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Exploring teachers' stories of writing: a narrative perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study takes a narrative perspective to examine teachers as writers and autobiographical creative writing as a way for promoting teachers' professional development. In a creative writing group for Finnish primary and secondary school teachers, the teachers expressed themselves and explored their lives and identities through autobiographical creative writing. The aim of this study was to examine the stories the teachers tell about their relationship to writing and the goals they set for their professional and personal development in the writing group. Through thematic analysis, seven descriptive themes were found in teachers' narratives of writing. Furthermore, based on the narrative analysis, a poem-like word image was composed. This study illustrates how literary methods diversify teachers' narratives. The findings shed light on teachers as creative writers and emphasise the connection between writing and well-being. Creative writing groups can be beneficial for teachers' professional development, identity work and well-being.

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Creative writing; teachers' professional development; narrative research

Introduction

This article examines autobiographical creative writing as a way to promote teachers' professional development. A lifelong career in a complex, diverse and unpredictable world calls for teachers' continuing professional development. Finding the means, let alone time and place for self-exploration and growth in teachers' hectic work life can be difficult. Because of time management issues, stress and fatigue, teachers may feel restrained from actively developing themselves. Meanwhile, supporting teachers' identity work is considered to be one of the most essential contents of induction support and in-service training for teachers (Geeraerts et al., 2015; Martin & Pennanen, 2015; Wang, Odell, & Schwillle, 2008).

Finland is well known for its high-quality teacher education and students' good achievement record (e.g. Sahlberg, 2011). However, there is a need for seeking ways to promote in-service teachers' professional development and identity from induction to retirement (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012; Kallioniemi, Toom, & Niemi, 2012; Martin & Pennanen, 2015). Although there is a global concern for teachers leaving their jobs after a few years of working in schools (OECD, 2005), teachers' professional mobility rates are

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low in Finland. Finnish teachers are given a lot of freedom and a prominent role in schools' decision-making, e.g. in terms of pedagogical practices, assessment and teaching materials, but on the other hand, the increasing responsibilities can burden the teachers (Toom & Husu, 2012). Many of the primary and secondary teachers in Finland who consider leaving the teaching profession do it partly for reasons related to job satisfaction: some perceive teaching to be stressful and demanding, and feel there is a lack of support from the work community and superiors (Martin & Pennanen, 2015).

Recent educational reforms in Finland challenge teachers to continuously develop themselves and to re-evaluate and renegotiate their professional identities (Ministry of Education & Culture, 2016). While learning has traditionally been associated to teacher-led and textbook-based pedagogies in closed physical settings (e.g. Hopkins & Tarnanen, 2017), the new Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) emphasises broadening learning environments outside the school and developing generic skills, such as creative thinking, interaction and multiliteracy. To be able to pass these competencies on to the students, teachers need to develop themselves in these areas themselves. Furthermore, teachers are no longer seen as 'lone riders', but as multitalented professionals working in collaborative networks. Thus, the new curriculum communicates and underlines the importance of today's multifaceted teacher profession.

Creative thinking is recognised as an important twenty-first-century skill (Fadel, Bialik, & Trilling, 2015). Although Finnish teachers consider creative thinking to be one of the most important skill areas in their profession (Martin & Pennanen, 2015), there are not enough opportunities to develop creative skills. Writing in general and reflective writing in particular are perceived to be a significant tool for professional development (see, e.g. Ortoleva, Bétrancourt, & Billett, 2015; Locke, 2014; Tynjälä, 2001). Applying autobiographical and literary methods to writing can bring new perspectives to exploring and supporting teachers' identity work and professional development (Huber, Li, Murphy, Nelson, & Young, 2014; Schultz & Ravitch, 2013).

Although creative writing is considered to be effective in supporting both personal development and well-being (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000; Kähmi, 2015; Thompson, 2006) as well as professional development (e.g. Huber et al., 2014; Schultz & Ravitch, 2013), there is a lack of research on teachers as writers and on in-service teachers' development through creative writing groups. This article is based on a study on a peer writing group of teachers, in which Finnish primary and secondary school teachers used autobiographical creative writing methods to develop themselves. Our aim is to deepen the understanding of how the teachers' narrate their relationship to writing and their expectations towards the writing group.

