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Teachers as writing students: narratives of professional development in a leisure-time creative writing community

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ABSTRACT

The authors explored five in-service teachers' experiences of professional development (PD) in Studies in Writing (30 ECTS programme at a Finnish open university) they participated in during their leisure time. Data consist of the teachers' creative writings and semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to holistically determine how the participants associated the creative writing community with their PD. The following themes were created: (1) Me as a writer, (2) Teaching and pedagogy, and (3) Writing and emotions. To illustrate these findings, three creative narratives were composed based on data excerpts. These ethnodramatic dialogues gave voice to the teachers' diverse PD experiences, enabling the authors to create evocative narratives that can be accessible to broader audiences. They suggest that creative writing communities can support teachers' PD holistically by offering peer support and pedagogical ideas, promoting narrative identity work, and offering a time and place for recovery and flow.

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Creative writing; teachers' professional development; narrative research

Introduction

This study takes a unique and narrative approach to holistically examine five Finnish in-service teachers' experiences of professional development (PD) in a Studies in Writing programme at an open university. In this study, we move away from inspecting teachers' PD as developing separate competencies, such as pedagogical content knowledge, towards a holistic view of PD as a process where aspects of personal and work life are intertwined. Teachers' PD is often researched from a perspective of pre- and in-service teacher education programmes that aim at developing skills that are directly related to teaching. Indeed, research supports the understanding of PD programmes as effective especially when they include the joint construction of pedagogical knowledge and skills in collaboration with other teachers and the learning community, as well as applying these new methods and activities to classroom teaching (Desimone 2009; Penuel et al. 2007). Yet, less is known about the impact of leisure-time activities that support teachers' PD.

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This study seeks to explore how taking part in a creative writing community can comprehensively support teachers' PD. Writing is recognised as a powerful means of PD (Cremin and Locke 2016; Kurunsaari, Tynjälä, and Piirainen 2015; Locke 2014; Ortoleva, Bétrancourt, and Billett 2015). As all teachers, regardless of the age level or specific subject they teach, are writing teachers (Peterson 2008), they benefit from the opportunity to develop themselves both as writers and as teachers of writing. Recent studies have presented encouraging findings related to teachers' PD in creative and autobiographical writing groups and workshops (Cremin et al. 2020; Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018, 2021; Schultz and Ravitch 2012). However, research on in-service teachers' experiences of studying writing in a formal context, such as at a university, and the connection to professional development is scarce.

Teaching is a challenging yet rewarding job that requires continuous learning and developing. In Finland, where teachers are highly trained professionals (see Paronen and Lappi 2018, 16, 19), the results of the Teaching and Learning International Survey 'TALIS 2018', by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), emphasise a need for in-service teacher education that will meet teachers' individual needs and offer inspiration to develop their own teaching practices (Taajamo and Puhakka 2019). Although most teachers feel satisfied in their work (e.g. OECD 2020), negative emotions, such as stress and perceptions of decreased well-being, impact teachers both globally (Johnson et al. 2005; Richards 2012; Steinhardt et al. 2011) and locally in Finland (Gluschkoff et al. 2016; OAJ 2018). As PD is a lifelong process of learning in which aspects of identity, emotions, and agency are intertwined, it may be beneficial to seek innovative ways to support teachers in that development that take into consideration aspects of both personal development and recovery from work.

The theoretical framework of this study is founded at the intersection of the educational sciences and of writing research that is usually based in the humanities. Bringing the two disciplines together is narrative research, which can be positioned under the umbrella of socio-constructivism and aims to capture people's definitions and experiences of certain situations as well as the diverse understandings and definitions of those situations (see Patton 2014, 122). This study thus approaches teachers' PD from socio-constructivist views of learning: the epistemological, ontological, and methodological foundation of this article lies in the social constructivism paradigm that is discussed in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978). This paradigm views learning as an active process of constructing knowledge by processing and reflecting upon new and previous information and experiences of social interactions in various cultural contexts (Gogus 2012; Simina 2012).

Moving beyond the traditional form of academic journal articles, we have utilised creative writing methods to portray the findings of our data analysis. This method, drawing on the narrative research tradition and especially the storyteller approach (Smith 2016), produced three ethnodramatic dialogues which are presented in the Findings section.

Aim of the study

In this study, we examine the experiences of in-service teachers who, in their leisure time, attended a creative writing programme, Studies in Writing (30 ECTS), at a Finnish open university.

The research question of this study is: What kinds of narratives can be composed of the teachers' experiences of participating in the Studies in Writing programme, especially in relation to their professional development?

