Measuring students' attitude towards Poetry

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Abstract

This paper develops a valid and reliable Likert scale for measuring students' attitude towards poetry which is constructed and implemented through an empirical study that captures the attitude of 225 high school students towards poetry and their knowledge concerning poetry-related issues. The research thus proposes a scale to measure students' attitude using Likert scaling theory, which can be used in other empirical surveys that aim at measuring attitudes towards poetry. The psychometric properties of the proposed rating scale are examined, and the findings show that the measurement of the attitude towards poetry produced is both valid and reliable, while statistical analysis reveals that the final scores are highly associated with a number of socio-demographic indicators. More specifically, the results reveal that a more positive attitude towards poetry would appear among students with highly educated parents, where poetry books are present in the house, when students read poetry in their free time and when parents have read literature books to the students when they were growing up.

Keywords: Attitude scales, Likert scales, Poetry writing, Creative poetry writing, High school students

Introduction

Discussion as to the function and utility of poetry has been going on for centuries. Aristotle declared that poetry has its roots in the instinctive tendencies of the human soul, while more recently Strachan and Terry state (2011, 174-175) that writing a poem is for most people the ultimate reward in the general field of art. Housman believes that poetry's presence is to be recognised from the symptoms, "poetry reveals itself only when it comes to your senses" (Housman, 1933, 15). Housman (1933) talks about symptoms, so in a way about poetic effect, and that effect always has a subjective filter. This subjective filter turns out to be very powerful if we think that any thought or impression, anything that comes through fantasy, experience or information, can be turned to poetry *when invested with the colouring of joy, or grief, or pity, or affection, or admiration, or reverence, or awe, or even hatred or terror* (Mill, 1837).

Poetry is personal expression, a verbal externalizing of the deeper world. It can untwist a vague idea, can capture a moment, it can express all ranges of human feelings and emotions. But it can also amuse, mock, satirise, annoy, reveal, rebel, protest, philosophize, dream and swim into the deep waters of subconscious (Symeonaki, 2013, 60).

This is why turning youngsters to (creative) poetry writing and appreciation is not only an essentially natural process, but it is a most valuable educational asset. At a juvenile age, feelings are clear, and language is perspicuous. Children have a natural tendency to verse, singing or word playing. Playing with words, inventing rules, shapes, constructing, creating are things that bridge young people and poetry. T.S. Eliot (1933, 32-34) notes that the children show special interest for poetry from a very early age. The older ones can be fascinated by the pleasure of poetry with more maturity. During this youthful stage of life one can be thoroughly fascinated by a particular poet or poem. In such cases there is often an urge to write and imitate. If taken one step further independent reading and writing becomes the norm.

In order to shape an environment sufficient for poetic expression rich feelings and authenticity are needed. Lyric or dramatic expression accompanied by constructive energy and humour belong to the domain of the adolescent. As Aristotle puts it in his *Rhetorica,* everything in this age is hyperbolic. Everyday life has much to do with poetic text. There is passion in play, in conversation, in music, in dramatic situations, and in the necessity of being free. Poems condense thoughts and attitudes in the same way children condense the substance of their existence in a party, a telephone call, a football match. Life is in a way a series of poems (Myers,1998, 262). Clark (1978) has a syllogism to offer in our effort to underline the necessity of turning students to poetry: if it is an obligation for education to care for children so that they can use and expand their abilities and potentialities in

language and literature, then it is a duty and also a privilege for education to turn them to poetry, because poetry is where language manifests itself in its ultimate form (Clark, 1978, 90). As for creative poetry writing Clark (1978) claims that the children naturally possess the equipment of an authentic poet; a special way of looking at the world, feeling, sensing relativities where they are not easily seen, saying things in an unusual manner. The major characteristic of children's language is that it is natural, simple and coloured with feeling, spontaneous as if within the moment. The process is natural concerning natural talent. If you start, the poem invents itself (Hughes, 1967, 90).

But all this requires language. Mill (1833) foresees that poetry will be written by those who have authentic feelings, with the culture of their time catering for the necessary language tools. The responsibility of those involved in education stems from the previous statement. Children do have one necessary element in writing poetry, and that is authentic feelings. But it is a great responsibility preserving those feelings and providing the environment that nurtures the further cultivation of them through language skills support and a variety of technical tools. Codification always happens through language, a language that you share with others (Eagleton, 2007, 33).

The benefits are multiple. By expanding the limits of expression poetry expands the limits of thought. Poets utter ideas and feelings in a way that they are both clearer (Parini, 2008, 8). Philosophers and linguists have written extensively about the role language plays in forming thought, and poetry has a very stable educational result. Without poetry one doesn't realise the emotional and mental possibilities offered by life. Poetry is an experience that pleases and rewards, that corresponds with the natural poetic tendencies of youngsters. The child develops acute senses for the sound and the power of language and sees things differently as result of an elevated comprehension of self and others, thus enabling better understanding and evaluation of the human experience. As Perfect (1999) puts it: in situations in which the complexities of the world provoke confusion and fear, poetry doesn't simply offer a shelter, but provides the ability to understand this world. To give it a name.

Summing up, the young person ponders along the paths of life and poetry by inclination and talent deriving from innocence of their feeling and language. From whatever point of view -expressing emotions, ideas, experiences or playing with words - the idiosyncratic inclination to poetic verse should be encouraged and developed. With this in mind, teaching poetry should be focused on providing language, techniques, stimulation and all that gives to the spontaneous nature of swollen and often flooded adolescent rivers and shores, and their ultimate destination. Feeling without technique is just diary (Sedgwick, 1987, 118).

There have been several attempts in the past concerning research carried out trying to determine children's attitude towards poetry and creative poetry writing. It is important to mention Benton's double research in 1984 and 1999 (Benton, 1984, 1999), which sought answers to two different matters: how teachers see the teaching of poetry and how do they regard creative poetry writing in their classrooms. The two studies show differences of attitude, but in both cases, poetry is highly regarded. Close to Benton's (1984, 1999) research, Wade and Sidaway (1990) gathered opinions from teachers and students towards creative poetry writing. Teachers appear not to have confidence in their own personal writing whereas students seem far more confident. Lipstein & Renninger (2007, 79-85) examined 178 students (age 11-13) and through both questionnaire and interview reached the conclusion that most teachers think that writing poetry is a talent with which some lucky ones were blessed. While children on the other hand seem to believe that their interest in writing poetry depended upon the teacher and the atmosphere within the classroom. One shouldn't omit a reference to Giese (1922) who managed to obtain access to 3000 texts, mostly seeking evidence on thematic differences deriving by sex. Moreover, Tarleton (1983) carried out research seeking for understanding of students' attitude towards poetry. Apart from the question "What is a poem?" the basic target was to reveal knowledge of elements of poetic technique, forms, rhythm, and rhyme. It was proven that these matters were clear in the mind of more than 100 children that had participated. For example, the questions were as follows: How could you explain what a poem is to a Martian? What should we put in a poem? What shouldn't we include at all?