Supporting teachers' professional development

Teaching is considered to be one of the most stressful occupations (Johnson et al., 2005). Due to the social and challenging nature of the profession, teachers have a deeply emotional relationship to their work. As they are strongly committed, their professional and personal identities merge in the classroom. Therefore, when teachers are able to exercise their professional skills and act according to their personal beliefs and values, which are at the core of identity, they feel more satisfied with their work (Nias, 1996). Schultz and Ravitch (2013) argue that teachers' professional identity is developed in connection to the communities in

which they work and learn, and through interaction with colleagues, pupils and parents. Consequently, it has been shown that supporting teachers' professionalism can influence their work satisfaction and decrease work-related stress (OECD, 2016; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005), especially when the support comes in the form of increased professional knowledge or increased peer networks (OECD, 2016).

Social, personal and professional dimensions are intertwined in the processes that support teachers' professional development (Bell & Gilbert, 1996). Because of the intertwined nature of the dimensions, teacher development should be seen as a whole and examined using holistic research methods (Geeraerts et al., 2015). In line with this thinking, the active building of teacher identity is generally considered to be an essential part of continuous professional development (Geeraerts et al., 2015). Teachers' professional development can be seen as a process of extending their self-knowledge, including reflecting on their teacher identity involving both personal and professional elements. Therefore, teacher education should not only promote teachers' theoretical and practical knowledge, but also self-regulatory, emotional and social knowledge (Tynjälä, Virtanen, Klemola, Kostiainen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2016).

Creative writing as a means of teacher development

Writing is perceived to be a significant tool for professional development (see, e.g. Bétrancourt, Ortoleva, & Billett, 2015; Locke, 2014; Tynjälä, 2001). One reason for this is that writing can be an effective method for reflection (Kurunsaari, Tynjälä, & Piirainen, 2015). Reflective writing assignments, such as learning journals and portfolios, have proven to be efficient in supporting student-teachers' and in-service teachers' learning (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

Studies about teacher development and identity work through written narratives (see, e.g. Huber et al., 2014) and teachers' narrative identity writing groups (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013) emphasise the importance of storytelling and the sharing of stories in teacher development. Recent studies have presented encouraging results for using autobiographical writing to support teacher development (e.g. Anspal, Eisensmichmidt, & Löfström, 2012; Selland, 2016). However, these studies are often focused on student-teachers. Therefore, the possibilities for also integrating arts-based, creative methods in the process of in-service teachers' professional development and narrative identity work through writing are still relatively scarce.

To date, many researchers investigating teachers' development and identity work have utilised autobiographic writing in study designs and in data collection (e.g. Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Löfström, 2012; Orland-Barak & Maskit, 2011; Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, & Heikkinen, 2016). This approach has allowed researchers to gain in-depth knowledge about teacher development and identity work. However, much less is known about teachers' perceptions of and relationships to writing, and especially creative writing. Therefore, the main research focus of this study was on teachers' relationship to writing itself, and their expectations of how they can benefit from writing in their professional development.

In the present study, professional development is approached from the viewpoint of autobiographical creative writing in the context of narrative research. In line with Hunt (2000), we use the term *autobiographical creative writing*, which refers to writing where

the writer draws on experiences and memories from his or her own life to create a literary end product using the techniques of literacy and fiction. In autobiographical creative writing, the writer uses fictional and poetic techniques to capture and reflect his/her experiences, memories and relationships (Hunt, 2010). Hunt (2000) highlights the dual nature of autobiographical creative writing courses: the participants are given tools to develop themselves on both an educational and personal level. The educational level refers to developing writing skills, whereas the personal level denotes self-exploration and therapeutic aspects (Hunt, 2000).

