

Special Issue Reprint

Teacher Narratives and Narratives of Teaching

Inquiry into Lived Experiences

Edited by
Trudy Ambler, Puspha Sinnayah and Joanna Lim

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Teacher Narratives and Narratives of Teaching: Inquiry into Lived Experiences

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Guest Editors

Trudy Ambler

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About the Editors

Trudy Ambler

Trudy Ambler is an Honorary Adjunct Fellow at Victoria University in Melbourne. Prior to this, she worked in the Faculty of Arts at Macquarie University (MQ) in Sydney, where she held the positions of Associate Dean (Quality and Standards) and Director of Learning and Teaching. Before commencing her work in the University sector, Trudy worked extensively in the school system in the United Kingdom (UK), Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Australia as a teacher, administrator, and education advisor.

Trudy's research and publications explore issues related to teacher and student learning, specifically how their 'experiences' of learning enable us to better understand the world. This research agenda has taken different forms and includes teacher learning in both the school and university sectors, teacher knowledge, students' learning, peer learning, first-year curriculum, mentoring, narrative inquiry, autobiographical inquiry, practitioner inquiry, research ethics in learning and teaching, and learning spaces and places.

In 2015, Trudy was awarded a National Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning from the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching. She also received a Vice Chancellor's Award for a 'scholarly, flexible and innovative approach to mentoring that enhances teacher and student learning' (2012). Together with members of her research team, she was awarded best scholarly paper at the Higher Education Research Development Society of Australia (HERDSA) Conference, Auckland, in 2013 for research into outdoor learning places.

Puspha Sinnayah

Puspha Sinnayah received her PhD in neuroscience from the Howard Florey Institute in 1999, where she studied the brain renin angiotensin system as a neurosignalling mechanism in fluid balance under the supervision of Prof. Michael McKinley. She then spent a decade (1999–2009) in the United States conducting postdoctoral research on neural mechanisms regulating appetite and cardiovascular homeostasis with Prof. Robin Davisson and Prof. Michael Cowley.

Currently a Professor and Associate Dean of Research and Research Training with the First Year College at Victoria University and a Research Fellow with the Institute for Health and Sport (IHES), she specialises in physiology education, curriculum innovation, and active learning pedagogy. Her teaching has been recognised nationally, receiving a 2018 Australian Award for University Teaching (AAUT) citation for improving engagement in first-year bioscience and a 2020 AAUT team award for innovation in curriculum design aligned with VU's Block Model.

Her work has led to the development of a flipped learning approach in anatomy and physiology, incorporating H5P interactive content, vodcasts, and inquiry-based learning. This has enhanced student engagement and success, particularly among diverse and underrepresented cohorts. She also leads initiatives such as the Head Start physiology bridging program and a collaborative peer observation learning model to support both students and academic staff. Her contributions were further recognised with the Michael Roberts Award, celebrating excellence in anatomy and physiology education.

Fei Song

Joanna Mei Lin Lim is an independent researcher and currently works as the Head of School/Director of the American International School of Bamako, Mali (2025 to 2028).

Before completing her PhD in teacher inquiry at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand (2013–2016), she was an educator who worked in international schools in Australia, Canada, Cameroon, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan.

Joanna works with explorative methodologies that foster examination of what it means for us to be human beings who exist, navigate and negotiate the physical and digital realms. In particular, she is interested in the educational experiences and implications of a narrated and/or digital existence.

Her current research focuses on the intersections that we find ourselves in as educators and leaders in the age of AI (in terms of narrated experiences with AI/digital literacies). From the ethics to the practicality and possibilities afforded by AI, she seeks to understand how educators (e.g., teachers and educational leaders) can navigate the digital future that is unknown. With a mindset that is open to growth and driven by curiosity, she seeks to understand how we can stay critically informed, realistic, and practical in the way that we teach and lead learning.

Preface

Teachers have the power to transform lives, shaping not only the learning and growth of their students but also their futures. Yet, despite their profound impact on individuals and society, teachers around the world are facing mounting challenges. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS, 2018) highlights a concerning trend; increasing numbers of teachers are leaving the profession and teacher shortages have become one of the most urgent issues confronting global education systems.

