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Narratives of professional development in a teachers' creative writing group

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores teachers' experiences of professional development in a creative writing group. The data was collected in a teachers' creative writing group and consist of semi-structured interviews and creative writing assignments. Reflexive thematic analysis and narrative analysis were applied to compose a nonfiction piece that describes the teachers' experiences of a 'year of creative writing'. Within the nonfiction piece, four themes were presented as findings of the study: social aspects, personal and emotional aspects, writer identity aspects, and pedagogical aspects. The results suggest that utilising creative writing methods in qualitative research can raise otherwise hidden voices and experiences that may be difficult to express through the academic language.

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Introduction

The changing world challenges educational systems around the globe to develop innovative approaches to support teachers' professional development. For example, in Finland, the current curriculum for basic education introduces transversal competences such as creative, multiliterate and self-regulative skills (FNBE 2014) that demand teachers to develop their pedagogical skills to support their pupils' learning. In order to pass on these skills, teachers could be offered, as one experimental solution, opportunities to develop themselves using creative methods, such as creative writing. Furthermore, all teachers are writing teachers, regardless of the subjects they teach or their students' age or writing skills (Peterson 2008). Therefore, teachers could benefit from opportunities that help them develop themselves as writers and writing teachers. Although teachers' relationship to writing and the pedagogy of writing has been studied in recent years (i.e. Cremin and Oliver 2017; Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018; Yoo 2018), there remains a gap in the research on teachers as writers and as writing teachers, and the dynamic interplay between these two roles (e.g. Cremin et al. 2020).

Both the academic literature and educational policy documents have emphasised that in order to support teachers' professional development, teachers should be offered both

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individual and personally inspiring education that facilitates the development of both teachers and school communities (OECD 2019; Senge et al. 2012). Therefore, in addition to supporting teachers personally, teachers' professional development should aim at developing schools and supporting pupils' learning (e.g. Avalos 2011; Senge et al. 2012). Furthermore, despite the rewarding and motivating nature of teaching, teacher stress is a global challenge for education (Johnson et al. 2005; Steinhardt et al. 2011) and, therefore, several studies have suggested that teachers' professional development should incorporate support for bouncing back and dealing with emotions. This paper thus views teachers' professional development holistically, taking into consideration different aspects of teachers' lives, such as personal experiences, classroom pedagogy, school development, and social aspects (Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Alsup 2019; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Bell and Gilbert 1996).

According to recent studies, teachers perceive that writing about their lives can support their professional development (e.g. Anspal, Eisenschmidt, and Löfström 2012; Schultz and Ravitch 2013; Seland 2017). Overall, creativity and creative expression might bring new perspectives to teachers' pedagogical thinking and teaching actions (Loveless 2012). However, more research is needed on concrete practices that can support teachers' professional development as a whole through creative writing as a creative arts-based method (e.g. Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018; Seland 2017).

To fill the research gap described above, this paper studies supporting teachers' professional development in a teachers' creative writing group. Aiming at contributing to the growing area of qualitative arts-based research, the present study utilises narrative methods to illustrate the teachers' unique experiences and to bring out their voices as writers and teachers. This article presents a creative nonfiction piece called *A Year of Creative Writing*, where the first author has conveyed the findings from the empirical data in the form of a story that uses techniques of fiction (Sinner 2013; Smith 2016).

Holistic approach to teachers' professional development through creative writing practices

During the last few decades, research on teacher development has moved beyond the 'teachers' acquisition of "assets", such as knowledge, competencies, or beliefs as the basis of professional development' (Akkerman and Meijer 2011, 308) towards a more holistic understanding of being a teacher, a shift that integrates teacher development with teacher identity. For example, Bell and Gilbert (1996) have stated that the social, personal and professional dimensions are intertwined in the processes that support teachers' professional development (see also Geeraerts et al. 2015). On the other hand, teachers' professional development can be depicted as processes of learning, growth and development of teachers' expertise, leading to changes in their practice to support their pupils' learning (Avalos 2011). Taken together, this paper views teachers' professional development as a process of extending teachers self-knowledge, including reflecting on identity, and simultaneously, as a process of developing pedagogical, social and personal skills that aim at supporting learning.