Teachers in Finland are highly educated academics (e.g. Sahlberg, 2011). It can be said that Finnish teachers are used to expressing themselves through written discourse, as their academic studies have involved writing numerous academic essays, keeping regular learning diaries, as well as writing complex Bachelor's and Master's theses. Although all writing is creative (McVey, 2008), in this study the term *creative writing* is used as a synonym for literary arts, or writing that utilises literary methods. Literary methods, such as poetry and fiction, can help the writer change perspectives, step back from or zoom into a certain experience or emotion and find new ways to express and process those experiences and emotions (Hunt, 2000; Kähmi, 2015; Kosonen, 2015). Bolton (1999) acknowledges many beneficial effects of creative writing on personal development and well-being. For example, in poetry, literary rules of grammar, spelling and prose can be thrown 'out of the window, so the writing is not hindered by such niceties as a sentence needing a verb' (Bolton, 1999). Furthermore, the use of metaphor enables writers to express difficult things through literary imagery. Through prose, writers can approach their inner child or write stories based on personal experiences. (Bolton, 1999.) Creative writing allows them to let go of some the barriers upheld in academic or professional writing, and seek for new ways of communicating their thoughts.

While some research has been conducted on in-service teachers' creative writing groups (e.g. Schultz & Ravitch, 2013), there is a gap in the research on autobiographical creative writing groups. Similarly, teachers' expectations of writing groups are still relatively unknown. Therefore, the goal of our research was to examine in-service teachers' creative writing in a peer group and to find out what kinds of goals the teachers set for their development in the writing group, and how they describe their relationship to writing.

Research questions

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' stories about writing and their expectations of creative writing in a peer group. The following research questions were addressed:

- (1) How do teachers describe themselves as writers in their narratives from the writing group?
- (2) How do teachers narrate their expectations for their professional and personal development in the creative writing group?

Methodology

Narrative research

The theoretical and methodological basis of this study was narrative research. Narrativity is closely related to constructivist theory, according to which knowledge is built continuously via individual experiences and social interaction.

In this study, identity is understood as ‘narrative’: building blocks of identity consist of personal history and experiences, which take a narrative form in individuals’ spoken and written stories (Bruner, 2004; Carbaugh & Brockmeier, 2001). Defined as *narrative*, identity is considered as an autobiographical continuum built by the interpretations we have of our experiences (e.g. Ricoeur, 1991).

Literature recognises the importance of storytelling and autobiographical reflection by teachers on their personal and professional development, well-being and self-understanding (e.g. Nias, 1996). In today’s teacher education, there is a strong tradition of storytelling and autobiography in supporting teacher development. This is often referred to as the ‘narrative turn’. The narrative formation of identity is taken into consideration in many support systems for teachers, such as peer group mentoring, in which teachers share their experiences in groups that support their professional development and well-being (e.g. Heikkinen et al., 2012; Kaunisto, Estola, & Leiman, 2013). In-service training that draws on the ideas of peer support and narrativity acknowledges the three aspects (personal, social, professional) of professional development and identity work (Geeraerts et al., 2015).

Following Stenberg (2010), this study argues that teacher identity is manifested through narratives of personal and professional experiences. Clandinin and colleagues (2006) understand teacher identity as the embodiment of a unique life story that is ever changing and shaped by the landscapes of an individual’s past and present life. In narrative identity building, an individual examines him or herself by highlighting specific meaningful experiences from his/her chronological life story. Narrative research on teachers examines teachers’ personal stories and experiences, and draws from the perception that it should benefit the teachers as well as the researchers. Teachers are not simply passive research objects, but they also take active part in the research.

As the teachers’ autobiographical creative writings are narrative in nature, it is logical to use narrative methods in this study. Furthermore, narrative research aims at giving a voice to the research participants’ stories. As teachers and researchers engage in a reflective research process, teachers’ stories are retold and changed through sharing of these stories with the group. In this study, the researchers were the sharers of the teachers’ stories, attempting to give a voice to the participant’s experiences of writing. Teachers’ stories of writing help us understand their relationship to creative writing in the context of professional development in the Finnish school system.