Teachers' professional development

In the field of education, definitions of teachers' PD vary. Some researchers even suggest that a generally accepted definition is lacking entirely (see Desimone 2009; Sancar, Atal, and Deryakulu 2021). From mentoring and study groups to pre-service teacher training and in-service education programmes, some descriptions focus upon learning activities offered to employees (i.e. Soine and Lumpe 2014). More often, the concept of teachers' PD refers to the acquisition of skills and content knowledge related to student learning (e.g. Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Avalos 2011). Teachers' PD can also be viewed from a broader perspective and depicted as processes of learning, growth, and development of teachers' expertise, leading to changes in their practice that further support their students' learning (Avalos 2011). In addition, PD can also be understood as a collaborative process of the school staff that aims to build learning community; each teacher's PD is essential to supporting the growth of their students (Senge et al. 2012). As teachers who are able to express themselves and follow their passions in the workplace are more committed to developing their work community, schools would benefit from supporting teachers' personal mastery, i.e. the practice of developing a personal vision for one's life, which allows for the enjoyment of learning and personal and professional development (Senge et al. 2012).

Bringing together and moving beyond the previous definitions, this article is in line with a broader view that understands PD as a lifelong process of learning in which aspects of identity, emotions, and agency are intertwined (i.e. Eteläpelto et al. 2014; Goller and Paloniemi 2017). This process is influenced by social and cultural realities (Senge et al. 2012) and is connected to personal life experiences and emotions (Uitto, Jokikokko, and Estola 2015). As social, personal, and professional dimensions are interwoven in the processes that support teachers' PD (i.e. Bell and Gilbert 1996), this article approaches teachers' PD in an integrated and holistic way (i.e. Geeraerts et al. 2015).

This paper primarily draws on the model of integrative pedagogy (e.g. Tynjälä 2008; Tynjälä et al. 2016, 2019) that emphasises the importance of creating learning spaces and situations where the four basic components of PD (theoretical, practical, self-regulative, and sociocultural knowledge) are integrated with an emotional, personal dimension (Tynjälä et al. 2016). PD and learning occur through processes of reflection, transformation, and conceptualisation between the different components of expertise (for example, reflecting on personal experiences and mirroring them to the current situation or transforming theoretical knowledge into practical knowledge). These processes are mediated by integrative thinking (Kallio 2020; Tynjälä, Kallio, and Heikkinen 2020) and by problem solving and are promoted by mediating tools, including writing, discussions, collaborative learning practices, and mentoring.

The model of integrative pedagogy has been utilised in different contexts of work life and education (Tynjälä et al. 2016, 2019), such as pre-service teacher education (Tynjälä et al. 2016) and peer-mentoring groups (Kiviniemi et al. 2020; Tynjälä et al. 2019). Its elements also guide the structure and curriculum planning of the Studies in Writing programme that is studied in this article.

Narrative identity work in professional development

Identity work, that is, the active construction, (re)negotiating, and (re)building of a teacher's identity, is generally considered to be an essential part of continuous PD (Eteläpelto et al. 2014; Geeraerts et al. 2015; Vermunt et al. 2017). In this article, teacher identity is understood to be dynamic and constantly evolving and to involve both personal and professional aspects of identity (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard and Meijer 2017, 177), and teachers' identity work is seen as a process of expanding self-knowledge through reflecting on personal and professional identities and experiences (e.g. Stenberg 2010).

Narrative research views identity as an autobiographical continuum built upon interpretations of life experiences (e.g. Ricoeur 1991) and by our personal history and experiences, which take narrative forms in spoken and written stories (Bruner 1987). Teacher identity is manifested through narratives of both personal and professional experiences (Stenberg 2010). As Breault (2010) explains, storytelling assists the process of identity work by serving both a regressive and progressive function: the first helps bring into awareness the memories and emotions that have been silenced, and the latter provides a way of working out the problem on a higher level of integration. Furthermore, storytelling can give teachers a voice in the educational research field: telling teachers' stories and sharing their experiences can also develop the teaching profession itself (Breault 2010).

Creative writing to support teachers' professional development

Recent literature suggests that engaging pre- and in-service teachers in creative writing activities can enhance their PD and inspire them to develop their pedagogical practices (Woodard 2015; Yoo 2018) by providing opportunities to reflect on personal writing histories, engage in writing, discuss textual processes, and participate in a writing community of practice (Cremin and Oliver 2017). Taking part in a creative writing workshop may encourage teachers to increase and enhance creative writing lessons in their own classrooms, thus positively impacting their students' motivation and confidence towards writing (Cremin et al. 2020; Cremin and Oliver 2017).

Research suggests that taking part in a creative writing community can support teachers' PD (e.g. Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018, 2021; Schultz and Ravitch 2012) through offering a time and place for narrative identity work, reflection, peer support, and expressing emotions and experiences. The emotional labour that teachers perform via personal writing engagement might in turn enable them to help their students become aware of their emotions and perform similar emotional labour in writing (Woodard 2015).