The present study underlines that teacher identity cannot be clearly divided into 'professional identity' and 'personal identity' (Alsup 2019). This interconnectedness between the personal and professional is highlighted in the dialogical approach to teacher identity,

which views the complex nature of identity as simultaneously multiple and unified, discontinuous and continuous, and social and individual (see Akkerman and Meijer 2011). When leaning towards the idea of teacher identity as constantly shaping and dynamic and involving both personal and professional aspects of identity (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009), teachers' identity work is understood as a process of expanding self-knowledge through reflecting on personal and professional experiences (Stenberg 2010). In sum, the holistic approach to professional development includes a holistic understanding of teacher identity.

This paper examines creative writing as a means for supporting teachers' professional development. Next, taking into consideration the holistic nature of teacher development, we will discuss writing from the perspectives of narrative identity work (me as a person; a writer and a teacher), and pedagogical development as writing teachers (me as a writing teacher).

The present study views professional development from a narrative perspective: we build our own identities as we narrate our lives and share those narratives with others, and our identities are shaped and reformed by narratives told by our families, friends, colleagues and society (e.g. Bruner 1987; Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001; Ricoeur 1991). In addition to supporting teacher development, storytelling can give teachers a voice in the educational research field, and therefore teacher stories can also develop the teaching profession itself (Breault 2010).

Creative writing researchers suggest that writing can enhance teachers' professional development through narrative identity work: creative writing allows us to deal with our experiences and emotions from different perspectives, change perspective, step back from or zoom into a certain experience or emotion, and find new ways to express ourselves (Bolton 1999, 2006; Hunt 2000; Kosonen 2015). Telling, writing and sharing stories about our life experiences allows us to stop and reflect on our lives from different perspectives, and can thus have a long-lasting positive impact on our development and our lives (Ihanus 2019; Pennebaker and Chung 2007). In addition, creative writing can enhance our learning capability. Based on their research on expressive writing's effects on health, Sexton et al. (2009) suggest that expressive writing can enhance the writer's working memory functions, as expressing stressful thoughts can free space in their working memory. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) sees creative writing as a natural way of achieving a flow state, an optimal state in which the individual experiences such high enjoyment and intrinsic motivation towards the task at hand that they lose their sense of time or feel otherwise emotionally elevated. Experiencing flow can enhance well-being (Boniwell 2012) by helping recover from work and recharge, which, in turn, lowers stress levels and motivates self-development.

According to a literature review by Cremin and Oliver (2017), pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes that give opportunities to reflect on personal writing histories, engage in writing, discuss textual processes and participate in a community of practice, can influence teachers' pedagogical practices as well as their perceptions of themselves as writers. Furthermore, taking part in a teachers' creative writing workshop, instructed by professional writers, encouraged the teachers to increase creative writing in their own classrooms, which seemed to positively impact their pupils' motivation and confidence towards writing (Cremin et al. 2020). Cremin and Oliver (2017) suggest that teachers' confidence as writers influences their pedagogical choices regarding, for

example, whether to offer more reflective approaches to their teaching of writing. Moreover, engaging teachers as creative writers can enhance their professional development and inspire them to develop their pedagogical practices (Yoo 2018). In the light of these findings, teachers' identities as writers and the role of emotions in creative writing processes deserve increased recognition and attention in future research (Cremin and Oliver 2017).

Aim of the study and the research question

The current study aims at shedding light on teachers' experiences of professional development in a teachers' creative writing group. The aim is to give voice to teachers' diverse stories of being a creative writer and a teacher. The research question is as follows:

- (1) What kinds of stories of professional development do the teachers narrate regarding their experiences in the writing group?

In addition, the methodological aim of the current study is to utilise creative writing an integral part of the narrative analysis process in order to compose a narrative nonfiction piece that illustrates the important themes in the teachers' stories.

Methodology

The context, participants, and study design

During the academic year 2016–2017, 11 Finnish teachers participated in a teachers' creative writing group. The group included three men and eight women, with an age range from 30 to 60 years, who had served as in-service teachers for five to more than thirty years. The writing group, comprising lower and upper comprehensive school (age 7–13 and 13–16, respectively) teachers in a middle-sized Finnish city, met seven times, three hours each time, to engage in creative writing, discuss writing pedagogy and share experiences of being a teacher and a writer. The teachers were recruited via an email invitation sent by the municipal educational administration to all teachers in the school district.