Study design and participants

This study is based on teacher narratives written in a Finnish teachers’ creative writing group ($N = 11$) facilitated by the first author of this article. The writing group was comprised of teachers teaching at primary school and lower secondary school levels. Three of the teachers were men, and eight were women, and their age ranged from 30 to 60 years, and they had

been in-service teachers for five to more than thirty years. The participants were recruited in one Finnish city via an email invitation sent to all teachers working in the city at the time. Although no specific requirements were set for joining the group, such as writing as a hobby or perceiving oneself to be talented in writing, the invitation sought teachers who were 'interested' in creative writing and wished to express and develop themselves through writing. Therefore, the group consisted of teachers who identified themselves as having a rather positive connection to writing.

The group met seven times during the academic year 2016–2017. In the writing group, teachers wrote autobiographical creative texts using different methods of poetry, drama and prose to express themselves and to explore their identities and reflect on their lives and profession. They also discussed pedagogical aspects of writing and shared their writing experiences with their peers. To help them develop as writers, the teachers were given feedback by the facilitator of the group.

A written consent to participate in the study was collected from each teacher. To protect the anonymity of the teachers, the names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Narrative data and methods

Data analysis of this study followed two methodological approaches: (1) the *analysis of narratives* in which the data, in the form of stories, are analysed to produce classifications and typologisations (Bruner, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995) and (2) *the narrative analysis* which involves producing explanatory stories on the basis of the data (Polkinghorne, 1995). The data consist of the teachers' written narratives (22 texts, each text's length varied from one to two pages) from the first two meetings of the writing group. In the first meeting, the teachers wrote an orientation narrative in the form of a letter or a diary page about themselves as writers and their goals regarding developing themselves in the writing group meetings. The teachers were given prompts, such as: 'Why have you joined the writing group?'; 'What role does writing play in your life?' and, 'What kind of expectations do you have for the writing group?' In the second meeting, the teachers were asked to use a literary genre of their choice to focus on a specific meaningful moment or experience that describes them as writers.

The teachers' writings consisted of both handwritten texts and texts written with laptop computers or tablets. The handwritten texts were transcribed. As the facilitator of the writing group, the first author made notes of each written narrative, and also gave feedback to the teachers about their texts. The data were then read multiple times and the content of the writings was discussed among the researchers. After this in-depth familiarisation with the narratives, the actual analysis of narratives was carried out using the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti was used to support the thematic analysis process. Based on the active, in-depth familiarisation with the data, initial codes were created from the narratives. These codes, highlighting different aspects of the teachers' relationship to writing, were then compiled into preliminary broader themes, which were then reviewed and modified. Seven themes that emerged throughout the teachers' narratives were identified. These are: (1) *Inspiration*, (2) *Therapeutic effects of writing*, (3) *Learning and discovering about oneself and the world*, (4) *Teaching writing*, (5) *Finding an individual voice*, (6) *Negative emotions* and (7) *Time and place for writing*. Finally, examples from the teachers' narratives were chosen to illustrate the seven themes.

After the thematic analysis, a narrative analysis process followed. The descriptive citations, featuring essential themes identified in the teachers' stories during the thematic analysis process, were arranged in chronological order, beginning with childhood memories and ending with the teachers' expectations of the future. A *word image* (Clandinin et al., 2006), which can be described as a narrative account similar to a poem, was created as an end result of the narrative analysis. The word image aims at giving a voice to the teachers' life stories from the perspective of being a creative writer. The word image was then translated from Finnish to English.

The word image created in the analysis can also be described as *found poem*. *Found poetry* is a method by which the researchers compose a poem based on their analysis on research data (Patrick, 2016). However, the term *word image* was adopted in this research, as it better reflects the study design and the social process of data collection through which the first author of this article facilitated and instructed the writing group. As a researcher and writing instructor, the first author engaged in the teachers' discussions and encouraged them to participate in the research process. Although the word image itself was composed by the researchers, it was then shared with the participants and discussed further in the writing group. Furthermore, the teachers used this word image as an inspiration as they started to reflect on their 'year of creative writing' during the group's last meeting.