Creative writing allows us to deal with our experiences and emotions from different perspectives, to change perspective, to step back from or zoom into a certain experience or emotion, and to find new ways to express ourselves (Bolton 1999; Hunt 2000; Kosonen 2015). For example, prose can help the writer reflect on their own life experiences (Bolton 1999). Metaphor can help the writer express difficult experiences and emotions using images (Bolton 1999; Kähmi 2015). Telling, writing, and sharing stories about one's life experiences, breaking the chains of silence, and forcing the writer to reflect on their life from different perspectives, can have a long-lasting, positive, and profound life impact (Ihanus 2019; Pennebaker and Chung 2007).

In general, writing is seen as a tool for learning through reflection (Kurunsaari, Tynjälä, and Piirainen 2015; Murtonen 2013). Some have argued that the act of construing and constructing our experiences through observation, imitation, introspection, and action (reflection) is the foundation of all human learning processes (Billett 2015, 21; see also Bolton 2010). In other words, reflection is about making sense of what we have experienced. For example, reflective writing assignments, such as learning journals and portfolios, have proven to be effective at supporting pre- and in-service teachers' learning (Johnson and Golombek 2011; Woodard 2015).

Creative writing can also offer teachers a time and place to relax and unwind (i.e. Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2021). In the literature on work-related recovery, there is indeed some evidence that engaging in creative and artistic leisure activities can enhance recovery. Previous large-scale studies (De Bloom et al. 2018; Tuisku et al. 2016) show that employee participation in creative activities during leisure time was related to perceived beneficial recovery.

One explanation of the various impacts of writing may be the experience of *flow*, that is, the state of optimal performance (Csikszentmihályi 1996), which can enhance our well-being (Boniwell 2012). During flow, we are not afraid of failure, and we feel secure and in control as we step out of our comfort zone and find that we can meet the challenge we have set for ourselves (Boniwell 2012; Csikszentmihályi 1996). Csikszentmihályi (1990) sees writing as an activity in which flow is often experienced. Through poetry, for example, one can escape the norms and boundaries of language and hurl oneself into playing with words (Bolton 1999; Csikszentmihályi 1990). In addition, Riva (2015) suggests that meaningful flow experiences can support our personal growth and learning if we draw upon and utilise them to find new resources within ourselves.

Methodology

The context, study design, and participants

Study data were collected from in-service teachers (N = 5) who, in their leisure time, participated in the Studies in Writing programme (30 ECTS, average length one year) at an open university in Finland. The programme, which is designed for anyone from an aspiring writer to a professional author who is interested in developing themselves in writing, can be applied to twice each year. In addition to practising writing, the student is introduced to a broader view of writing, including the common and varying literary traits of different genres and the socio-cultural aspects of writing. Modes of study include a variety of creative writing exercises, returning a learning journal for each course, feedback, reworking texts, reading, online learning, group work, and discussions. The model of integrative pedagogy described earlier is interwoven into the programme structure. The Studies in Writing programme consists of six courses, some of which are mandatory for all and some of which the student can choose between (see Table 1).

The students of a specific academic year who were at the end of their basic studies and employed as teachers were sent an email invitation to participate in interviews about writing and about being a teacher. They were asked for permission to use their application letters as data. Five of the contacted female teachers responded and agreed to take part in the study.

Table 1. Studies in Writing programme curriculum (30 ECTS).

Mandatory studies for all	Orientation: writing communities (5 ECTS)
	Fact and fiction in writing (5 ECTS)
	Autobiographical writing (5 ECTS)
Genres (choose two)	Prose (5 ECTS)
	Drama (5 ECTS)
	Poetry (5 ECTS)
	Non-fiction (5 ECTS)
Writing process (choose one)	Writing as a creative process (5 ECTS)
	Text collection (5 ECTS)

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. The teachers hold MA degrees and work in basic or upper secondary education in different areas of Finland, with the exception of one teacher, who did have long experience of teaching at schools, but who, at the time of the interviews, worked in educational duties in a charitable organisation. Their work experience ranged from a few years to several decades of teaching experience.

Two teachers were interviewed face to face, and three interviews took place via Skype. As the second author of this study worked as a teacher in the Studies in Writing programme, the first author of this study conducted the interviews. We acknowledge, however, that this connection with one of the programme teachers may have influenced the participants' answers to some degree.

Data and methods

The methodology of this study draws from a narrative research tradition. We chose to adopt a narrative approach, as it is in line with methods used in the Studies in Writing programme (i.e. using literary genres, writing about personal life events, and reflecting on personal experiences) and as it makes it possible to form a holistic understanding of teacher development. It also is a subject-driven way to collect data and thus ensures that teachers' voices will be heard. Narrative research is set within an intermediate zone between art and science (Bochner and Herrman 2020), and in this research, the analysis process aimed at composing a piece of literary art.