In that direction, it is therefore a significant issue to develop instruments that measure and capture students' beliefs and position on poetry as a whole and not as stand-alone questions. The present study presents findings from an empirical study that was conducted in order to measure the attitude of 225 high school students towards poetry and their knowledge concerning poetry-related issues. The contribution of this work is that an overall Likert scale to measure the students' attitude is developed and tested for the first time to our knowledge using Likert scaling theory. The produced rating scale and the findings show that the measurement of the attitude towards poetry produced is both valid and reliable, while statistical analysis shows that the final scores are highly linked with a number of socio-demographic indicators, i.e., parental education, the existence of poetry books in the house, poetry reading in free time and whether parents have read literature books to the students when they were growing up. Thus, the paper provides new knowledge on factors concerning students' and family background that might explain students' attitude towards poetry.
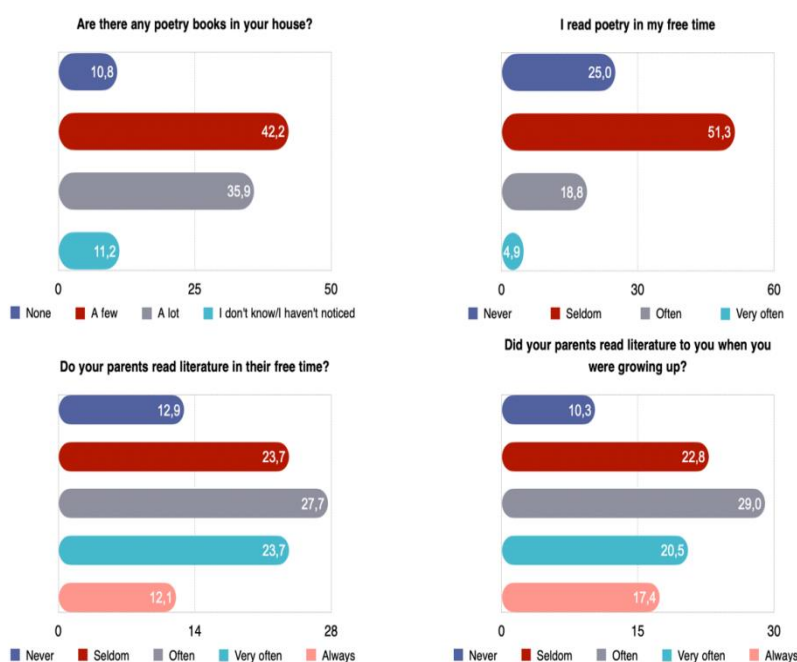
The paper is outlined in the following way. In Section 2, the empirical research is presented together with the descriptives of the items used in the questionnaire. Section 3 delivers the statistical analysis and results for the development of the Likert scale, along with the descriptive and statistical inference results. Section 4 delivers the conclusions of the study and thoughts for future work.
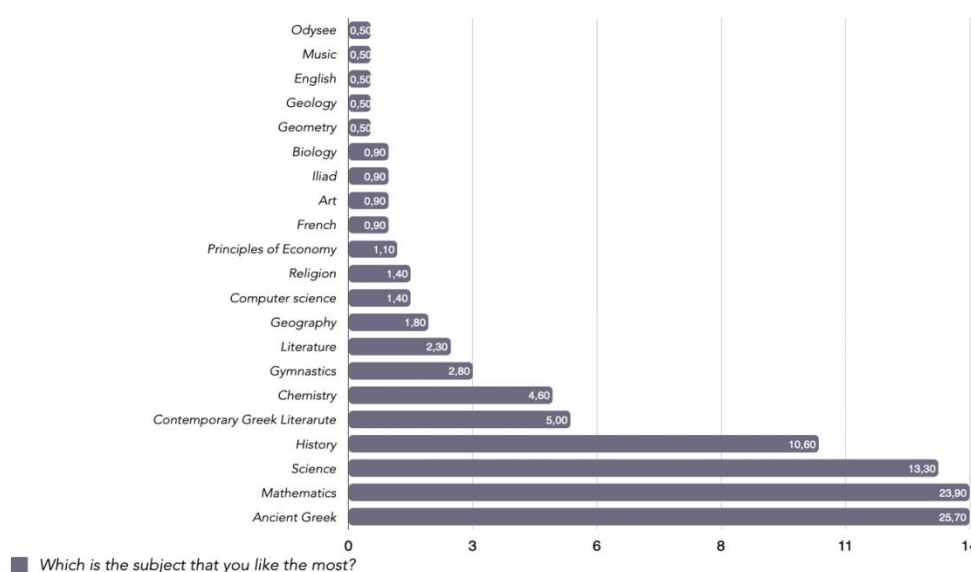
Method

The sample used in the survey comprised of students attending four different types of high schools that bear diverse philosophies, in Thessaloniki, Greece equally divided to students attending an Experimental school, an Art school, an Intercultural school and a typical state (public) school. The sample consisted of 225 students in total. All participants were aged between 12 and 16 at the beginning of the study.

The survey used 49 questions in a self-completion questionnaire for data collection covering the students' socio-demographic characteristics, their knowledge on poetry-related issues and their attitude towards poetry. A pilot survey was conducted, prior to commencing this study by a trained interviewer. Statistical data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20. Well over half of the sample (63.7%) were female and 36.3% were male. Concerning the educational attainment of their parents, approximately 31% of the mother's and 34% of the father's educational level was lower than upper secondary. Preliminary item analysis was performed for all 49 questions used in the questionnaire.

The analysis of the respondents' answers, exhibited in Figure 1, reveals that more than 40% reply that they have a few poetry books in the house and almost 36% that they have a lot. On the other hand, almost 11% say that they don't have any poetry books in their house. Moreover, 25% of the students say that they never read poetry in their free time and almost 5% that they are engaged in poetry reading very often. Most students (51%) though say that they seldom read poetry in their free time. Examining the parents practise it is clear that only 13% of the respondents state that their parents never read literature in their free time. An equal percentage state that they always read literature in their free time, while most students say that they often do. On the other hand, 17.4% remember that their parents always read literature books to them when they were growing up, while 10% say that they have never done that and almost 30% that they have done that often.