Autobiographical narratives do not necessarily need to be chronological. For example, the word image can be non-linear and based on the narrative story's main themes. However, most of the teachers' written narratives were chronological. Composing a chronological word image was therefore a data-driven decision and is in line with Ricoeur (1991), who sees narrative identity as an autobiographical, plot-like continuum. The *word image* was constructed in a chronological order, beginning with childhood memories and ending with the teachers' expectations of the future. Within the word image, the themes that were identified in the thematic analysis appeared in the descriptions of the different phases of the teachers' lives, representing the non-linear aspect of the teachers' narratives.

Findings

The word image below represents the narratives of teachers' stories of writing, including personal, professional and social aspects. The first part of the storyline illustrates the teachers' childhood memories of a natural and positive relationship to writing. The word image then continues to describe the teachers' youth, portraying self-doubt and critique. Proceeding to adulthood, teachers describe how writing is visible in their everyday lives and teaching. As the word image continues, teachers start gazing forward, expressing the hopes they have for the writing group in relation to their identity building and professional development.

*I was a child
no chains of self-criticism
I would fling myself into enjoyable writing
build a world inside my mind
felt like knowledge became a part of me
the pencil had to be constantly sharpened
writing stories was the best thing at school
the universe opens the curtains of inspiration slightly and a story starts flowing into my mind
pages filling, the story would go on*

High school required of me to be the kind of writer I was not
 I gave up, let go
 started to think my voice did not matter
 writing letters came to an end little by little while walking toward adulthood
 'Now that you are studying Finnish you must be reading my letters with a blue pen in hand.'

I found poetry
 those lovely evenings when the kids were still small and I would sit down and start writing a letter
 I wrote stories when my students were writing theirs
 the first years of marriage brought things too impossible to even mutter, so I wrote a letter to my husband
 my mother's death, the emotions that emerged
 started this writing process back then, but never finished
 I stopped writing but I never stopped thinking about writing

These days I don't write that much
 things related to school and studying
 sharing news with friends
 communication with colleagues
 statements, assessments, comments, messages, assignments
 Rewarding? No way.
 I teach my students to write prose
 I myself can only achieve scratches and scribbles.
 How I miss writing.

My voice is lost
 fear is keeping me from starting again
 I would cross the great wall of criticism
 write without forcing it, focusing solely on writing
 catch a creative flame of my own
 find my voice as a writer
 dare to start again
 let the words come
 not overthink
 to realise I have something to write about
 that it's not that bad or pathetic
 to light the spark again
 a thought, free and flying
 turn on the flow
 the joy of writing

To learn something new and exciting
 new ideas for work
 to find ways to help the students as they wonder how to write
 so that each child could experience the skill of writing
 each child could say that they learned to express themselves through writing in school
 they would not consider themselves as poor writers,
 not put too much weight on their mistakes
 to lower the threshold for everyone

Too busy
 the bar set too high
 thoughts get trampled on in the hurry to speak my mind
 how could I find the time
 a suitable moment in the rush hour of my life

*a moment of me time
if even just one time and place only
in the stillness of my own thoughts
shut myself away in writing*

*Ways to unravel the overburdened heart and mind
clear my thoughts
put my life in order
it feels easier after expressing my thoughts
taking care of my wellbeing
finding help for coping
strength
ease and lightness
finding space in myself for something more
I would not be full to the brim*

*Offload my worries about not being able to help
process the emotions of inadequacy
write about the bubbling joy
the atmosphere and pressures at my workplace
about change
I could ponder my teacher identity
clarify the big questions and oddities of being a teacher
Could writing help me recognise the things I still want to do in life?*

*I would draw with words
write myself
a chance to process work and personal life
I could share something about myself with others
learn to know the others better
step in front of people and truly be myself
I would see myself in their eyes
the image starting to shape in my eyes as well*

*A year of creative writing
Just for me, from myself*

Next, each of the seven themes identified in the analysis of narratives are discussed. Examples of how the teachers utilised literary methods to illustrate and deepen their narratives are also given. Names of the teachers have been altered for anonymity.