The study's data, that is, the teachers' written creative application letters (two pages each) from four teachers and semi-structured thematic interviews (66 pages of transcribed text), were analysed using a qualitative, narrative approach. Using both interviews and creative writings as data can be seen as one way of increasing the validity of narrative (action) research, as using different data 'gives space to different voices and interpretations of the same events' (Heikkinen, Huttunen, and Syrjälä 2007, 13). Data and methods are presented in Figure 1.

The teachers' application letters, which were written in creative and personal styles, were read and discussed in depth. This provided us with information about each participant and helped us plan the semi-structured interviews, which were also informed by the researchers' previous theoretical knowledge. The teachers were then individually interviewed by the first author of this article. In the interviews, the teachers were first asked

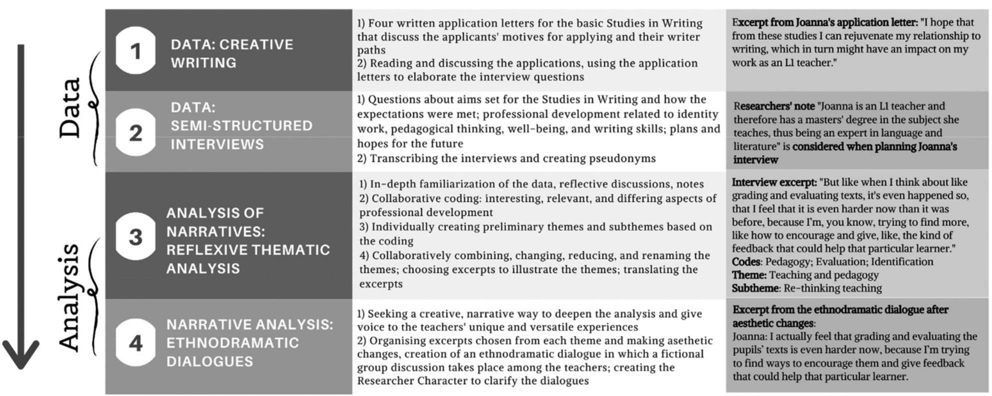

Figure 1. The data collection and analysis process with examples from Joanna (pseudonym).

about their motives for applying to the Studies in Writing programme. They were also asked to explain their hopes and goals for the studies and whether and how these goals had been achieved during the studies. The teachers were then asked how writing and the Studies in Writing programme in particular had affected their personal and PD. They were also asked how the programme had influenced their personal writing skills, their view of pedagogy and teaching writing to students, and their well-being. The teachers were encouraged to describe specific lessons, methods, and practices in Studies in Writing that they felt had been useful to their development. Finally, the teachers were asked to describe their future plans and expectations concerning creative writing. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed.

In this study, as is traditional in narrative research, the analysis was divided into two different approaches. First, the *analysis of the narratives* (the 'story analyst approach') in which data in the form of narratives or stories are analysed to produce classifications and typologies (see Bruner 2004; Polkinghorne 1995; Smith 2016). Second, the *narrative analysis* (the 'storyteller approach'), which produces explanatory stories based on the data (see Polkinghorne 1995; Smith 2016).

The *analysis of the narratives* was carried out following the reflexive thematic analysis approach. In this approach, themes are created and implemented in the active interpretation of the data and are influenced by the researchers' expertise and knowledge, by the research problem, and by theoretical assumptions (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). As this allows the researcher to critically view the data in a broader context and provides space for the researchers' previous experience, thematic analysis is perceived as a practical medium for narrative research (Lainson, Braun, and Clarke 2019).

The data analysis began with the first two authors carefully reading the transcribed interviews multiple times. A preliminary coding of the data was conducted using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. This coding process was done by two researchers simultaneously and in collaboration, and the aim was to create codes that would holistically highlight different aspects of PD and capture the diversity of experiences narrated by the teachers. We then compiled these preliminary thematic codes into broader themes and subthemes, and, drawing from the theoretical background of the study, partially combined, changed, reduced, and renamed the themes. This theory-

informed but data-driven process resulted in the following main themes: (1) Me as a writer, (2) Teaching and pedagogy, and 3) Writing and emotions. The process also produced the following subthemes: (1a) writer identity and (1b) developing as a writer; (2a) teacher identity, (2b) pedagogical development, and (2c) re-thinking teaching; and (3a) the effects on well-being and (3b) personal life stories. Finally, excerpts of these themes were chosen to illustrate the teachers' experiences and were translated from Finnish to English.

In the *narrative analysis*, the second phase of our data analysis, we sought the most suitable ways to give voice to the teachers' unique experiences. The goal of this phase was to compose an in-depth, profound, and creative end result for the study. After many discussions on the nature of the data, we settled on writing an *ethnodramatic dialogue* of each theme, which Saldaña (2011, 13) describes as 'a written play script consisting of dramatised, significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries or other narrative sources'. An ethnodramatic dialogue consists of two or more characters in verbal action, reaction, and interaction, and it can be composed in several ways depending on the researchers' interests and the nature of the data (Saldaña 2011).