In the writing group, teachers wrote different autobiographical creative texts using literary genres to express themselves and to explore their identities. In each session, the teachers did short writing exercises (e.g. freewriting, lists, poems), broader literary exercises (e.g. short stories, letters, dialogues) and discussed their experiences of writing and of teaching writing. The topics of the writing assignments drew on personal experiences that varied from childhood memories to life as a teacher, and they can be described as 'autobiographical creative writing', where the writer draws on experiences and memories from his or her own life to create a literary end product (Hunt 2010). To help them develop as writers, the teachers were given feedback by the instructor. Teachers also had opportunities for giving and receiving peer-feedback.

In addition to supporting the teachers' personal writing, the social aspect and opportunities for peer support were acknowledged in facilitating the writing group. Drawing from personal experience as a peer-group mentor and theoretical knowledge of

peer-group mentoring for teacher development (Pennanen, Heikkinen, and Tynjälä 2020; Tynjälä et al. 2019), the instructor of the writing group and the first author of this paper sought to create a positive experience for the participants. Ways of supporting the success of the group were physical and practical, such as serving refreshments and arranging the meetings at a convenient time in an aesthetic, pleasant space with good air quality; social, such as giving time for open conversation; and structural, such as creating a clear structure for the group meetings (Tynjälä et al. 2019).

Each group meeting started with a short warm-up writing assignment and introduction round, followed by one to three longer writing assignments. Each meeting featured discussions on writing and pedagogy. The teachers mostly wrote by themselves and did not share their writings with their peers. However, in most meetings the teachers were also asked if they wanted to read aloud one of the texts they had written that day, and in one of the meetings, the teachers participated in a collaborative online-writing drama assignment. In the last two meetings, the teachers were divided into small groups in order to give and receive peer feedback on their writing. As the writing group was a part of the instructor's research process, she took copies of most of the writing assignments, but emphasised that sharing their writings with her was optional. During the year, the instructor kept the teachers informed of how she was planning to utilise the data she had gathered, and shared with them, for example, a narrative poem she had composed from the teachers' creative writing assignments (Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018).

Ethical questions were taken into consideration following the principles of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics. Participants gave written consent to take part in the study, and the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Data and methods

The data of the current study consist of (1) creative writing assignments (one from each 11 participants) written by the teachers who participated in the writing group, and (2) interviews of each 11 participants (150 pages of transcribed interviews). Firstly, the written data were collected in the last meeting of the group. The teachers were given an assignment to freely write about their experiences of the creative writing group, reflecting on how the group had met their expectations and what they had learned and achieved in the group. This assignment was free form, meaning that the teachers were able to decide what literary genre to use. These creative writings varied from journal pages to letters and poems. Secondly, after the group's last meeting, each teacher took part in an individual semi-structured interview in which they continued to reflect on their perceptions of the writing group with respect to their development as writers and teachers.

A narrative researcher can take on a position of (1) a 'story analyst' or (2) a 'storyteller', which are equivalent to (1) 'analysis of narratives' and (2) 'narrative analysis' (Polkinghorne 1995; Smith 2016). However, Smith (2016) reminds us that a researcher can simultaneously operate both as a story analyst and a storyteller in order to best serve the purpose of the research at hand. In the current study, the analysis can be divided into two phases, in which the first utilised the 'story analyst' or 'analysis of narratives' approach, and the second the 'storyteller' or 'narrative analysis' approach. Combining

these two standpoints, we were able to form a deep and profound understanding of the data and to compose a nonfiction narrative of the teachers' stories.

The data analysis proceeded as follows. First, the data was carefully read multiple times. Transcription, preliminary notes and codes were carried out shortly after collecting the data. The primary analysis was conducted by applying reflexive thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019), which, according to Lainson, Braun, and Clarke (2019), can be a practical medium in narratively informed research. This part of the analysis started with deep familiarisation with the data and generating codes that identified important features of the data regarding the research question. The next phases aimed at creating and naming themes that represent different perspectives or facets of creative writing as a means for supporting professional development. The themes were: (1) Aspects of writer identity, (2) Aspects of personal growth and emotions, (3) Pedagogical aspects, and (4) Social aspects. Within those concepts, 15 subthemes were created.

