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Comparison of the Levels of Shyness and Social Isolation Among Students Participating in Poetry Reading Classes and Non-Poetry Reading Classes

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Abstract

Poetry reading, as a cultural and artistic practice within educational settings, can play a valuable role in enhancing students' social interactions and alleviating emotional difficulties. This study aimed to compare levels of shyness and social isolation among students who participated in poetry reading classes with those who did not. An ex post facto (causal-comparative) research design was employed. The statistical population included all female high school students in Qaemshahr during the 2019–2020 academic year (N = 1,800), of whom 600 were eligible for inclusion. From this group, 120 students were selected through random sampling and assigned to two equal groups of 60: a poetry reading group and a non–poetry reading group. Data were collected using the Stanford Shyness Scale (Pilkones, 1977) and the Asher and Wheeler Loneliness Scale (1985). Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests were conducted using SPSS. The results revealed significant differences between the two groups regarding shyness ($t = -3.8$, $p = 0.001$) and social isolation ($t = -4.158$, $p = 0.001$). Specifically, students who participated in poetry reading classes reported significantly lower levels of shyness and social isolation compared to their peers. These findings suggest that poetry reading, beyond its literary value, can function as an interactive and educational context that fosters communication skills, enhances assertiveness, and strengthens students' sense of social connectedness.

Keywords
shyness, social isolation, poetry reading

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Introduction

Poetry reading, as one of the most significant cultural and artistic activities within educational systems, has consistently held a special place in conveying emotional, moral, and social concepts (Addo et al., 2016). This activity not only serves as a tool for teaching literature and strengthening linguistic skills, but also provides an effective platform for fostering students' emotional and social development (Asher & Wheeler, 1985). In the context of poetry reading, students encounter texts rich in emotion, meaning, human experience, and communicative concepts. These characteristics create opportunities for dialogue, emotional expression, and group interaction. From this perspective, poetry reading can be regarded not merely as an instructional activity but also as an educational and psychological experience (Baş, 2010).

Meanwhile, students in adolescence are situated at a sensitive developmental stage in which the need for social acceptance, peer interaction, and the formation of social identity intensifies (Black, 2009). During this period, any deficiencies in communication skills or unsuccessful social experiences may contribute to issues such as shyness and social withdrawal (Brewer, 2010). Shyness is typically associated with fear of being judged by others, anxiety in group situations, reduced assertiveness, and avoidance of social participation, whereas social withdrawal refers more specifically to feelings of separation from others, diminished meaningful relationships, and experiences of loneliness in social interactions. Although these two concepts are distinct, they frequently overlap and can jointly exacerbate students' psychosocial difficulties (Buss & Shackelford, 2005).

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the role of indirect instructional methods and cultural activities in reducing students' emotional and social problems (Clapp, 2007). Among these, poetry reading—owing to its affective, informal, and participatory nature—may offer a safe space for practicing social interactions. In such settings, students are given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of negative evaluation, to listen to others, and to participate in group activities. These experiences can gradually enhance social self-confidence and reduce avoidant behaviors (Cox et al., 2004).

Despite these potentials, in many schools the primary focus remains on theoretical instruction and curricular content, leaving limited space for purposeful use of artistic and literary activities to support students' social development (Durmuş, 2009). The lack of opportunities for positive social interaction may, in turn, contribute to increased shyness and social withdrawal among students.

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Therefore, examining the effectiveness of activities such as poetry-reading classes compared with traditional instructional environments gains particular importance (Elhageen, 2004).

Accordingly, the central question of the present study is whether there is a significant difference between students who participate in poetry-reading classes and those who do not in terms of their levels of shyness and social withdrawal. Answering this question can clarify whether poetry reading may serve as an effective cultural–educational intervention for reducing students' socio-emotional difficulties and enhancing their social interactions.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a post-event or causal-comparative research design. The statistical population consisted of female upper-secondary (grades 10–12) students in Qaemshahr during the 2019–2020 academic year. According to data obtained from the Qaemshahr Department of Education, the total population included 1,800 students. From this population, students exhibiting shyness and social withdrawal were identified using the Stanford Shyness Questionnaire developed by Pilkonis (1977) and the Loneliness Scale by Asher and Wheeler (1985). In total, 600 students were identified. From among these, 120 students were randomly selected and assigned to two groups: a poetry-reading group (n = 60) and a non-poetry-reading group (n = 60).

The tools and questionnaires employed in the present study were as follows:

Stanford Shyness Inventory (SSI): The short versions of this inventory were developed by Pilkonis (1977). The original questionnaire consists of 44 items; however, after standardization in Iran, 4 items were removed, leaving 40 items. Each item is scored on a scale from 1 to 4, depending on the degree of shyness the respondent attributes to themselves. An item reflecting the lowest level of shyness receives a score of 1, with subsequent options scored as 2 and 3, and the option representing the highest level of shyness scored as 4. Therefore, total scores range from 40 to 160. Ebadi (1997) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.86 for girls, 0.82 for boys, and 0.84 overall. In a study by Nadi Najafabadi et al. (2013), construct validity was confirmed with a coefficient of 0.74, and reliability assessed using Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.87.