Figure 1 Existence of poetry books in the house, Students' reading poetry in their free time, Parents reading literature in their free time, Parents reading literature to students when they were growing up

It is also rather interesting to examine which are the students' favourite subjects (Figure 2) and which are the ones that they dislike the most (Figure 3). Ancient Greek and Mathematics are the subjects that students prefer the most, followed by Science and History. On the other hand, Mathematics and Ancient Greek are in the first places of students' dislike, followed by Science and surprisingly enough Gymnastics.
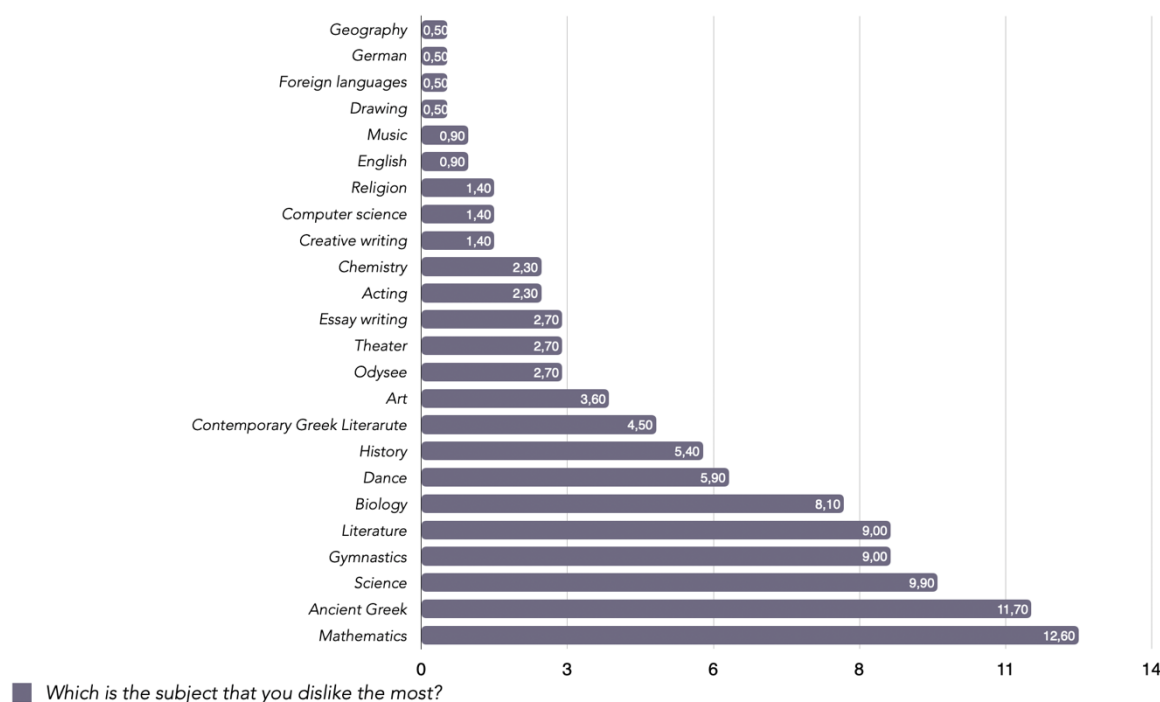
Figure 2 Students' favourite subject

Figure 3 Students' most disliked subject

Coming now to assessing the students' knowledge concerning poetry itself (Figure 4) we see that more that 97% of the students don't believe that all poems rhyme, 64% that it is not organised in strophes and nearly 68% that all poems have a strict structure. Approximately 80% believe that they can distinguish prose from poetry, almost 60% that prose was written first, while 55% think that a poem is a construction of words.
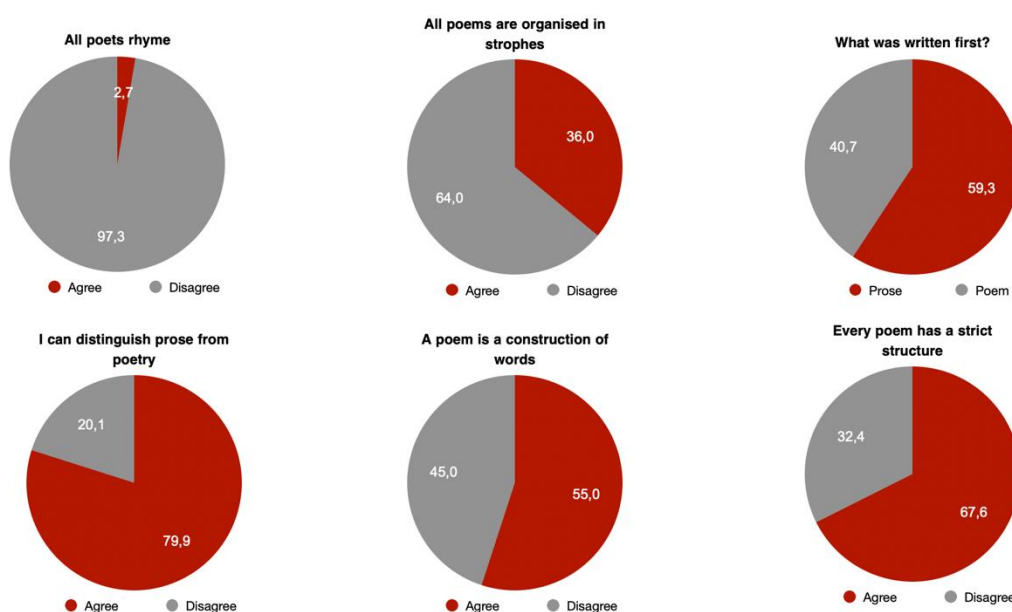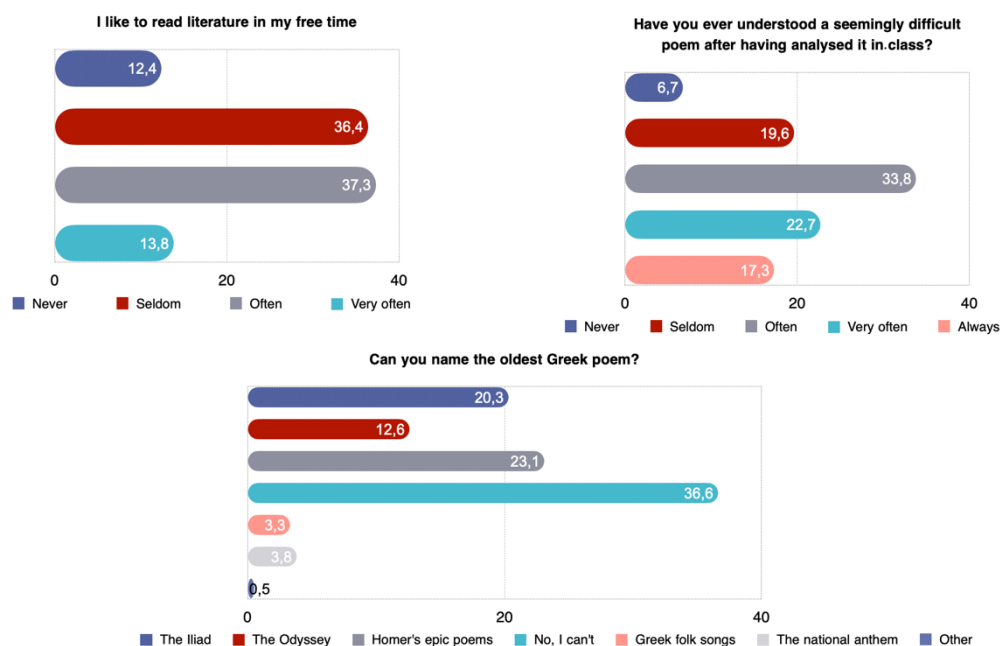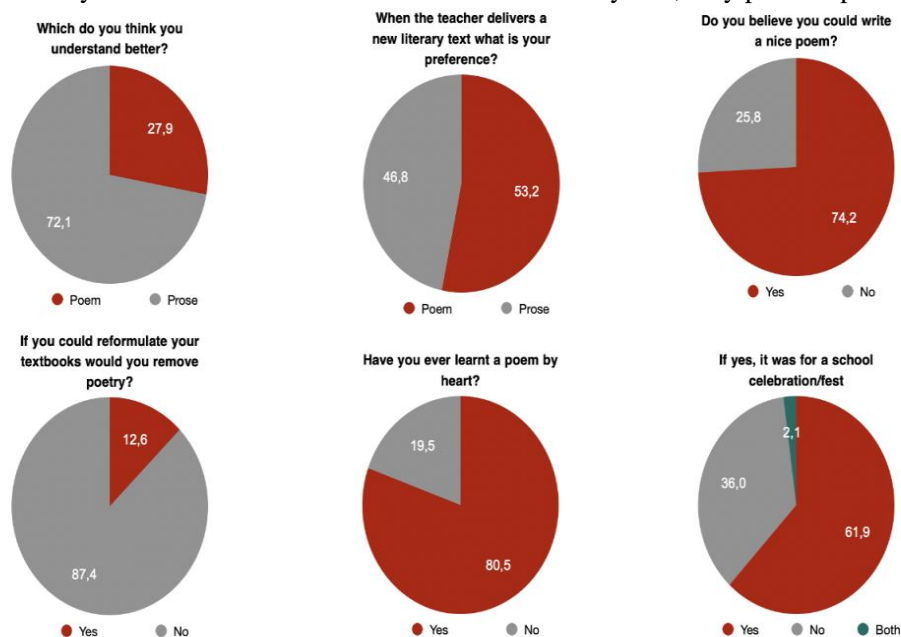