The first theme, which emerged throughout the teachers' life stories, was *Inspiration*. Teachers' childhood memories were characterised by a positive and natural relationship to writing, free of self-criticism and filled with inspiration. This finding is in line with Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who sees creative writing as a natural way of reaching enjoyment and flow. Playing with words, organising one's thoughts into poems and discovering new stories from within can bring enjoyment into lives of people of every age (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Indeed, some of the writing experiences described by the teachers can also be defined as experiences of flow. Many mentioned being active writers of letters, diaries and stories in their childhood. Some described their childhood writing experiences using present tense. This allowed them to speak with a child's voice and to relate to the child they once were. To Eva, the best thing school had to offer were writing lessons, where she wrote stories and built her identity as a writer. Her teacher encouraged her to read her stories to the class and even

suggested that she might become a professional writer one day. In their narratives, teachers reminisced on moments of inspiration and flow in adult years as well: Olivia's passion for journal writing inspired her family to start writing collective travel diaries, and John, in his early adulthood, discovered a way to express himself through poetry.

In their narratives, teachers emphasised the *Therapeutic effects of writing*. Teachers hoped to enhance their well-being through writing. Words such as 'unloading', 'expressing' and 'processing' were repeatedly found in the narratives.

Indeed, the therapeutic potential of writing seems to rise from expressing, organising and re-telling one's thoughts and emotions with one's own individual way and voice (See also Hunt, 2000). Writing was seen as a tool for expressing and dealing with emotions and life experiences, such as the death of a family member, relationship problems and work stress. Alex, for example, wrote his two narratives, which dealt with the therapeutic effects of writing, in the form of fiction. His use of metaphors was lucid: Alex described his situation in life as 'crossroads' and the writing event as 'a fireplace', where his character can sit down and ponder his life. Furthermore, Mary, whose job as a special education teacher is demanding and emotionally tiring, expressed her need to find ways of 'unloading' her worries and feelings of inadequacy. Although the teachers perceived writing to be effective for well-being and personal development, they described often being too busy or otherwise occupied to 'take care' of themselves via writing.

Writing was not only described as enjoyable and therapeutic, but also as a tool for *Learning and discovering about oneself and the world*. From early on, John perceived writing as a tool for adopting and building knowledge. He copied interesting statistics and facts from his parents' encyclopaedia on the pages of his notebook. He felt as if he was 'building the matters of the world' inside his mind. John exploited humour and created a strong image in his narrative, portraying how he would constantly have to sharpen his yellow pencil during his long writing projects. This interest in knowledge building later accompanied John in his educational career: in the subject John teaches, writing has an active part in knowledge building. Writing is indeed considered to be a powerful tool for supporting learning (see, e.g. Bétrancourt, Ortoleva, & Billett, 2015; Locke, 2014; Tynjälä, 2001). For example, Sexton and Pennebaker (2009), based on their research on expressive writing's effects to health, argue that expressive writing can enhance the writers' working memory functions: by expressing their stressful thoughts, the writer deals with their stress and memories, therefore freeing space in their working memory. In addition to learning about the world, writing was perceived as a tool for self-exploration. In the writing group, teachers shared their thoughts and experiences with others, thus negotiating and working on their identities. Alex considered the chance to interact with others a strong reason for joining the group. Through the interaction with the teachers, he hoped to strengthen his own identity.

The word image also sheds light on the teachers' experiences of *Teaching writing*. The teachers actively try to encourage their pupils to be creative and brave writers. In her narrative, in the form of a letter, Helen described her passion for supporting children to find ways of self-expression: 'At work, I motivate kids to write different texts. I am constantly seeking new ways to help get them going'. Still, the teachers' own workdays are mostly filled with 'dull' writing tasks, such as filling in forms and making evaluations. The teachers hoped to gain new pedagogical ideas and perspectives related to teaching writing to their students.