Finally, with respect to each theme, the first author of this article composed a short story called *A Year of Creative Writing* through a 'reflective, participatory, and aesthetic process' (Leavy 2020). This narrative method can be referred to as 'creative nonfiction', where findings from the empirical data are conveyed in the form of a story that uses techniques of fiction (Sinner 2013; Smith 2016). According to Sinner (2013), the literary form of creative nonfiction renders contents (facts and events) with form (the conventions of fiction writing), including narrative voice, persona, authentic characterisation of place and settings, and pursuit of an idea or a goal. It aims at creating conditions to 'reconsider, rethink and redefine how information is understood and what knowing should be at the forefront in scholarship', thus moving 'toward greater social, political and intellectual consciousness' (Sinner 2013, 4).

In this study, creating the nonfiction piece aims at a holistic approach, thus moving from merely dividing the themes of professional development in the teachers' stories into distinct categories. In the nonfiction piece, the first author has incorporated the teachers' own phrases from their reflective creative writing assignments to elaborate, bring out and respect the teachers' own unique voices. Once the creative nonfiction piece was completed, the first author contacted the former members of the creative writing group, offering them a chance to read it and comment, if, for example, they wished their phrases to be removed, or felt unable to identify with the piece.

The composing on the creative nonfiction piece joins this study into the tradition of narrative 'storytelling', that is, incorporating fiction and qualitative research. Leavy (2020) argues that using forms of fiction as a research practice allows us to (1) portray the complexity of lived experience through details, nuance, specificity, contexts, and texture, (2) cultivate empathy and self-reflection through relatable characters, and (3) disrupts dominant ideologies or stereotypes by showing and not telling, thus building critical consciousness and raising awareness (Leavy 2020). At its core, utilising fiction in narrative research aims at making a change and broadening the readers' views through appealing to the readers' imagination and challenging the readers' ideas about educational phenomena (Kim 2008).

In this study, we have aimed at giving voice to the teachers while examining their stories, in forms of the creative writing assignments and the interviews, within the framework and context of the cultural and political atmosphere in the educational field of the time. Through this approach we hope to combine 'theory and stories' (Kim 2008, 257), or,

in other words, shift from the micro level (teachers' personal experiences of the creative writing group) to the macro level (theoretical perspectives of professional development during educational reforms), thus bringing validity to our work (Leavy 2020). In order to combine art and research, we have adapted Kim's (2008) Bakhtinian novelness in our narrative work, which refers to using different voices that present partial truths of equal participants (polyphony), placing the stories in context (chronotope), and placing counternarratives as equals to the mainstream ones (carnival).

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in the form of a creative nonfiction piece called *A Year of Creative Writing*. The nonfiction piece illustrates the teachers' perceptions of the creative writing group through the perspective of a fictional first-person narrator. The nonfiction piece is divided into four chapters, each of which portrays the teacher-writer's experiences from the viewpoint of one of the theme drawn from the reflexive thematic analysis. Within the nonfiction piece, phrases from the teachers' original creative writing assignments are highlighted in *italic* font. It should be noted that in the data of this study, the different themes or aspects of professional development were often intertwined. Therefore, each theme is present on some level in each chapter. Following the creative nonfiction piece, the themes and subthemes of the teachers' narratives are further discussed.

A year of creative writing

Summer [Aspects of writer identity]

Why did I stop writing?

I've been asking myself that question over again for the past few years, but this is the first time I've actually sat down and written about it. It'd be easy to answer this question on a shallow level. It'd be easy to point an accusing finger at the hurries and worries of everyday life, to explain that most of my time nowadays goes on taking care of my pupils, my kids, the home. Taking care of myself is limited to exercising when I can and the odd night out with friends. There's simply no time for writing. But I know, though, that the real answer isn't that simple. There's a deeper reason for my absence from writing. I'm scared of what I might discover if I go back to the pen and a blank page. *What if nothing comes? What if my dream is nothing but an empty shell?* I am afraid, afraid that writing will bring back hurtful memories and invoke painful feelings.