Composing the ethnodramatic dialogues proceeded as follows: First, the excerpts selected as examples of the three themes were reviewed in order to collect and present a broad variety of opinions and experiences from the teachers' interviews. The excerpts from the teachers were then organised according to the subthemes. The excerpts naturally began to form a dialogue, transforming from separate citations to interacting with each other. With this discovery, we started to apply the adaptation approach by shortening the original excerpts and reorganizing them in an even more dialogical structure (Saldaña 2011). This work produced three texts in which the teachers engage in a fictional conversation with each other. As we wanted our role in interpreting the data and composing the dialogues to be transparent, we included ourselves in the ethnodramatic dialogue as the character of a Researcher. However, Saldaña (2011) points out that research participants' voices are usually able to speak for themselves without too much narration. Therefore, the Researcher was used only to ask questions that clarify the themes and subthemes in the dialogues.

Finally, we completed the dialogue by storylining and plotting to compose a story-like dialogue instead of simply presenting one interview excerpt after another. This last phase was inspired by Saldaña's (2011, 117) description of his method:

> My personal way of working is admittedly a holistic, heuristic process. I cut and paste interview transcript and field note excerpts in a word processor file into an initial skeletal structure. It is literally like painting a blank canvas improvisationally with words.

Findings

In the following, we present the findings of this study in the form of three ethnodramatic dialogues reflecting the three PD-related themes identified in the thematic analysis: 1) me as a writer, 2) teaching and pedagogy, and 3) writing and emotions. Combined, these

three themes and their subthemes summarise and discuss the teachers' experiences of PD in the Studies in Writing programme. After each dialogue, we briefly discuss and further explain our findings and then describe the subthemes identified in each topic.

Me as a writer – 'I never saw myself as a writer'

The teachers sit in an empty classroom, sip coffee and discuss their relationship to writing.

Researcher: You have all participated in Studies in Writing during the last few years. How would you describe your development as writers during the course?

Helena: Well, I've always felt like I'm a bit of an average writer.

Olivia: I sort of never saw myself as a writer.

Joanna (nodding): I hadn't written anything for years and years.

Olivia: In the first course there were some people who'd already done all sorts of writing classes. Some were planning their first novel and had taken part in writing competitions. I can't deny wondering at that point if I was in the right place.

Joanna: I'm such a nit-picker. It's been one of my main goals to get rid of the idea that commas always have to be in their right places, because sometimes doing it wrong can even be a literary decision. You're allowed to break the boundaries of language.

Helena: My own identity as a writer is a lot stronger now. Even though I still can't always get those commas and all the small grammarly stuff right.

Everyone laughs.

Olivia (smiling): Somehow it's dawned on me that I've had a very limited impression of writing and about what you can and should expect from yourself and on what schedule. I realised that, from being effective to getting creative and to not getting anything done, writing has its own stages. There's always something cooking in the subconscious.

Sofia: Yeah, and the fact that I actually tried lyrics and non-fiction writing, which actually came surprisingly effortlessly. So my confidence was boosted in that sense as well.

Olivia: If you never try, you'll never know. But seriously, I've gone way out of my comfort zone too, but that's not a bad thing at all. Because it's really fulfilling when you know you've excelled yourself.

Joanna: Technically, I am a good writer, but it's hard for me to throw myself into playful writing, 'cos I take it too seriously. But I do think I have made progress.

Helena: The feedback's been really valuable and helpful, and it's strengthened my identity as a writer and given me ideas on how to improve.

Olivia: I once wrote this text that I was extremely happy with. I got a great review as well. I let some of my close friends and family read it and they were really surprised that I could write like that.

Helena: It's also been really valuable to read other writers' stuff. You realise there are some great ways to write.

> Helena: Writing has become an official part of my identity. I am a person who writes. I am no longer just a wannabe-writer.

> Olivia: What I've also discovered is that we all have our own different writing paths and that this is my path as a writer.

This theme included the subthemes of writer identity and developing as a writer. The teachers narrated their relationship to writing first in their application letters and later in the interviews. Each teacher had a unique path that led them to apply and participate in Studies in Writing. For some, writing had always been very important and a natural way of expressing themselves. Although all of the teachers described their relationship to writing as positive, they did have different assumptions of themselves as writers. For example, as a child, Helena positioned herself as an average writer who struggled with grammar issues. Only after becoming an adult did she begin to consider herself to be somewhat talented as a writer; as her motivation towards writing grew, she wanted to get past her fear of misplacing the commas. Joanna, on the other hand, described herself as technically skilful but not an especially creative or original as a writer.