In response to these challenges, this collection turns to narrative as a powerful mode for exploring, understanding, and respecting the lived experiences of teachers. As Grumet (1990, p. 323) reflects, “narratives of educational experience... challenge teachers to listen to stories and to hear their resonance in the distant orchestration of academic knowledge”. Through personal and professional narratives, this issue invites readers to engage with the emotional, intellectual, and ethical dimensions of teaching. In doing so, it affirms the enduring capacity of narrative not only to convey the complexities of teachers’ lives but also to offer connection, meaning, and, drawing again on Grumet’s (1990, p. 323) words, “joy surpassing despair”.

Focusing on research that explores how narrative can deepen our understanding of teaching and learning the aim of this SI is to encourage an appreciation of teachers’ experiences by illuminating the vicissitudes of their lives. Contributors examine the theoretical, methodological, and practical dimensions of narrative research, while also addressing the ethical considerations and intersubjective relationships that arise when researching lived experience.

Spanning early childhood through to higher education, the chapters position teacher narratives as valid, valuable, and generative sources of educational knowledge. They reveal how teachers make meaning of their work, how their relationships and contexts shape their practice, and how their private, personal, and professional experiences inform what it means to teach.

By inviting scholars, educators, and researchers to listen to and reflect on these narratives, this collection is designed to promote dialogue and foster a renewed appreciation for teaching’s complexity and importance. It is both a celebration of teachers’ narratives and a call to recognise them as vital to educational research and practice, catalysts for learning, transformation, and the ongoing shaping of a shared educational future.

Reference

Grumet, M. (1990). Retrospective: autobiography and the analysis of educational experience, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 20:3, 321–325.

Trudy Ambler, Puspha Sinnayah, and Joanna Lim
Guest Editors

Editorial

Exploring Experience: Teacher Narratives and Narratives of Teaching

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1. Introduction/Editorial

In this Special Issue (SI), we have published recent scholarship addressing (a) narrative ways of knowing, (b) the diversity of methods used for researching experience and (c) issues related to the use of narrative to explore the experiences of individuals within an educational context. Our goal was to make progress towards understanding the use of narrative to explore teachers' experiences and illuminate the vicissitudes of teachers' professional lives, with the intention of sharing and appreciating their work.

The theoretical framework of this SI is grounded in Dewey's (1938) view of experience. Dewey (1938) explains that experience arises from two principles—continuity and interaction. Continuity refers to how experiences, both past and present, influence the future, as "every experience lives on in further experiences" [1] (p. 27), while interaction refers to an individual's relationships with what constitutes the environment.

There is a distinction between an event and our experience of that event. An event is something that occurs without differentiation, while an experience involves highlighting salient aspects by an individual [2]. Teachers' experiences are often shaped by the unique characteristics of their environments [3] and hold value not only for personal insight but also for broader social science research [4]. Reflecting on, retelling and re-evaluating experiences can transform them into learning opportunities [5]. However, recapturing everyday lived experiences is complex, as understanding how life is lived involves navigating its inherent messiness and intricacies [6,7].

This SI presents a critical collection of scholarly work from Hong Kong, Israel, the USA, Spain, Brazil, West Africa, the UK, New Zealand and Australia. The authors have shared autobiographical and biographical narratives that highlight the challenges of writing about their experiences of teaching and learning. Oral histories, letters and social networks were used to understand teachers' and students' experiences in times of crisis and upheaval. Photographic and community narratives in early childhood and for professional learning and the analysis of narratives using software and other thematic methods were also evident. This diverse range of data collection methods, sometimes called 'field texts' [8], enabled the authors to give shape and form to their experiences. As authors prepared the final texts published in this SI they were involved in a complex combination of "description, explanation, analysis [and] interpretation" [9] (p. 490) in order to engage the audience and encourage the wider community to investigate their experiences of learning and teaching.

There were some common themes that emerged across the research in this SI. Some studies focused on the use of autobiographical narratives as a tool for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices, personal experiences and emotional well-being (e.g., de Oliveira Barbosa and Marin-Suelves, Lim, Shalev and Gidalevich, Shu and Rajaraman et al.). These narratives help teachers engage in self-dialogue, make sense of challenges and achieve professional growth.

The impact of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is a central focus in many studies (e.g., Tsui et al., Pressley et al., Hopman and Clark). Authors highlighted the

social and emotional aspects of teaching (e.g., Shalev and Gidalevich, Hopman and Clark, Pressley et al.) precipitated by critical events. These studies explored how teachers adapted their practices, coped with stress and reflected on their roles during difficult times. Teachers' personal experiences, especially during a crisis like a pandemic, were shown to significantly impact their emotional well-being, morale and mental health, emphasising the need for collective care and institutional support for teachers.