Finding their own *Individual voice* as writers was one of the repetitive themes as teachers expressed their hopes and goals in the writing group. In her youth, Karen perceived that her high school expected her to be the kind of writer that she was not. She could not find her voice in the ‘concepts that were used to analyse, itemise and interpret’, and in her diary-like narrative from the second meeting, she asks: ‘Where was the fun, the creativeness – where was I?’ Instead of processing her own voice with determination, she started to think that her unique voice didn’t matter. As a teacher, she found a contradiction between her wish to help her students seek their own voices and the demands of the school: ‘I instruct others to write texts in a way similar to what killed me: *Each word and sentence must be polished and perfected; kill your voice, adapt, obey the rules.*’

Although the teachers’ narratives mostly described a positive relationship to writing, *Negative emotions* were also reported. In Hannah’s narratives, the tension between writer’s block and inspiration followed her from childhood to the present day. Hannah described experiencing writer’s block in her writing classes at school. As a child, she often found it difficult to get started, which made her feel stressed. She would be aware that, ‘I only have a little over half an hour left, and I have an empty paper in front of me.’ Hannah’s story began to take a positive turn as she continued describing the sudden emotion of flow from her childhood: ‘Then it happens again. The universe opens the curtains of inspiration slightly and a story starts flowing into my mind faster than I can write. [...] The story leads me, and as the bell rings it’s on my paper.’ Growing up, Hannah actively wrote prose and letters but she often found herself ‘paralysed’ by ‘some kind of fear’, which she discussed in her narrative written in a form of an imaginary letter to an old friend. This fear, Hannah wrote, to her friend in her imaginary letter, was one of the main reasons for her joining the writing group. Furthermore, Helen utilised poetry to describe her struggle of being overly critical of her own writing. Sarah, on the other hand, wrote her second narrative in the form of a dialogue. This dialogue consisted of a conversation she once had with her old pen pal, who told her that she had become nervous about writing letters to Sarah. Sarah’s friend assumed that since Sarah had started her studies as teacher on Finnish at university, she probably checked all the letters for spelling and grammar errors. Instead of explaining her emotions bluntly and directly, Sarah used dialogue to allow her emotions to be revealed interlinearly, between the lines.

In the teachers’ narratives, one of the most apparent reasons for joining the writing group was finding a *Time and place for writing*. As teachers’ stories moved on to adulthood and the present day, they narrated that in their daily life they mostly used writing to carry out mundane chores and stay in touch with friends, family and colleagues. Creative writing was described as something dear and longed for, yet unobtainable oftentimes. In their hectic life, having time to write was perceived as a precious moment for relaxing, reflecting and learning. Although the storyline chosen for this word image describes a gradual distancing from writing when growing up, there were alternative stories in the teachers’ narratives as well. From writing blogs, poems and diaries to taking prose courses and song writing, some teachers mentioned having always been active writers. For example, Peter wrote that during his adulthood studies ‘creative writing has remained in the background, but nevertheless, I have always written something: short stories, school plays and song lyrics.’

The longing for creative and expressive writing was very visible in the teachers’ narratives. For example Elsa, who used to be an active writer as a child, gave up creative writing when she faced big challenges in her adolescence. Later in life, Elsa discovered writing to be a

way of dealing with difficult experiences, from the challenges of work life to the passing of her mother. She had yearned for a time and place to write, and after the writing groups first meeting she put her experience to words: ‘It is rare to have time to just be still and quiet with one’s own thoughts. [...] It makes things so much lighter and easier when one does it. Who else is going to listen to me, if not me, myself?’