The teachers wanted to develop themselves as writers and to find new inspiration for their writing. In this respect, it is natural that they talked at length about their writer identities and reflected on their unique writer paths in the interviews. For example, Helena used to be afraid to describe herself as a *writer* or a *person who writes*. This insecurity originated in her experiences in primary school, where she was labelled as an average writer who was not particularly creative and who had problems with grammar. Later in life, and especially during the Studies in Writing programme, aided by encouraging feedback from her teachers and peers, she realised that she was a talented writer with her own way of expressing herself. Joanna, who had perceived herself to be a technically skilful but not very creative, felt that her participation in the programme helped her write more freely.

Some of the teachers initially felt insecure and doubtful about their place in the programme, as they saw themselves as far worse or less experienced than the other writers. As their studies progressed, however, and they were challenged in different ways to reflect on their writer identity and build their theoretical knowledge about writing, they became aware that each person has their own writing path and that writing is a personal process. Each person develops at their own pace, and each writing process goes through different phases. This learning process happened with the help of the writing teachers, theoretical literature, course materials, learning journals and other writing assignments, and peer discussions. Eventually, the teachers became more informed about their own strengths and weaknesses and learned to develop themselves as writers. They were encouraged to bravely call themselves *writers*.

Teaching and pedagogy – 'It's more about encouraging'

> Researcher: Can you identify any changes in your teaching that were influenced by the Studies in Writing programme?

> Erika: Maybe it sparked some enthusiasm for teaching writing.

> Sofia: I'm not so strict or fussy about writing anymore.
>
> Olivia: I've realised that PowerPoint presentations and all that probably don't do much to help the learning of young students with linguistic struggles. Maybe what they need instead is some sort of playful writing.
>
> Erika: Whenever I start fizzing about creative writing, my pupils are always like 'there she goes again' (laughs).
>
> Joanna: I think I've become more empathetic towards the students. I somehow understand their perspectives better.
>
> Helena: True. When you think that we as adults were given all of these helpful prompts, frames, and clear writing assignments during the courses, to think that the children are just given a title and told to start writing . . . (shaking her head).
>
> Sofia: I've become a lot more merciful towards their writing.
>
> Erika: When we do creative writing in class, I don't look for mistakes in the writing. It is more about encouraging.
>
> Joanna: I actually feel that grading and evaluating the pupils' texts is even harder now, because I'm trying to find ways to encourage them and give feedback that could help that particular learner.
>
> Olivia: But then it's not only the teachers' feedback that can help the student take the next steps. It could just as well be peer feedback from other students, which can be even more beneficial.
>
> Joanna: Especially students that find writing difficult, to pep them and help them find the right keys to move forward.
>
> Olivia: And maybe the students somehow feel that writing has so many rules and restrictions. But does it really? Like, can we think of it more like free writing, where you can just write whatever comes to mind.
>
> Sofia: Yes! You don't always have to be effective in life. Writing also has quiet moments where something important is going on beneath the surface that will bloom sometime later. What I've learned during these studies relates to the humane philosophy on which I base my teaching.

For most of the participants in this study, their reasons for applying to the Studies in Writing programme were mainly personal. The teachers' motivation for participating in the studies was thus not driven by their position as teachers, although their teacher identities were intertwined with their writer identities. Nevertheless, the teachers found themselves reflecting on their teacher identities and, especially, building their pedagogical knowledge. Beneath this theme we created the following subthemes: teacher identity, pedagogical development, and re-thinking teaching.

Teacher identity in itself was not something that the teachers discussed as such, but more as part of a broader processes of identity work which covered all aspects of life, from work to leisure time and relationships. Sofia described how participating in creative writing communities (the programme and some previous courses she had taken) had impacted her 'humane philosophy', which then impacted her teacher identity and the way she wanted to teach.

Through participating in the programme, the teachers gained new understanding about how to motivate, evaluate, and encourage their students. As the teachers personally experienced the therapeutic effects of writing, they began to consider whether creative writing could help their students as well. For instance, Olivia wondered if her teenage students could benefit from creatively expressing their emotions and thoughts during their learning processes, instead of simply writing essays with strict structures and academic forms.

Finding new ways to perform peer assessment and new pedagogical ideas for their teaching were some of the most important discoveries that the teachers mentioned in their interviews. When reflecting on their own identity as a writer, some of the teachers also began reflecting on themselves as teachers. For example, Joanna, who used to be strict about grammar and rules, started to pay more attention to encouraging students' unique forms of self-expression, and Sofia rebuilt her understanding of writing as a creative process, which influenced her teaching.

From being more sensitive to taking the students' perspectives into account to wanting to share the joy of writing in their classrooms, the teachers described a range of positive changes in their attitudes towards teaching writing. One important aspect from the teachers' narratives was identification: the teachers, who are usually in the position of directing, giving feedback, and evaluating students, were suddenly in the student's position, receiving directions and feedback from others. This helped the teachers realise the importance of giving their students clear instructions and tools for writing assignments and the importance of ensuring that students receive regular motivating feedback, not only from their teachers but also from classmates.