Figure 4 Frequencies of questions All poems rhyme, All poems are arranged in strophes, What was written first (poetry or prose)? I can distinguish prose from poetry, A poem is a construction of words, Every poem has a strict structure

The percentages of students that like to read literature in their free time (appr. 51%) is almost equal to the percentage of those who don't (appr. 49%) (Figure 5). It is also true that a seemingly difficult poem can be explained and understood in the classroom, since more than 70% of the students believe that they have had that experience often, very often or always. Moreover, nearly 37% of the respondents say that they cannot name the oldest Greek poem (open ended question). On the other hand, 20% give the correct answer (the Iliad), while almost 13% say it was Odyssey that was written first. Moreover, 23% say that the oldest Greek poem was Homer's epic poems.

I like to read literature in my free time

Never	12,4
Seldom	36,4
Often	37,3
Very often	13,8

Have you ever understood a seemingly difficult poem after having analysed it in class?

Never	6,7
Seldom	19,6
Often	33,8
Very often	22,7
Always	17,3

Can you name the oldest Greek poem?

The Iliad	20,3
The Odyssey	12,6
Homer's epic poems	23,1
No, I can't	36,6
Greek folk songs	3,3
The national anthem	3,8
Other	0,5

Figure 5 Frequencies of questions I like to read in my free time, Have you ever understood a seemingly difficult poem after having analysed it in class? Can you name the oldest Greek poem?
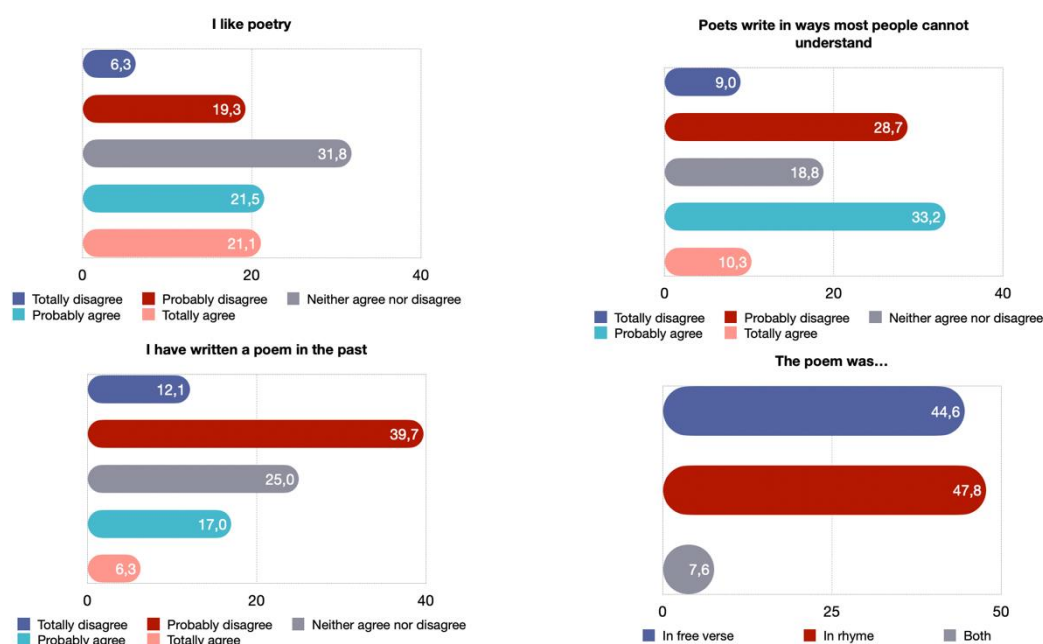
The majority of students reply that they can understand prose better (72%). On the contrary, more than half of the students say that when their teacher delivers a new literacy text, they prefer a poem (53%) rather than prose (47%) and approximately 74% say that they believe they can write a nice poem. Moreover, asked if they would remove poems from the textbooks if they could reformulate them nearly 88% say that they wouldn't, while more than 80% say that they have learnt a poem by heart in the past. The majority of those who have answered that they have learnt a poem by heart indicate that it was for a school celebration/fest.