Discussion and implications

The current study investigated how in-service teachers narrated their relationship to and expectations of writing in an autobiographical creative writing group. By combining *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis* (Polkinghorne, 1995), a *word image* was composed from each teacher’s narrative, beginning with his or her childhood story and concluding with his/her hopes and goals for the future. The word image illustrates the culture and everyday life of Finnish school teachers, from their deep commitment of addressing their students’ needs and developing themselves professionally to handling stressful demands and hectic workdays. Through the word image, the teachers’ need for time and space to relax and unwind as well as to reflect upon their work and express their thoughts became apparent. Themes related to teachers as writers, their well-being as well as learning and teaching were also examined. As noted by Clandinin and colleagues (2006), creating a word image is a highly interpretive process and may portray a unidimensional account of teachers’ lives. Nevertheless, by conjoining thematic analysis and the word image, we were able to present an in-depth narrative in which the teachers are ‘given voice’. Thus, the study adds to the growing body of literature on narrative methods in educational research.

In the narratives of this study, the personal, professional and social aspects of teacher development and identity work were intertwined. According to Hunt (2000), participants of autobiographical creative writing courses usually seek to develop not only as writers, but also on personal level. This is visible in the teachers’ written narratives and stories as well. The teachers hoped to develop their expressive language, to learn new methods and receive tools for writing. They also emphasised the wish to find their ‘own voice’ as writers. On a personal level, the teachers aimed to enhance their well-being and to explore their identities. The teachers also hoped to discover new pedagogical tools and to find new perspectives for teaching writing to their students.

In addition to being a medium for development, the teachers also saw writing as therapeutic and as a way to support their well-being. This was one of the main findings of this research and emphasises the importance of taking emotions and personal experiences into account when supporting teachers’ professional development and learning (see Tynjälä et al., 2016). The therapeutic effects of, for example, writing stories and poems or keeping a journal are indeed well recognised in the field of creative writing research (Bolton, 1999; Thompson, 2006). Many of the teachers underlined writing’s potential for dealing with troubling matters in both one’s personal and professional life. Furthermore, the teachers saw the writing group as an opportunity to share life experiences and discuss writing with their peers. Through writing and sharing their experiences in the writing group, the teachers expected to strengthen and support their identity work and well-being.

The teachers in the writing group saw creative writing as a way of expressing and reflecting on their experiences from different perspectives. Indeed, the data of this study consist of 22 very different creative narratives, written in different formats as letter, poems, diary

pages, dialogue and stories. For instance, many of the teachers' narratives were written in the form of a letter addressing an old friend or even the facilitator of the group. These letters illustrated the teachers' longing for writing, and shed light on their previous writing experiences. In this article, some examples have been given to illustrate the teachers' use of literary language. Using different literary mediums such as positioning (third-person narration), metaphors and dialogue in their writing helped the teachers narrate their lives in illustrative ways. For example, using prose allowed the teachers to explore an event as an outsider (fictionalising themselves) or putting themselves in a child's position (memorising a childhood event). Literature on creative writing argue that through literary methods, a writer can change perspectives, take a distance from or zoom into a certain experience or emotion and find new ways to express and process those experiences and emotions (Hunt, 2000; Kähmi, 2015; Kosonen, 2015).

An encouraging addition to the small but slowly growing body of literature on utilising creative writing methods in teacher development, the findings of this study suggest that autobiographical creative writing can be a valuable way to support teacher development. Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this study. The participants of the present study were a relatively small group of voluntary teachers with a positive interest to writing. An issue that was not addressed in this study was how to support those teachers who are not willing or motivated to write. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalised to all teachers. However, as professional, social and personal aspects of teacher development and identity were clearly intertwined in the teachers' narratives, this study supports the idea that teacher development and identity should be examined as a whole, taking into consideration all three aspects (Geeraerts et al., 2015). Furthermore, the findings of this study shed new light on teachers' relationship to writing suggesting that autobiographical creative writing groups can support in-service teachers' development.

Creative writing can bring new perspectives to pre-service and in-service teacher training. As academic writing is dominant in teacher education, adding literary methods can provide teachers more holistic ways to express and explore themselves. Furthermore, creative writing can be used as a medium for supporting teacher well-being. However, more research is needed to further explore the benefits and challenges of creative writing and writing groups for teachers. Future research could concentrate on teachers' perceptions and experiences of autobiographical creative writing groups as medium for supporting teacher identity and development.

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