For some, creative writing, and especially their experience of the Studies in Writing programme, altered their teaching philosophy and the way they saw learning. Only one participant joined the programme for mainly PD reasons, yet the benefits found their way into all of the teachers' professional lives.

Writing and emotions – 'most of all I want to write about my life'

Researcher: Did the Studies in Writing have any impact in your lives, beyond just being writers and teachers, do you feel?

Joanna: Writing enabled me to analyse and organise my own thoughts and emotions. I also spent time thinking about 'who am I and where am I going'.

Olivia:I got to write an autobiographical assignment about a difficult issue at the time that kept running through my mind.

Joanna (nods):My personal life crises recurred in my texts; I was processing them through writing.

Helena:I've realised now that most of all I want to write about my life and myself.

Sofia: And you got to reminisce about childhood memories, which was therapeutic to me. It opened up new perspectives to me; I somehow managed to put myself in my parents' place when I was writing about those memories.

Olivia: I learned new stuff too about my family tree, and even about my own mother. So, in that way, writing can have a broad impact on human relationships.

Sofia:Writing has improved my ability to talk about things with my family, for example. I've slowly come to terms with my childhood.

Joanna: Yeah, so (sighs) this has been sort of an empowering experience, but also hard. It's been very therapeutic and wonderful to write again.

Olivia: You know, teaching is so hectic and pressured.

Erika (smiling): Studying writing brought a counterbalance to my life. It brought joy and energy.

Joanna: Yes, it gives positive energy.

Olivia (nodding): So that everyday life isn't so gloomy. This is something strictly for myself.

Researcher (leans towards the group): So, what does it feel like when you write?

Erika (smiling): Writing is kind of liberating, and I've discovered the experience of flow again.

Sofia: I don't, for example, notice time passing. It's a harmonious state.

Olivia (nodding): Like, how's it possible, time just flies by!

Sofia: Exactly! But then when I stop writing and get up, I feel energised.

Erika: And when I go back to what I've written and look at my work, I sometimes can't even believe that I actually wrote this.

Helena: Each time I started, I enjoyed it and afterwards I felt lighter in every way.

Olivia (sits quiet for a while): When you experience that feeling of succeeding, it definitely has a positive impact on your mood and so on your well-being, too.

(Other writers nodding, smiling, reminiscing quietly on similar memories of flow.)

The subthemes within the theme of writing and emotions were the effects on well-being and personal life stories.

Narratives of recovery and unwinding as well as evidence of the benefits of dealing with emotions, both of which are related to well-being, were found in the data. Within their narratives, we discovered details, or small stories, about being a teacher and about private life. These stories often included negative emotions such as stress, powerlessness, and uncertainty, and they often centred upon everyday working life situations as well as job contacts, future plans as teachers, and unemployment. Amid the everyday demands and stresses of teaching and issues of personal life, the teachers longed for time and space for their own personal development and relaxation. Studies in Writing offered this. Additionally, the programme gave the teachers opportunities to express and deal with emotions and current life challenges, both personal and professional.

Another finding related to well-being was the similarity between the teachers' accounts of experiencing flow: the teachers described flow as a mental state in which time flies and writing is fluent and after which a certain afterglow can remain for a long time. Furthermore, the positive emotions brought about by the writing sessions enabled them to unwind, relax, and forget their concerns, thus helping them recover from daily stress.

The Studies in Writing programme included some assignments that took the teachers beyond their comfort zone. For example, Joanna described completing the learning journals as an often challenging and unenjoyable task, as it brought up difficult experiences and emotions. However, through reflecting and writing about these difficult issues, by leaving her comfort zone, she learned new things about writing and about herself. In her interview, Olivia explained that the writing exercises had helped her overcome various personal insecurities and challenges. Far from detrimental, overcoming these challenges was highly satisfying and empowering.

In Studies in Writing, the teachers were assigned to write about their lives and about things that are important to them. In addition, they wrote a biography of someone close to them, such as a parent or relative. The assignments seemed to open up new perspectives on their own life stories, thus rebuilding their identities.

Discussion and implications

The aim of this study was to examine in-service teachers' experiences of professional development when participating in a Studies in Writing programme. Through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019), we created three main themes: 1) Me as a writer, 2) Teaching and pedagogy, and 3) Writing and emotions. We utilised a narrative, literary analysis method to compose creative ethnodramatic dialogues (Saldaña 2011) that narrate the teachers' experiences. The findings of this article suggest that as teachers learn about writing and practise creative writing in their free time, they develop not only as writers, but also as teachers.

The teachers of this study took part in the programme in their free time and were mostly motivated by personal interests. In other words, the teachers' main motivation was not necessarily to develop themselves as teachers. However, the findings of this study show that the teachers did find themselves developing as educational professionals as well. The teachers were inspired to develop their teaching practices in order to better motivate, evaluate, and encourage their students as writers.