Which do you think you understand better?
- Poem 27,9
- Prose 72,1

When the teacher delivers a new literary text what is your preference?
- Poem 53,2
- Prose 46,8

Do you believe you could write a nice poem?
- Yes 74,2
- No 25,8

If you could reformulate your textbooks would you remove poetry?
- Yes 12,6
- No 87,4

Have you ever learnt a poem by heart?
- Yes 80,5
- No 19,5

If yes, it was for a school celebration/fest
- Yes 61,9
- No 36,0
- Both 2,1

Figure 6 Frequencies of questions Which do you think you can understand better (a poem or prose)? When the teacher delivers a new literary text what is your preference? Do you believe you could write a nice poem? If you could reformulate your textbooks would you remove poetry? Have you ever learnt a poem by heart? If yes, was it for a school celebration/fest?
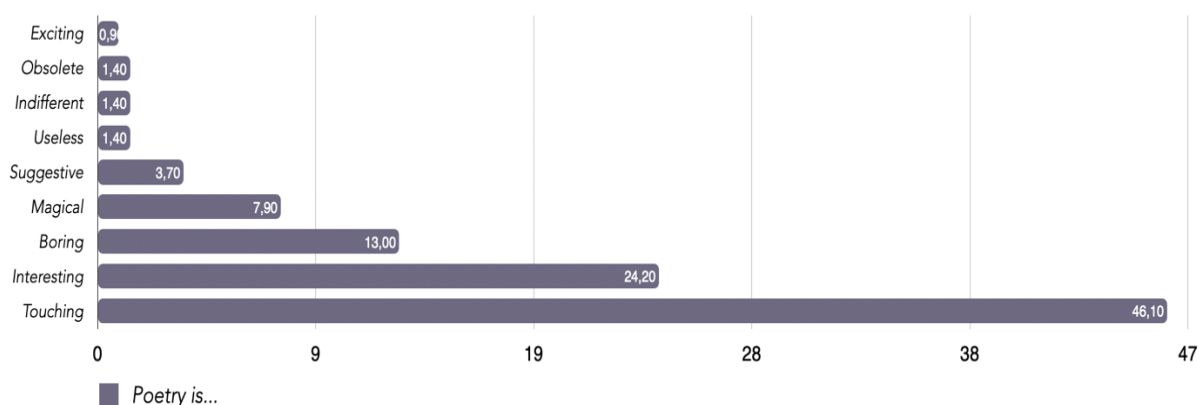
The majority of students seem to like poetry (Figure 7) since only 25% of them totally disagree or disagree with the item *I like poetry*. Approximately 21% of the students totally agree with this statement. Interestingly almost 46% of students think that poets write in ways most people cannot understand. When it comes to writing poetry, students are categorised into two categories: those who believe that they have never or very seldom written poetry (52%) and those who say that they write poetry often, very often or on a regular basis (48%). To determine what kind of poems students choose to write, 47.8% say they choose poems that rhyme, while 44.6% indicate that they prefer poems in free verse. Almost 8% claim that they write both.

I like poetry

Poets write in ways most people cannot understand

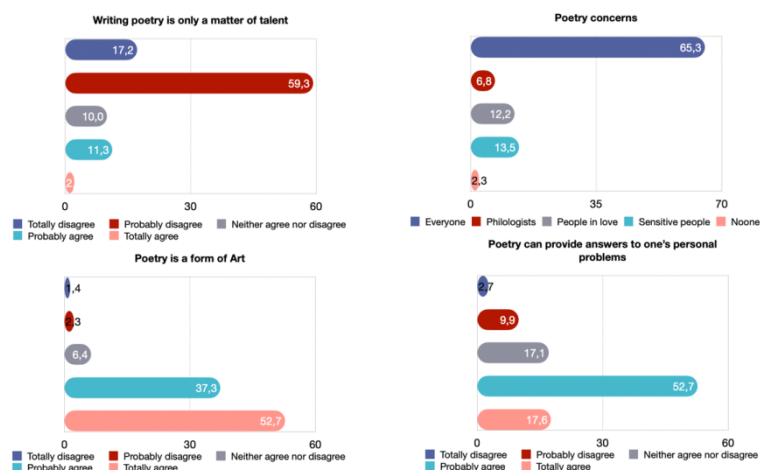**I have written a poem in the past**

The poem was...

Figure 7 Agreement and disagreement to the statements: I like poetry, Poets write in ways most people cannot understand, I have never written o poem in the past

The participants were furthermore asked to assign suitable adjectives that describe poetry with an open-ended question (Figure 8). The most frequent adjectives were *touching* and *interesting*, with percentages equal to 46.1% and 24.2% respectively.