Until recently, I believed that if I just keep a distance from it and stay busy, it would stay under control. I used to fear that if I stop rushing and start listening to myself I'd lose that precious control and break down. But what if, actually, it's the opposite? What if facing myself and allowing myself time to reflect on my life would help me become a better person? What if being brave and creative could help me become a better teacher to the kids who need me to encourage them? *When I heard about this group, I immediately felt it was meant for me.* I had to come, no matter how scared I was.

Now I am here, in a peaceful classroom in the university's newest building, where everything is white, with a subtle scent of new timber in the air. *Instead of driving the kids to their hobbies, I now have my own hobby marked and circled on my calendar.* I am

here, because a voice inside me has been begging to be heard for a long time. When we all introduce ourselves, I realise that the other teachers in the group have similar thoughts to me. The first writing assignment, a five-minute poem, feels intimidating at first. The others start writing. I am not a poet, I am a teacher, I think to myself. Maybe coming here was a mistake. The instructor suggests that, if nothing comes to mind, we write about how it feels to be here. 'Don't think, just write,' she says, 'this is just a short exercise and you don't have to share it with anyone.' I close my eyes, breathe deeply and start again, this time with an open mind. Words start rushing in, and in two minutes, there is a poem in front of me. *So what if the text isn't perfect!*

When the first meeting is over I feel *euphoric and want to keep writing more*. Maybe this year of creative writing will be just what I needed. *Maybe this isn't rocket science after all.*

Autumn [Aspects of personal growth and emotions]

I step quickly past the museum towards the white campus building. It's raining; perfectly not-perfect Finnish late autumn weather is flushing through the emptying parking lot, throwing brown leaves and large drops of slushy rain at me. I'm in a hurry, running late, so I quickly make my way inside. Right now, I feel like there isn't a creative bone in my body; all I can think about is the confusion from today's curriculum training. Was I the only one out of all my colleagues who didn't understand how the school district's new assessment protocols were meant to help my pupils learn? On top of all that, I've been feeling those familiar blues in the autumn air, lately.

My jacket leaves a trail of drips on the stairs, my feet ache, and I feel a dull pain rising in the back of my skull. I leave the wet jacket outside the classroom, too stressed to care if it makes a puddle on the pristine floor. The moment I make my way inside the room, though, a small change begins to happen inside me. It starts from my heart, still beating from exhaustion, but slowly recovering, and then moves to my lungs. I start taking deeper breaths. I smell coffee and tea. I check the time on my phone; I'm actually only a few minutes late, it seems.

'Feel free to grab a cup of tea', our instructor says. I pour tea into white porcelain and sit down next to one of my new classmates, who smiles at me and asks how I am. Her effortless gesture helps me calm down. Forgetting my stressed and hasty appearance, I take out my pen and a little notebook. I remember that here I am *allowed to stop and stay quiet, and allowed to get excited and be loud*. I am here as a member of a group, but more importantly, I am here to be alone with myself.

'Today we are going to get right to it with a little freewriting exercise. We've practised this before, but just to remind you, these writings are just for you. Just let yourself go, write whatever comes to mind and don't worry about the grammar or making mistakes. This is just a warm up, which I think we all need in this weather.' After making sure we all know what to do, the instructor gives us the cue to begin.

I open my notebook, and the first thing I write is *'Writing is a way to fill emptiness with words, to create a new world, to give birth to a new world, if nothing else.'* The frantic work day pours onto the paper like the rain outside. A strange lightness settles in my heart with each word I write, and I suddenly forget what I was so stressed about. When the allotted five minutes are up, we all raise our eyes from our writing and put down our pens. *I feel good, and light.*

Winter [Pedagogical aspects]

The child in front of me is struggling with school and taking his frustration out on anyone who gets in his way. With small steps, I have started to encourage him to express his feelings by drawing and writing. 'Put those feelings and that rage on paper', I carefully suggest, and hand him a pen. The pupil in front of me is restless with self-doubt. 'I'm not a good writer', he says, 'I can't even get started.' He starts drawing angry lines and cranky stickmen. I encourage him to forget about the rules of school writing: the titles, the planning, the goals. 'Just write something, write whatever comes to mind. Write what makes you angry. And don't worry, I won't read what you write. This is for you, not for me or the school.' He sighs, but then leans over the table and starts writing.

