszen et al., 1999; Yadav, 2016). The artworks created in this context expressed emotions and conveyed messages regarding the COVID-19 crisis, resonating with the students' experiences and having a collective, therapeutic impact as sources of strength in their lives (Barel et al., 2022; Bull, 2005; Kelly, 2015).

Simon became empowered and changed his status at school, positively affecting his attendance, peer relationships and learning motivation, and altering his teachers' views on his potential (Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2016; Yadav, 2016). Teachers can draw insights from the intervention and incorporate them into their educational practice, or even arts-based (PAR) projects to sustain change in the future. The SSWs' group further suggests utilizing collective story-writing to connect students and facilitate transitions, exploring alternative art forms, and promoting inter-arts initiatives to strengthen resilience and school-family-community relations.

Reflecting on the Connection Between Arts-based Systemic Interventions, School Social Work for Inclusion and PAR

The case illustrated how the integration of the arts within systemic school social work practice can effectively promote educational inclusion (Huss, 2018). Rather than stand-alone activities (Sinding et al., 2014) the arts were embedded into systemic strategies to address context-specific goals (Constable, 2016), driving systemic change at multiple levels (Whipple, 2015). This holistic approach tackled multiple layers of exclusion, shifting the focus from individual deficits to Simon's broader context. It also strengthened the connections between all the systems surrounding the student, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that nurtured resilience, emotional well-being, and social cohesion.

The arts brought their own unique dynamic to the intervention: story-writing and poetry connected individual and collective experiences while amplifying marginalized voices. Drama evoked emotions and reflection, fostering social transformation, while drawings and crafts facilitated the expression of feelings and messages (Heinonen et al., 2019). Singing and songwriting built meaning, fostered connections, and empowered groups, while creating lasting memories (Baker, 2015; Lefevre, 2004; McFerran-Skewes, 2004; Pearce et al., 2015). The creative process was dynamic and constructive, with the SSWs' song evolving into a story, which inspired a play and additional artworks, all culminating in a school-wide performance.

However, it was clear that art alone was not sufficient to ensure Simon's inclusion. Had this been the case, he would have been involved in the SSW's story-writing project from the beginning. His inclusion required careful handling, creative

solutions to overcome obstacles, and a focused commitment to inclusion—all of which were achieved within the PAR project. The PAR project empowered the SSW to take action and prevent Simon from remaining excluded by offering several key advantages that strengthened his professional role: active participation in the SSW's video-song, which deepened his engagement with the arts; exposure to both remote and in-person alternative communication methods required by the pandemic; collaboration with the researcher, characterized by ongoing mutual feedback, reflection, and the integration of her musical skills; gradual development of autonomy from the researcher and an initiative for independent fieldwork; and the opportunity to be part of a professional SSWs' group with a shared vision, navigating common challenges while providing recommendations for advancing educational inclusion and enriching school social work practice (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2020).

Future Directions and Implications for Research and Practice

In the PAR project, knowledge was co-produced by the SSW, the researcher, the SSWs' group, the target student, and other participants, offering valuable insights into how art in school social work can foster educational inclusion (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). SSWs, teachers and other educational professionals can draw on these insights and adapt them to their specific contexts, addressing unique needs and conditions (Smeijsters et al., 2011). Acting as facilitators in PAR initiatives, SSWs can engage students, teachers, parents and community members as co-researchers to develop tailored, arts-based practices for inclusion. Such bottom-up initiatives, whether supported by academic partners or independently led by educational communities, can generate innovative and practical knowledge for promoting inclusion (Greenwood & Levin, 2000).

Although this project was conducted under the unique challenges of the pandemic, future research could explore how its insights might be adapted to non-pandemic conditions to maximize their potential for fostering sustainable inclusive school environments. Additionally, future studies could investigate the application of the arts-based strategies proposed by the SSWs' group across diverse contexts and student populations, examine the rationale behind choosing specific art forms, and explore their long-term impact on students' inclusion, academic performance, and social outcomes.

Integrating arts-based interventions into school social work highlights the need for SSWs' targeted training and professional development. Building SSWs' skills in facilitating creative projects, engaging in reflective practice, and collaborating effectively with multiple stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of these approaches, further advancing educational inclusion. Future research could also examine how arts-based and participatory

methodologies might influence educational policy and practice, supporting their institutionalization to foster inclusive learning environments.