Figure 8 Assigning suitable adjectives to poetry

Writing poetry is only a matter of talent

Poetry concerns

Poetry is a form of Art

Poetry can provide answers to one's personal problems

Figure 9 Agreement and disagreement to the statements: Writing poetry is only a matter of talent, Poetry is a form of Art, Poetry can provide answers to one's personal problems and Who does poetry concern?
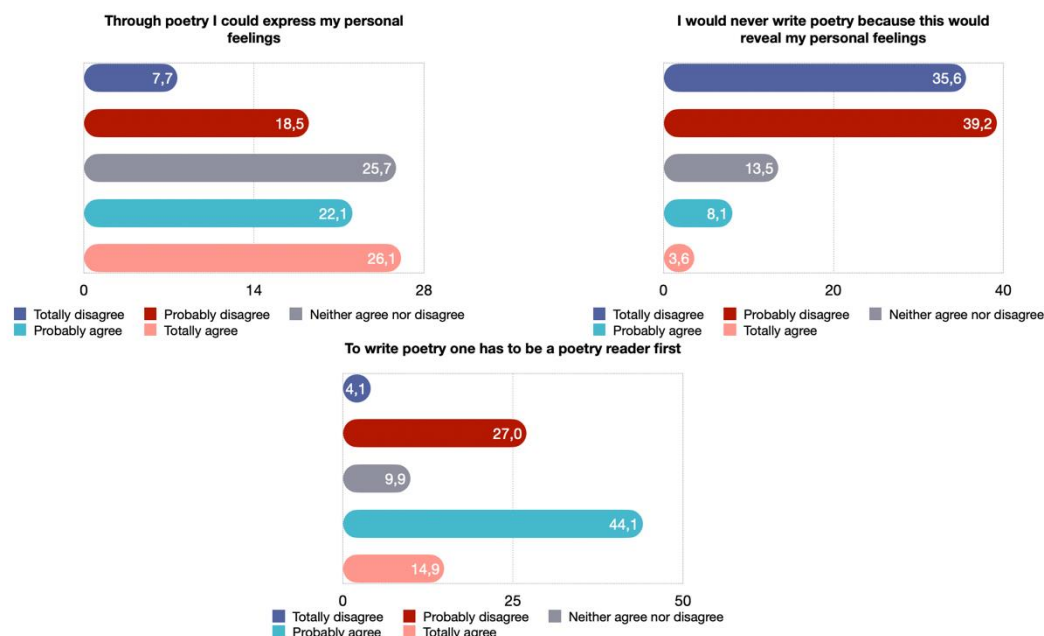
Moreover, all students were able to list at least five well known poets, Greek and foreign ones. Among the foreign ones were Pushkin, Moliere, Baudelaire, Blake, Shakespeare, Prévert, Kipling, Goll, but also Jim Morrison.

The vast majority of the respondents don't believe that writing poetry is only a matter of talent (approximately 77% disagrees or totally disagrees with the argument) (Figure 9). In addition, 86% from those who believe that it is a matter of talent think that it can be further reinforced with the right guidance. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed believe that poetry concerns everyone (65.3%) and not only literature
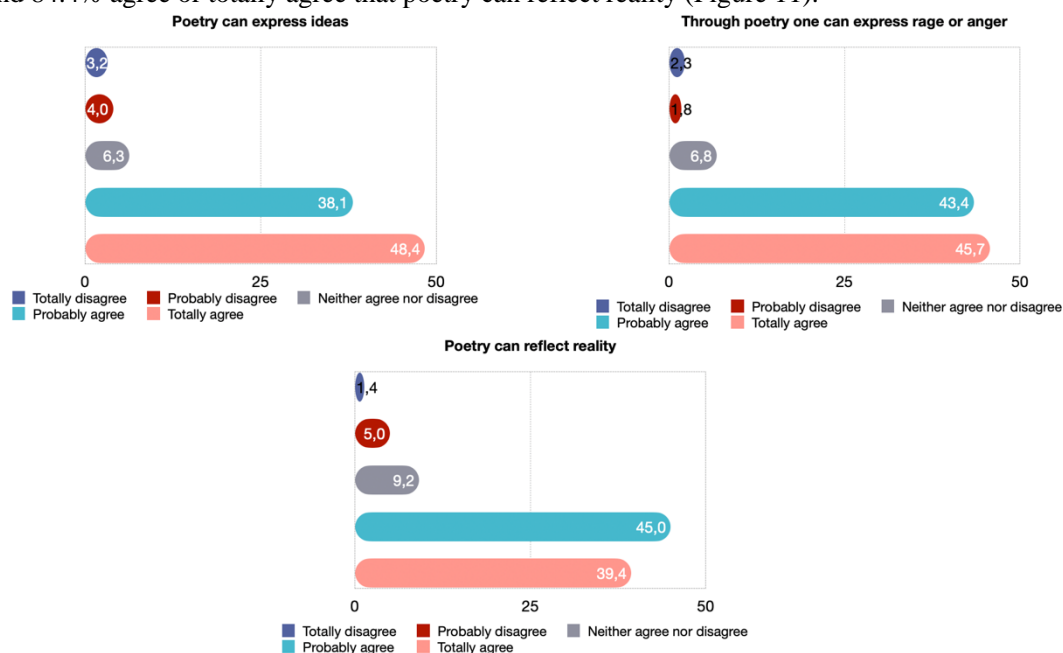
teachers or philologists (6.8%), people in love (12.2%), sensitive people (13.5%) and no one (2.3%). Moreover, students believe that writing poetry is a form of Art (90%) and that poetry can give answers to one's personal problems (70.3%).

The majority of the participants believe that they could express their feelings through poetry, since only 25% of students totally disagree or disagree with the statement (Figure 10). Only 12% of students believe that they would never write poetry because this would reveal their personal feelings. Moreover, only 31% disagrees or totally disagrees with the statement that in order to write poetry one has to be a poetry reader first.

Figure 10 Agreement and disagreement to the statements: Through poetry I could express my personal feelings, I would never write poetry because this would reveal my personal feelings, To write poetry one has to be a poetry reader first

Most students think that poetry can express ideas, apart from feelings (86%), poetry can express rage or anger (89%) and 84.4% agree or totally agree that poetry can reflect reality (Figure 11).

Figure 11 Agreement and disagreement to the statements: Poetry can express ideas, Through poetry one can express rage or anger, Poetry can reflect reality

Finally, the respondents believe that poetry can brighten our lives (80.4%), while they agree or totally agree with the statement that poetry is related to politics (12.2%). In addition, when students hear a poem that they like they are apparently not interested in finding information about the writer, since only 15.4% agree and 13.1% totally agree with the presented item.

Poetry makes people's life more beautiful

Poetry is related to politics

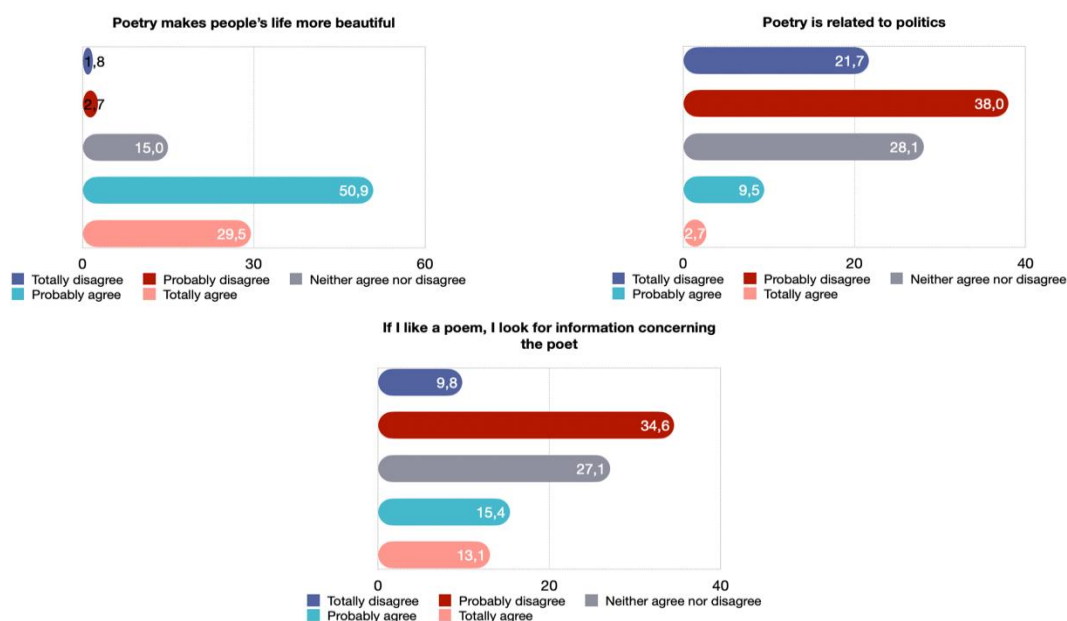**If I like a poem, I look for information concerning the poet**