I've started mirroring my writing group experiences in my teaching. If creative writing has worked for me, why not for my pupils, too? Strengthening self-regulation skills and self-knowledge are important themes in the new curriculum. Alongside subject knowledge, transversal competences have been emphasised and expressed more clearly. Wellbeing isn't just pretty words in the curriculum, but an important contributor to learning. I'm trying to see that supporting my pupils to express themselves and deal with difficult emotions is not time away from learning but, in fact, an important part of what I can teach them.

Now that I've been in the writing group, I've experienced how difficult, yet rewarding, writing can be. I can also see the importance of being guided and scaffolded. *I don't think I would have been able to see other perspectives without being prompted by the writing group instructor.* I've also been reminded how much potential lies in peer support and feedback. *The instructor's feedback has felt especially elevating, and at times even made me feel slightly embarrassed, that my writing wasn't worth such great feedback.* Giving experiences of support, encouragement and praise to my pupils seems even more important now that I've experienced their power myself. *But how to help pupils develop their skills in receiving and giving feedback as a natural part of the writing process?*

Words have a strange might. When you let them loose, new perspectives and insights can appear. Memories are transformed into stories that we can see and read. When you learn to let go of your inner critic and release control, unexpected words and thoughts can be born. The outcome doesn't have to be a piece of art, not even a diamond in the rough. It's enough just to give ourselves those small moments – time and place for peaceful soul-searching.

Spring [Social aspects]

In the final group meeting I'm forced to leave my comfort zone, as we share our writing and give peer feedback in small groups. *How hard it is to read my own text aloud and be peer-assessed!* Then I realise that we are just teachers who are here not to judge but to share. We end up discussing less about the writing and more about being a teacher. There is a sense of belonging, even though I haven't always been eager to share my inner thoughts with the other teachers in the group.

Once again, I have learned something new and gained new building blocks for this adventure called life. For the past year, *I have been collecting stories, experiences and great and small moments within me to share with others.* These meetings have given me a chance to write and discuss writing with other teacher-writers. I came here on my own, but I discovered that there is a special power in sharing and peer support. It has been important to

see that others are faced with the same questions, that others carry something within themselves as well.

We are asked to reflect on the past year. The genre is optional. *Shall I have a go at poetry, prose, or prose poetry this time, to perhaps illuminate some of the dark matter weighing on me?* Maybe I'll just try and be myself, let the words come. After all, that's what I've been doing all year: *trying different creative writing methods, different genres*, while at the same time *trying to look more kindly at myself as a writer*. Writing about my life has helped me grow. It has been something *heavy, aching, beloved, my own*. I can now say that I have a dear hobby, that I am, indeed, a writer.

As the meeting comes to an end, I feel nostalgic in a grateful way. Part of me wishes we could continue these meetings, but another part feels ready to move on and let go. The group has given me new perspectives on teaching writing and helped me understand my pupils a little bit better. Most importantly, though, *writing has opened my eyes* to parts of me that I wasn't connected with before. Allowing myself to be creative and vulnerable has *also taken courage*. *I think I started out with the intention of finding my teacher and writer identity. I ended up at the edge of myself, a point of no return that taught me new things about myself*. At times, it has been a *painful, demanding, agonising road*. But, on the other hand, it *has been liberating*. And I haven't walked it alone.

As I step outside, I sense the warmth of the sun on my skin; I close my eyes and breathe. A new story is on its way. *The gateway has been opened*.

Elaborating the themes

Most present in the Summer chapter, the first theme, (1) *Aspects of writer identity* deals with the teachers' relationship to writing itself. The subthemes within this theme were Developing as a writer; Reflecting on my own voice; Creativity and bravery; and Ambivalence and criticism. In their narratives, the teachers' described experiencing self-doubt and uncertainty when first joining the group. Some soon discovered that the writing assignments were mostly easy to complete and described experiencing enjoyment and empowerment. However, some described that they sometimes struggled with starting assignments, and at times felt that they did not achieve their desired level of aesthetics in their writing. However, some of the most commonly used expressions the teachers used when asked about what they had gained from the writing group were bravery, freedom, enjoyment, flow, and encouragement to engage in creative writing. In addition, the writing group gave the teachers opportunities to try different genres and assignments. Although the teachers were not primarily motivated to join the group for purposes of developing their writing skills, many of them mentioned that it was useful and inspiring to try out different writing methods and explore different genres, some of which were not initially 'their cup of tea'. This, for some, aided in finding what they called their 'own voice', such as using a specific dialect, or in discovering their own future plans and goals as writers, such as writing autobiographical short stories about childhood to be shared with future generations.