Conclusion

This article, based on Simon's case, underlines the contribution of music- and arts-based systemic school social work interventions in enhancing the educational inclusion of students facing social isolation and marginalization during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the use of various art forms such as the SSWs' collective video-song, the students' collective story, theatre from within the school community, singing, songwriting, drawing, and craft-making, multiple school subsystems were creatively activated, fostering resilience, empowerment, belonging, and group co-operation, as well as interdisciplinary, inter-family, school-family, inter-class, and inter-school levels collaboration (Whipple, 2015).

The art-based systemic intervention not only helped Simon reconnect with school life, but also transformed his social status, his sense of self, and relationships within the school. It positively influenced both his family's view of education and his teachers' belief in his potential. Furthermore, it laid the foundation for more stable school attendance, as well as improved learning and socialization skills (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The PAR project not only mapped Simon's reality but also contributed to the co-creation of a more inclusive reality for both him and his school community (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). By integrating arts-based strategies, school social work interventions were enriched, and more holistic and sustainable approaches to educational inclusion evolved (Bos & Huss, 2022).

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Appendix



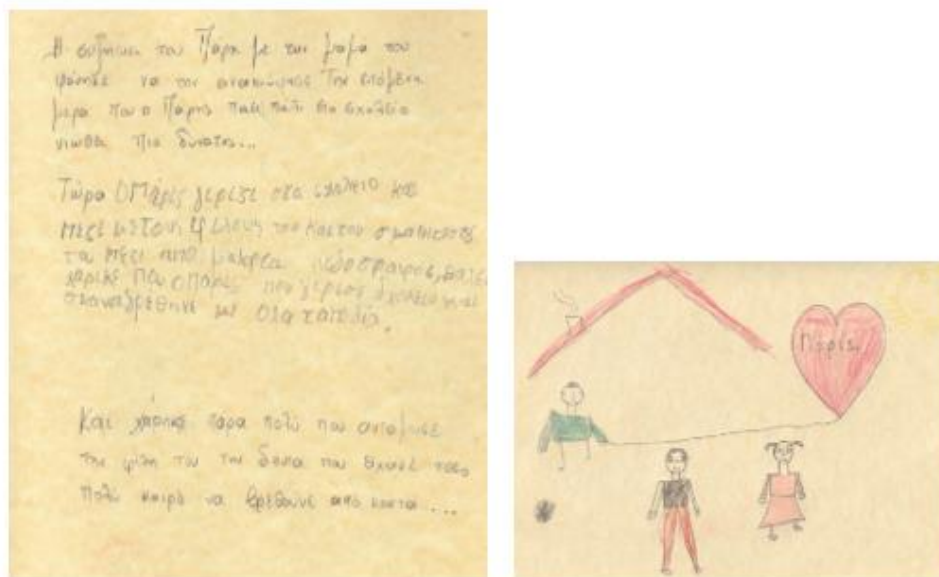
Student 1, 2nd grade (male)

Story text: *It's time for Zach to return to school after spending two months at home. He will finally get to see his friends again, whom he had only been seeing through the computer screen. Like all children, Zach needs to follow the new rules as he goes back to school. Hugging friends or teachers is not allowed because it could be unsafe. Zach feels both happy and a little nervous. He has heard on TV so many times about the importance of keeping a safe distance. Perhaps this will be a bit easier now, given the hot weather.*

Bridge: *With all these thoughts swirling in his mind, Zach pushed open the school door...*

Figure 1

The initial sub-story of the collective story as written and illustrated within the storybook, with an English translation



Student 3- Simon, 2nd grade (male)

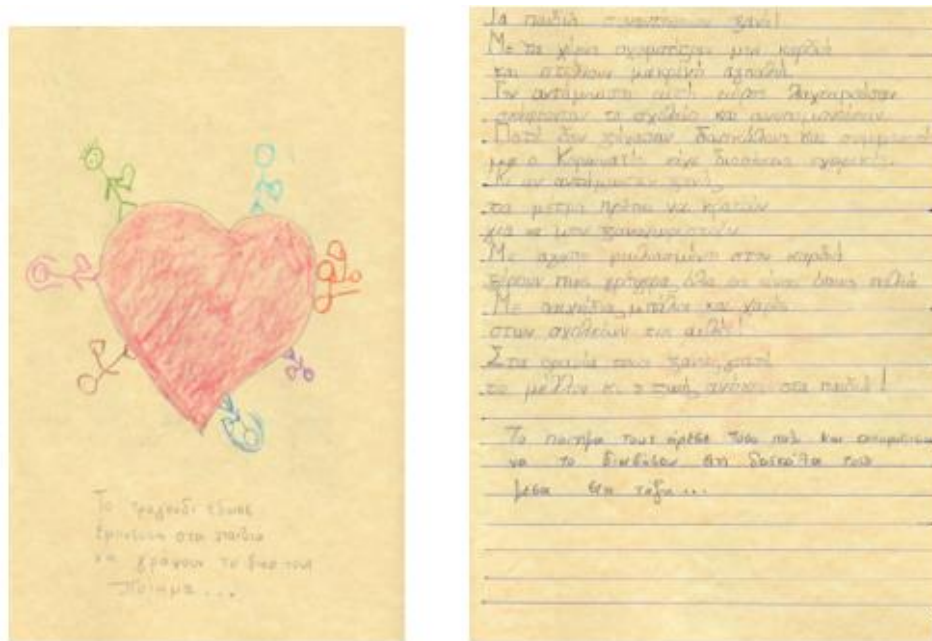
Bridge: Talking to his mom seemed to comfort Zach. The next day, as he went back to school, he felt much stronger.