Figure 12 Agreement and disagreement to the statements: Poetry makes people's life more beautiful, Poetry is related to politics, If I like a poem, I look for information about the writer

Results: Developing a Likert scale for measuring students' attitude towards poetry

In this study the students' attitude towards poetry was also measured through a Likert Scale, and more specifically through a series of 15 opinion items regarding poetry. The 15 items had 5 response categories, ranging from total disagreement to total agreement. The expressions *totally disagree*, *probably disagree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *probably agree*, *totally agree* were used and the categories of the answers were graded from 1 to 5. The questions used were the following:
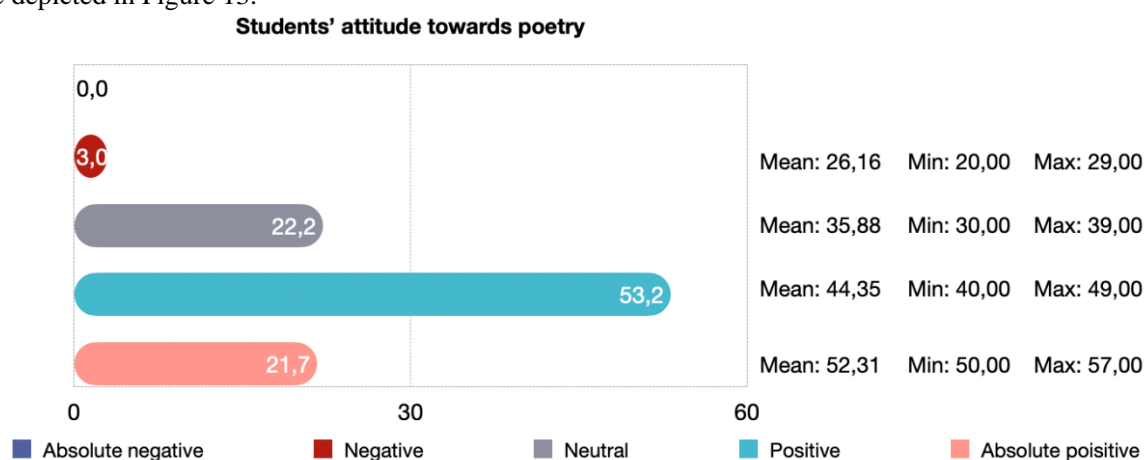
1. I like poetry.
2. I have written a poem in the past.
3. Through poetry I could express my personal feelings.
4. If I like a poem, I look for information concerning the poet.
5. I would never write poetry because this would reveal my personal feelings.
6. Poets write in ways most people cannot understand.
7. Writing poetry is only a matter of talent.
8. Writing poetry is a form of Art.
9. To write poetry one has to be a poetry reader first.
10. Poetry can express ideas.
11. Through poetry one can express rage or anger.
12. Poetry can reflect reality.
13. Poetry can provide answers to one's personal problems.
14. Poetry makes people's life more beautiful.
15. Poetry is related to politics.

Two central psychometric properties of attitude scaling are *reliability* and *validity*. By definition, a measurement for an attitude is *reliable* if it is constant through time, provided that the repeated measurements are conducted under constant conditions and no significant alteration in the attitude has occurred. On the other hand, *validity* refers to the extent to which the scale developed actually measures what was planned to be measured (in our case the students' attitude towards poetry). The initial phase of attitude measurement analysis is the assessment of the validity and reliability of the overall Likert scale (or subscales). Upon completion of this phase, the unidimensionality or multidimensionality of the Likert scale will be decided. See Symeonaki et al. (2015) for a thorough description of construct validity and reliability assessment. In order to assess reliability, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the overall scale and subscales are reported (Fabrigar et al., 1999). According to Nunnally & Berstein (1994) and Revelle & Zinbarg (2009) a scale or subscale is reliable if Cronbach's alpha coefficients are at least 0.70. The reliability analysis performed has indicated the exclusion of three questions, which were: *To write poetry one has to be a poetry reader first*; *Poetry can express ideas* and *Poetry is related to politics*. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the overall scale using the remaining 12 questions was equal to 0.734>0.700.

Since the aim was theory development and there were no predetermined subscales, Principle Components Analysis (PCA) was used to investigate the construct validity of the proposed Likert scale. This resulted in a three components and factors solution based on the eigenvalue greater than 1.0 criterion, implying three dimensions of the underlying attitude. Parallel analysis validated this initial solution showing that the retained three components had actual eigenvalues that were greater than the randomly generated ones for both the average and the 95-th percentile eigenvalues criteria. Moreover, parallel analysis revealed similar results for retaining these three factors. Successively, the three components and factors solution were examined for simple structure and interpretability by running both varimax and promax rotations. Based on the outcomes we interpret the three factors as follows: the first factor is defined exclusively by items indicating favourable attitudes towards poetry (SC1-subscale), expressing for example the need for writing poetry. Items such as *I have written poetry in the past*, *I like poetry, I could express my personal feelings through poetry writing* are correlated with this factor. On the other hand, the second factor is defined mainly by items indicating a stereotypical attitude towards poetry, for example items expressing opinions such as *poets write things, only they can understand* (SC2-subscale). The third factor is defined mainly by items suggesting a negative projection of self, indicating that writing poetry is not for me (one needs to have the talent) (SC3-subscale). Subscales SC1, SC2 and SC3 were constructed by summing up the defining items, PCA was performed for SC1, SC2 and SC3 resulting in a single factor that explained 66.698, 59.504 and 61.823 percent of the variance, respectively. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for SC1, SC2 and SC3 were 0.792, 0.687 and 0.631, respectively, indicating that only SC1 was reliable. Split-half reliabilities for SC1, SC2 and SC3 were not estimated due sample size restrictions. Correlations between subscales were 0.632, 0.556 and 0.663. Average inter-item correlations within SC1, SC2 and SC3 subscales were estimated to be equal to 0.343, 0.295 and 0.385 and between subscales 0.296, 0.301 and 0.321, respectively. The outcomes implied that the subscales were not warranted and should be combined into a single overall scale. Unidimensional measurement of a construct is considered in cases where construct validity assessment results indicate that there exists a single underlying dimension. In this case item scores can simply be added. Before carrying out the analysis, the ordering of the positive or negative items were reversed, depending on the definition of the negative-positive ends of the overall scale.