As discussed in the findings, the teachers developed their writing skills and their perceptions of themselves as creative writers. In line with previous literature (see Dawson 2017; Schultz and Ravitch 2012), writing enabled the teachers to express themselves, share their stories, and discuss their writing with others, thus building new understanding of writing as a creative process. Interestingly, we discovered that, although the teachers' main motivations for taking part in the programme were personal (developing as a writer), they also found themselves developing as teachers. One important discovery of this study was that the teachers strongly believed that creative, literary methods could encourage not only themselves, but also their students, to find new ways to express themselves and reflect on their thoughts and emotions. These findings of the contribution of creative writing to teaching are similar to recent research literature (Cremin et al. 2020; Cremin and Oliver 2017; Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018, 2021; Woodard 2015; Yoo 2018).

According to the teachers, the programme offered them space to think and act creatively in the midst of their hectic everyday lives, which influenced their lives on both a personal and professional level. For example, the teachers perceived that flow experiences positively impacted their well-being (see also Boniwell 2012). One way to

explain these results is via work-related recovery experiences, which refer to the degree to which one perceives that one's leisure-time activities help restore energy resources (Kinnunen et al. 2011, 806). This recovery often takes place during artistic leisure activities (De Bloom et al. 2018; Tuisku et al. 2016).

When studying teachers' PD, emotions often emerge as significant experiences (Tynjälä et al. 2016; Uitto, Jokikokko, and Estola 2015). Indeed, teacher identities and teacher development do not happen in a vacuum but are intertwined with other life experiences, emotions, and mental processes. This became evident in our research when writing and emotions emerged as one of the three main themes in the findings. The findings also emphasise impact of narrative identity work for teachers. According to narrative identity researchers, professional identity is constructed by examining our life stories through narratives of our own lives and work (Bruner 1987; Clandinin et al. 2006; Ricoeur 1991; Stenberg 2010). Indeed, literature about teacher development and identity work through written narratives (see, e.g., Huber et al. 2013; Johnson and Golombek 2011; Schultz and Ravitch 2012) emphasises the importance of storytelling and the sharing of stories in teacher development.

There are some limitations of this study that should be considered. The study participants were a relatively small group of teachers with a positive interest in and a personal relationship with creative writing, thus the results cannot be generalised to all teachers. Also, our position as researchers, writers, and writing instructors influenced the way the data has been interpreted: the researchers' theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources, and the data itself influenced the process of reflexive thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2019). As narrative researchers, we sought not to generalise but to emphasise the voices of the participants as we searched for shared meanings in their stories.

The findings suggest that creative writing communities such as the Studies in Writing programme can support PD by offering peer support and new pedagogical ideas, by promoting narrative identity work, and by establishing a time and place for recovery and flow. In addition, this study supports the idea of PD taking place in an 'out-of-work context' and encourages teachers to participate in leisure-time creative writing communities. We hope that this study will empower teachers to invest their time in leisure-time activities that they find inspiring and interesting in terms of their own personal growth, as it may support their growth professionally as well. However, in spite of how encouraging these findings are, it should be noted that not all teachers have the motivation or ability to commit themselves to extensive academic studies. Therefore, in order to support teachers in their work, it would be beneficial to bring creative writing methods to them in an easily accessible way, for example by integrating creative writing into in-service teacher training programmes. Applying creative writing methods with elements of peer support into lifelong teacher development programmes could be a remarkable way of promoting PD in a cost- and time-effective, integrative way that would promote not only teachers' pedagogical development, but also wellbeing.

From discovering novel pedagogical ideas to identity work, this study joins recent research literature in arguing that utilising creative writing methods during in-service teacher training can be a valuable way to support teachers' PD (see Cremin et al. 2020; Cremin and Oliver 2017; Martin et al. 2021; Martin, Tarnanen, and Tynjälä 2018; Woodard 2015; Yoo 2018). Furthermore, as PD is strengthened by social elements, we suggest that including a social aspect, such as peer discussion, would be a fruitful addition to this and similar writing or PD

programmes. From creative writing studies to narrative writing groups, further research on utilising creative writing methods to holistically support teachers' PD is needed in order to form a more cohesive understanding of teachers' experiences of writing and PD.

Breault (2010) encourages teacher researchers to be creative in telling teachers' stories, suggesting that instead of traditional scholarly writing, researchers can create impactful stories in literary forms. By composing ethnodramatic dialogues, we adopted the position of *storyteller* researchers (Smith 2016). Our hope is that presenting the findings in a literary form will evoke emotions and bring the teachers' stories to life in a way that is not always easy through traditional academic expression. As a closing remark, in agreement with Breault (2010) we hope our study will empower other researchers to embark upon brave storytelling.

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