Story text: Now Zach is back at school, playing with his friends and classmates. He plays soccer and volleyball from a distance, following the rules. Zach felt truly happy to be back at school, reunited with all the kids.

Bridge: He was especially excited to catch up with his friend Sonya, whom he hadn't seen in person for such a long time.

Figure 2

Simon's sub-story as written and illustrated within the storybook, with an English translation



Student 5, 2nd grade (male)

Text on the drawing: *The song inspired the children to write their own poem.*

The poem

*The children reunited,
forming hearts with their hands, sending hugs from afar.
They had longed for this moment, thinking of school and eagerly awaiting their return.
They never forgot their teachers or classmates,
though the coronavirus had kept them apart.
Now that they're back at school, the rules must still be followed,
to prevent them from being separated again.
With love in their hearts, they know that soon everything will return to how it once was.
They'll enjoy games, sports, and laughter,
in the schoolyard, back at their desks,
for the future and life are theirs to embrace.*

Bridge: *They liked the poem so much that they decided to share it with their teacher in the classroom.*

Figure 3

The poem as written and illustrated within the storybook, with an English translation

Theatrical script
“Zach goes back to school after the lockdown”

Casting: All characters are portrayed by the class students, except for the teacher, who is portrayed by the class teacher.

Settings: The settings in the script are real school environments: the school’s front door, the schoolyard, and the classroom. Zach’s house is represented in a corner of the schoolyard.

Scene 1

(Zach stands at the school’s front door and delivers a monologue.)

Zach: *Ah! First day back at school. I’m a little scared, but I’m glad I’m here!*

- **Note:** This moment reflects the hero’s ambivalence.

(Zach enters the schoolyard, notices that no one is there, and walks away.)

- **Note:** This scene conveys the hero’s feelings of loneliness upon returning to school after the quarantine.

Scene 2

(A few minutes later, Zach is at home with his mother. They engage in the following dialogue.)

Zach: *Mom... I don’t want to go to school! I feel scared!*

Mother: *Why do you feel scared?*

Zach: *I’m afraid of catching the coronavirus. What should I do?*

Mother: *You should wash your hands often and avoid hugging your friends and teachers!*

Zach: *Thanks, Mom, for your advice!*

Mother: *You’re welcome, sweetie!*

- **Note:** This scene highlights the mother’s support in helping her son manage his fear of the coronavirus.

Scene 3

(Zach reappears at the school’s front door, but this time the schoolyard is full of students. He looks at them and exclaims with joy.)

Zach: *How wonderful! I’m going to play soccer with my friends!*

- **Note:** This moment reveals the hero’s feelings of hope and optimism now that he is reunited with his classmates.

Figure 4

An excerpt from the theatrical script, translated into English



A crafted envelope featuring a rainbow, with the lyrics of the song written on it. According to the student-creator: *"Just as the rainbow appears after the rain, we return to school stronger after the lockdown."*



A crafted box with the lyrics of the song written on it. According to the student-creator: *"When you open the box, it's like opening a spring from which the lyrics of the song flow out, filling the soul with joy, optimism, strength, and love."*

Figure 5

Crafted envelope and box, accompanied by brief reflections on their symbolism by their students-creators, translated into English



Crafted boats with the lyrics of the song written on them. According to the student-creators: *"The boats symbolize the journey of patience we endured during the quarantine until the school re-opened, and now we've returned to our port."*



A crafted hot-air balloon with the lyrics of the song written on it. According to the student-creator: *"The song travels in the hot-air balloon from school to school and from home to home, empowering all the children of the world during the pandemic."*

Figure 6

Crafted boats and hot-air balloon, accompanied by brief reflections on their symbolism by their students-creators, translated into English