The range of the total scores were divided into five categories implying negative to positive attitude towards poetry. The frequencies, together with the mean, the minimum and maximum values of the total scores per category are depicted in Figure 13.

Students' attitude towards poetry

	Mean	Min	Max
0,0			
3,0 (Negative)	26,16	20,00	29,00
22,2 (Neutral)	35,88	30,00	39,00
53,2 (Positive)	44,35	40,00	49,00
21,7 (Absolute positive)	52,31	50,00	57,00

■ Absolute negative   ■ Negative   ■ Neutral   ■ Positive   ■ Absolute poisitive

Figure 13 Categories of students' attitude towards poetry

The demographic and social characteristics of the students exhibiting a positive or very positive attitude towards poetry are presented in Figure 14. Thus, 73% of the student's that were rated as having a positive or very positive attitude are females, almost 73% of their mother's educational level and approximately 65% of their father's is higher than upper secondary and the subjective measurement of their parents' income is reported mainly as *medium* (78.1%) and *high* (17.9%). Moreover, the majority states that there are a lot of poetry books in their house, that their parents read literature in their free time and that they also read literature to them when they were growing up, and their favourite subjects are Ancient Greek and Mathematics.
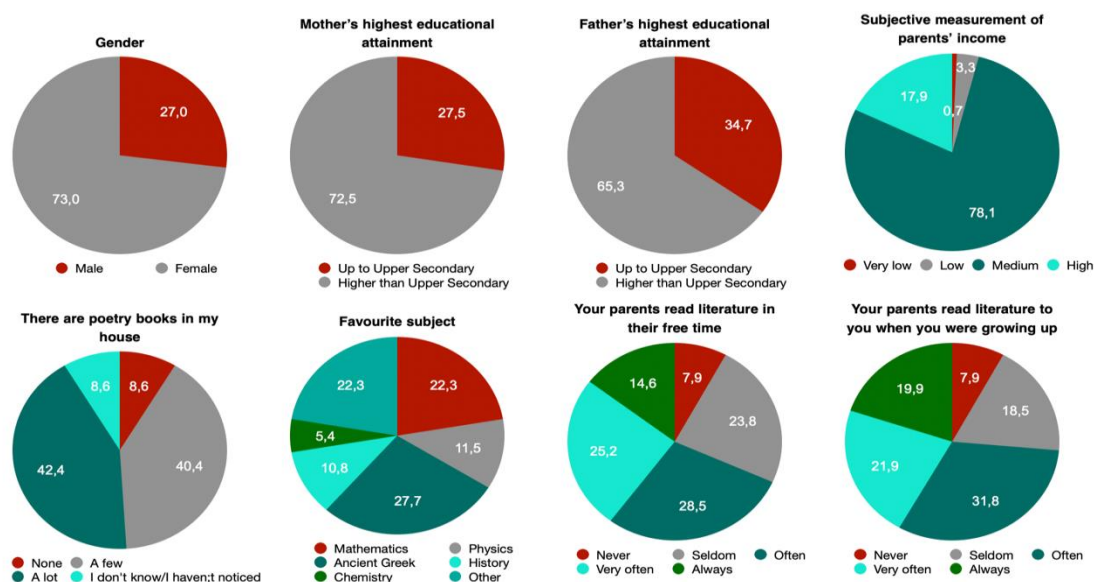
Figure 14 Socio-demographic characteristics of students exhibiting a positive or very positive attitude towards poetry

Moreover, the performance of crosstabulation reveals that a statistically significant association exists between mother's and father's highest educational attainment (p=0.001), the parents' income (p=0.023), gender (p=0.01), the existence of poetry books in the house (p=0.001), parents reading literature in their free time (p=0.03), reading poetry in the free time (p=0.000) and parents reading literature to the students when they were growing up (p=0.001).

Discussion

In the present paper findings from an empirical study measuring the attitude of 225 high school students towards poetry and their knowledge concerning poetry-related issues were presented. Apart from the 49 items used in the questionnaire, the survey designed a Likert scale to measure the students' attitude using Likert scaling theory, which can be used in other empirical surveys that aim at measuring attitudes towards poetry. This is true, since the demonstrated rating scale and the findings show that the measurement of the attitude towards poetry produced is valid and reliable. Students were divided into five categories, as suggested by Likert scaling theory and the socio-demographic characteristics of those having a very positive or positive attitude were deducted. Further statistical analysis revealed that the final scores are highly linked with a number of variables. More precisely, a more positive attitude towards poetry would appear among students with more educated parents, where poetry books are present in the house, when students read poetry in their free time and when parents have read literature books to the students when they were growing up. Thus, the proposed methodology, by incorporating methods traditionally used for attitude scaling provides valid and reliable measurement of the attitude under study.

Theoretical Implications
These results have significant implications for both theory and practice. As far as the theoretical implications are concerned, our outcomes deliver the first, to our knowledge, valid and reliable instrument, i.e., the proposed Likert scale, that can be used to measure students' attitude towards poetry.

Practical Implications
From a practical point of view, the study provides clear support as to the factors that might be significant for shaping a positive attitude towards poetry. Our results point to the conclusion that encouraging students to read poetry and literature in their free time, will be valuable.

Future Directions
Further work would include the determination of factors that explain students' attitude towards poetry by developing a prediction method for identifying groups of students that exhibit a positive attitude. Predictor variables could include variables that were detected in the present analysis to be linked with the final students' scoring. Therefore, we could examine which socio-demographic and/or other factors influence the student's interest in poetry and create profiles of high school students who are most likely to show interest or not. A Multinomial Logistic Regression model (MLR) is suitable for modelling the outcome of a categorical variable (in our case categories of interest in poetry), in which the log odds of the outcomes are modelled as a linear combination of the predicted variables.

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