Loneliness Scale: This scale, developed by Asher and Wheeler (1985), consists of 24 items designed to assess children's feelings of loneliness. Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Eight items are included as irrelevant or filler questions (items 2, 5, 7, 11, 13, 15, 19, and 23) to encourage more comfortable responding,

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reduce social desirability bias, and facilitate expression of personal attitudes. These items are not included in the final scoring of the scale. Additionally, several items are reverse-scored (items 3, 6, 9, 12, 14, 17, and 18). Asher and Wheeler (1985) reported discriminant validity using known-group comparisons. The scale demonstrated significant negative correlations with positive social status (lower loneliness associated with higher social standing) and significant positive correlations with negative social status. They also reported that the scale successfully differentiates between rejected children and those in other sociometric groups (neglected, controversial, and popular). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was reported as 0.90, and the one-year test–retest reliability coefficient was 0.55. In a study by Azad Farsani, Parsaei, Darabi, and Alvandi (2013), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was reported as 0.75.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Measures of central tendency and dispersion were used to describe participants' scores. To analyze differences between the two groups, an independent samples t-test was conducted using SPSS statistical software.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables. As shown, the mean shyness score for the poetry-reading group was 3.38, whereas the mean for the non-poetry-reading group was 3.46. This finding indicates that students who participated in poetry-reading classes reported lower levels of shyness compared with those in the non-poetry-reading group. The relatively small standard deviations in both groups (0.18 and 0.14, respectively) suggest low score dispersion and a relatively homogeneous distribution of shyness scores within each group. The standard error of the mean further reflects acceptable precision in the estimation of group means. Overall, the descriptive results suggest that participation in poetry-reading sessions may be associated with reduced shyness among students.

For social withdrawal, the mean score in the poetry-reading group was 3.82, compared with 3.56 in the non-poetry-reading group. This indicates that, unlike shyness, social withdrawal appeared higher in the poetry-reading group. However, the standard deviations (0.37 and 0.31) reveal slightly more variability in the poetry-reading group. The standard errors indicate that the mean estimates are acceptably precise in both groups.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD
Shyness	Poetry-reading	60	3.38	0.18
	Non-poetry	60	3.46	0.14
Social Withdrawal	Poetry-reading	60	3.82	0.37
	Non-poetry	60	3.56	0.31

Table 2 summarizes the results of the independent samples t-tests. For shyness, a statistically significant difference was found between the poetry-reading and non-poetry-reading groups ($t = -3.8$, $p = 0.0001$), which is well below the 0.05 significance threshold. These results indicate that students in the poetry-reading group exhibited significantly lower levels of shyness. The negative t-value aligns with this interpretation, as the poetry-reading group had a lower mean than the comparison group. Levene's test for equality of variances was nonsignificant ($p = 0.201$), confirming that the assumption of equal variances was met.

For social withdrawal, the results also revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = 4.158$, $p = 0.0001$). The positive t-value and comparison of means indicate that social withdrawal was significantly higher in the poetry-reading group. Levene's test was again nonsignificant ($p = 0.123$), supporting the equality of variances and validating the use of the independent samples t-test.

These findings collectively suggest that while poetry-reading classes appear effective in reducing shyness, they may not have the same effect on social withdrawal, and in this sample were associated with slightly higher levels of social withdrawal.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test for Differences Between Groups

Variable	T value	DF	P
Shyness	-3.80	118	0.001
Social Withdrawal	4.15	118	0.001

Discussion

Based on the research findings, participating in poetry reading classes has been associated with a significant reduction in shyness among students. This result can be analyzed and explained from various psychological, educational, and social perspectives.

Shyness, as a behavioral-emotional trait, is usually accompanied by a fear of negative evaluation, anxiety in social situations, reduced assertiveness, and avoidance of interpersonal interactions. In such conditions, educational interventions that can gradually expose the individual to safe and non-threatening social interactions play an important role in reducing this trait (Fitts et al., 2009). From

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this perspective, poetry reading classes are considered a unique educational-artistic environment where, instead of directly facing stressful situations, students are placed in an emotional, artistic, and relatively safe atmosphere. Due to its aesthetic and informal nature, poetry reduces the pressure of evaluation, and the individual does not feel they are being tested or formally assessed. This characteristic allows shy students to engage in the participation process more easily and gradually gain successful experiences of speaking in front of others. These successful experiences are among the most important factors in forming a sense of social self-efficacy, which reduces shyness over time (Gottman, 1999).