Within the theme (2) *Aspects of personal growth and emotions*, most clearly illustrated in the Autumn chapter, the following subthemes were created: My life story; Expressing and reflecting on emotions and thoughts; Bouncing back, enjoyment

and flow; and Searching for Me. In the writing group, the teachers were given assignments in different genres to write about their lives, from childhood to future hopes. In addition, each meeting featured short warm-up assignments, such as freewriting, where the teachers were able to unload their thoughts. The assignments seemed to open up new perspectives on their life stories, thus rebuilding their identities holistically. Expressions that came up most often within this theme dealt with empowerment, bouncing back, self-discovery, and having their own time and space for calming in the middle of their hectic every-day lives. One teacher beautifully described their experiences of creative writing as similar to meditation, with the difference that 'writing leaves a concrete mark'. Some of the teachers experienced burdensome situations in their professional and personal lives during the year of creative writing, which they were able to deal with in the meetings.

In theme (3) *Pedagogical aspects*, the focus is on being a teacher and teaching writing. This theme is demonstrated in the Winter chapter. Three subthemes were generated: Encouraging creativity; Classroom practices; and Developing assessment. The teachers' thoughts on pedagogy were partly linked to the curriculum reform (FNBE 2014), which was especially relevant in the primary school teachers' lives at that time as it had been put into practice during that year, and there was still a lot of development work underway, for example regarding the new assessment system. Finding new pedagogical ideas, discussing with peers, and clarifying the importance of assessment and encouragement for their teaching were some of the most important discoveries that the teachers mentioned in the interviews. Although teachers acknowledged the importance of supporting creativity, they often felt forced to leave creativity in the background and focus on other subject content. This pressure was often related to textbooks, illustrating the teachers' fear of being 'left behind'. On the other hand, teachers felt that offering different creative assignments could lower the threshold especially for those pupils who struggle with writing. Thus, they appreciated the concrete ideas they were able to apply in their classrooms, and a few mentioned that they could have benefited from even more pedagogical ideas and discussions.

Finally, the subthemes within the theme (4) *Social aspects* were named as follows: This is my dear hobby; Peer feedback and instructors' assessment; Peer support and belonging; and Alone together. The theme was portrayed in the Spring chapter. The teachers described the group atmosphere as communal, positive, broad-minded, and encouraging. For some, the social nature of the writing group and the peer support it provided were among the most crucial factors. On the other hand, some preferred to focus on their own work, and did not experience a strong connection with the other group members. Between the previous two, were a group of teachers who enjoyed the peer discussions and sharing knowledge, but mostly were 'alone together'. Having a 'real writing hobby' and a set time and space for writing in a group was essential for many: the positive effect of group pressure helped them stick with writing and increased their writing activities.

Discussion and implications

The aim of this paper was to study creative writing as a means to support teachers' professional development. Furthermore, this study aimed at exploring the use of creative

writing in the qualitative, narrative data analysis and the reporting of the results. Using the data collected in this study, the methodological aim was to compose a creative nonfiction piece, a story of being a teacher and of embarking on creative writing in the setting of a teachers' writing group. Based on the thematic data analysis process, the creative nonfiction piece illuminates the diverse and meaningful narratives of the teachers. It also paints a picture of being a teacher in the midst of educational curriculum reform in Finland, which took place during the year of data collection.

From a pedagogical perspective, writing and reflecting on their writing experiences helped the teachers to see themselves as 'writing teachers' and to stop and think about their own ways of teaching. This discovery is in line with previous research (e.g. Cremin et al. 2020; Cremin and Oliver 2017; Yoo 2018). However, the findings of this study go beyond classroom practices and pedagogical insights.