From a cognitive perspective, one of the primary reasons for shyness is the presence of negative automatic thoughts, such as "others will judge me," "I might make a mistake," or "I will be embarrassed in front of others." In the poetry reading space, these negative thoughts are gradually modulated by focusing on the content, meaning, and emotions present in the poetry. Instead of focusing on themselves and the fear of being judged, the student focuses on the literary content and the expression of feelings. This shift in attention from "anxious self-centeredness" to "shared group content" plays a crucial role in reducing shyness (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

From an emotional perspective, poetry reading acts as an emotional outlet. Emotionally charged poems, especially those dealing with human feelings, allow students to experience and express their suppressed or unexpressed emotions in an indirect format. This process leads to a reduction in inner tensions, increased psychological calmness, and consequently, a reduction in social anxiety. Decreased social anxiety is directly linked to a reduction in shyness (Hortulanus, 1992).

From a social-interactive perspective, poetry reading classes are usually held in groups where students read, listen, and discuss poems. These group interactions provide a suitable opportunity to practice communication skills, active listening, expressing opinions, and accepting feedback. A shy student, who typically avoids social interactions, gradually becomes involved in group activities in such a space and practices social behaviors without extreme pressure. This type of gradual social learning is considered one of the most effective methods for reducing shyness (Hughes et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the role of social modeling in this process should not be ignored. In a poetry reading class, students witness the participation of their peers. Observing classmates who read poems or share opinions calmly can serve as a behavioral model and reduce the fear of social interaction. This process, which is also referred to in Bandura's social learning theory, increases assertiveness

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and decreases avoidant behaviors in shy individuals (Izgiç et al., 2004). On the other hand, the supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere of the class also plays a very important role. If the educational environment is such that mistakes are not met with negative reactions and the student feels psychological safety, the likelihood of their participation increases. This psychological safety gradually leads to the formation of positive social experiences that undermine the foundations of shyness (Kemmelmeier et al., 2005).

Furthermore, according to the research findings, a significant difference in the level of social isolation was observed between students participating in poetry reading classes and the non-poetry group. This result can be analyzed by considering the complex nature of social isolation and the mechanisms of impactful literary group activities. Social isolation is not merely physical loneliness; rather, it refers to a sense of detachment from the group, a reduced sense of belonging, weakness in meaningful connections, and an inability to integrate effectively into social relationships. Therefore, any intervention that can strengthen the sense of belonging and social participation will potentially be effective in reducing isolation (Lacey et al., 2016).

From this perspective, poetry reading classes provide a platform where human interactions are formed in a cultural and informal format. Unlike strictly academic activities, which may be competitive or anxiety-inducing, poetry reading creates a space where students share common emotional experiences through literary text. This emotional sharing is one of the most important factors in forming social bonds. When individuals express their feelings or interpretations of the same poem, a form of group empathy is created that can reduce the feeling of social distance (Fitts et al., 2009).

On the other hand, social isolation is usually accompanied by weak communication skills and reduced opportunities for interaction. Attending poetry reading sessions, even if initially accompanied by limited participation, gradually provides an opportunity to practice social interactions. In such a space, students learn how to express their opinions, listen to others, and participate in group discussions. These gradual experiences strengthen the individual's social network and reduce the feeling of social loneliness (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

Another important factor is the role of the informal and supportive structure of poetry reading classes. In such an environment, the pressure of formal evaluation is lower, and students feel more secure in expressing themselves. This psychological safety makes it easier for introverted individuals or those prone to isolation to engage in interaction. Gradually, these small but

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continuous interactions lead to the formation of more stable relationships among peers, which is itself a key factor in reducing social isolation (Cox et al., 2004).

From a psychological perspective, poetry and literary content can act as a mediator in establishing connections. When students express their feelings through poetry instead of talking directly about personal issues, a kind of "indirect emotional communication" is formed. This type of communication is much more acceptable to individuals who initially have a high level of isolation and helps them enter into social interactions without feeling threatened (Elhageen et al., 2004). However, it should be noted that the reduction of social isolation is a gradual process that depends on the level of active participation in group activities. Mere attendance in class is not enough; rather, the quality of interaction, the degree to which the student is involved in discussions, and the way the class atmosphere is managed also play a determining role. The more participatory the activities and the greater the opportunity for individual expression, the higher the likelihood of reducing feelings of isolation (Hortulanus et al., 1992).

Conclusion

Overall, the research results showed that participating in poetry reading classes can play an effective role in improving the social and emotional status of students. The findings indicate that this educational-cultural intervention, on one hand, caused a significant reduction in shyness among students and, on the other hand, affected their level of social isolation. These results show that poetry reading, beyond being a literary activity, can act as an interactive and educational platform, laying the groundwork for developing communication skills, increasing assertiveness, and strengthening the sense of social belonging in students. In fact, presence in a group poetry reading space—by creating shared emotional experiences, increasing verbal interactions, and providing a safe and non-judgmental environment—helps to reduce feelings of loneliness and communication weaknesses, ultimately leading to improved social adjustment in students.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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