According to the results, the teachers met the goals they had set for themselves in the group in terms of developing as both writers and writing teachers, but also as individuals. Creatively expressing themselves via different genres and writing assignments seemed to support their narrative identity work (Stenberg 2010; see also Bruner 1987; Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001; Ricoeur 1991). This study is thus in line with previous findings indicating the holistic benefits of creative writing for individual growth (Bolton 1999; Hunt 2000; Ihanus 2019; Kosonen 2015). Furthermore, the teachers stated that the writing group offered them social, personal and professional support and offered them the time and space for writing that they had longed for. For the teachers, the practices of the creative writing group seemed to serve as a means of silencing the controlling inner critique, facing fears and listening to their inner world. Furthermore, the group offered an opportunity to share and tell their stories, and discuss writing with their peers.

The results, including the themes, subthemes and the nonfiction piece, support the claim that teachers' professional development should be examined as a whole, using holistic methods and respecting the integrative nature of different aspects of identity and professional development (e.g. Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Alsup 2019; Bell and Gilbert 1996; Geeraerts et al. 2015). We suggest that creative writing groups can offer teachers not only a space and time to write and engage in narrative identity work, but also an opportunity to meet other writers, discuss their writing experiences, and share pedagogical ideas, thereby continuing the process of writing and learning.

Kim (2008) encourages narrative researchers to engage in narrative theorising, that is, the intentional process of questioning and interrogating the nature of their narrative work, aiming at re-establishing and re-affirming its significance. One way to do this is by examining the analysis process and the results of the study through the lens of Bakhtinian novelness (polyphony, chronotope, carnival) (Kim 2008). We argue that this study, and especially the creative nonfiction piece: (1) portrays different voices and presents partial truths of equally treated participants (polyphony), as the nonfiction piece is composed of the stories told by 11 teachers; and (2) places the voices or stories in time, space and context (chronotope), as the nonfiction piece is put together so that each part (Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring) is set in different seasons and environments and with notes on the Finnish educational reform of that time; and (3) considers counternarratives as equal to the mainstream narratives (carnival), as the nonfiction piece introduces new perspectives and views brought up in the data by the 11 teachers, and was also sent

to each participant of the writing group to allow them an opportunity to add something or to state if they did not identify with the nonfiction piece. In the more traditional part of the Results section, we further discuss the themes, thus deepening and enriching our interpretation of the data. Based on this analysis, we suggest that utilising creative writing methods in narrative research can raise and highlight otherwise hidden voices and experiences that may be difficult to express through the academic language used in traditional journal articles.

One limitation of the study is that the participants were a relatively small group of teachers with a positive interest in and a personal relationship with creative writing, and as many teachers may not be motivated towards creative writing, the results cannot be generalised to all teachers. We are also critically aware that our professional roles and previous experiences have influenced the way the data is interpreted, as researchers' theoretical assumptions, analytic resources and the data itself influence the process of our thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2019). Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the first author of this paper has a twofold position as both the facilitator and instructor of the group, and a researcher of this study. Sharing the experience of the teachers in the group and having an insider position (e. g. Berger 2015) might have impacted this study in many ways. For example, it has been easy to understand which writing tasks the teachers were referring to when describing their experiences in the group. On the other hand, the first author's personal relationship to the teachers might have made it difficult to observe the data from 'the researcher lens'. Nevertheless, our, that is, the three authors of the article, collaboration and discussions throughout each step of this study, from planning the group to discussing the analysis and the creative nonfiction piece helped the first author in shifting the focus from being an instructor to being a researcher. Lastly, as narrative researchers, we aimed not at objective generalising, but rather at bringing out the voices of the participants, seeking shared meanings in the data, and telling their stories in a form of a creative nonfiction piece in a way that is relatable and speaks to a broader audience.

The findings of this study support the idea that utilising narrative, creative methods such as creative writing groups can be beneficial for teachers' holistic professional development. Consequently, utilising creative writing methods in in-service teacher training could be a valuable way to support teachers' professional development. Based on the findings of the study, we suggest that utilising the social aspect, such as peer discussion, in the writing practices would be beneficial. Finally, as storytelling can give teachers a unique voice in the educational research field, thus developing the teaching profession itself (Breault 2010), we encourage educational researchers to bravely try different storyteller (Smith 2016) approaches such as creative nonfiction. Further research on creative writing groups and other socially engaged narrative activities is recommended in order to form a more cohesive narrative of teachers' experiences of writing and professional development.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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