Collaboration and shared learning were evident in studies by Boyle et al. and Scott et al., who emphasised the value of collaborative approaches in both curriculum development and professional learning. Collaboration between teachers, faculty members and students is framed as a way to enhance learning experiences and improve teaching practices.

The use of various research methods and media was highlighted. The studies employed diverse research methods, including autobiographies, oral history interviews, visual narratives (Garvis, Keary and McCallum), social media analysis (Hopman and Clark), an online questionnaire (Pressley et al.) and semi-structured life narrative interviews (Sigad). This diversity in methodology underscores the rich potential of narrative approaches in educational research.

When inquiring into personal experiences and the experiences of others, ethical issues are ever present. All the papers in this SI have attended to ethics, some of which involved submission to and formal approval from ethical review bodies, while others have inquired within an ethics of practice framework. Consequently, this SI provides ideas about some of the ethical matters that must be considered when people's experiences are researched and narrated within texts [10].

It seems appropriate to end this editorial with an idea from Connelly and Clandinin [11] (p. 375), who suggest that the narratives teachers create are a "portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful". The diverse approaches to exploring, interpreting and making meaning of experience in this SI reveal narratives that reflect the passion and commitment practitioners have for learning and teaching. Although the papers in most cases are context-specific, the findings may be relevant to other practitioners and offer ideas about the way teachers can learn from exploring their experiences and the role of narrative in expanding understandings of learning and teaching.

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Article

Sparkling Intentional and Antiracist Pedagogy: A Narrative Analysis of COVID-Era Interviews with Public Health Faculty

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice uprisings of 2020–2022 created an altered and challenging landscape for teaching public health. Challenging and direct experiences with these public health issues and their reverberations shaped how some faculty and many students participated in both online and in-person classrooms. In this project, we conducted a narrative analysis of oral history interviews with eight faculty members at a public university in New York City to understand how they reacted to these events and reconsidered their public health teaching during this period. We map what propelled faculty along paths of change and where these paths led. We learn that participating faculty shifted in varied ways toward more intentional and sometimes more antiracist teaching practices. Two experiences were foundational to these shifts: (1) faculty attunement to student realities during this time, and (2) faculty reflection on their own social positionings (i.e., race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, age, immigration status, etc.) and their development of critical consciousness. These findings provide insights into how faculty conceptualize, support, and change their teaching approaches during periods of upheaval, particularly in the context of limited institutional support for faculty development. Finally, we discuss key issues for institutions seeking to formalize and enhance shifts like those described.

Keywords: public health; pedagogy; antiracism; narrative research; oral history

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice uprisings in the United States during 2020–2022 created an altered and challenging landscape for education broadly. In public health education specifically, the events of this time amplified the human dimensions of our classroom topics and dynamics and helped us understand the ways that societal and public health problems are lived by students and faculty. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the mission of the public health field is to “protect and promote the health of all people in all communities” (<https://www.cdc.gov/public-health-gateway/php/about/index.html>, accessed on 12 July 2024). Our classrooms are spaces where large-scale harms to population health are a primary topic, as are the interventions, programs, policies, and social movements that might change public health outcomes. Some students come to graduate school in public health with direct experience of public health problems, particularly in public universities [1], and most bring a passion for changing the policies, systems, and societal dynamics that create these problems. Racism is one of these societal dynamics, causing people of color to suffer poorer health than White populations across a devastating range of health issues [2,3]. For this reason, racism has been officially deemed “a public health threat” by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [4].

And yet, we are still just beginning the urgent work of actively addressing racism and other health and social harms inside of public health classrooms.

In this project, we collected oral history interviews with graduate-level public health faculty in New York City, an early epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic and an active site of racial justice protest movements. In these interviews, faculty reflected on their experiences of this period, and specifically those in the classroom. In this paper, we use narrative analysis to map what propelled faculty along the path of pedagogical change and where these paths led. We see this mapping as important for understanding how faculty may engage, respond, develop, and change (or not) during periods of upheaval. An understanding of these trajectories, which are largely driven by faculty members themselves (rather than the institution), is especially important in institutional environments that lack formal structures for teaching and learning support (e.g., a teaching and learning center) or structured faculty development sessions.

In this paper, we are interested broadly in what we are calling “intentional pedagogy” and, more specifically, in student-centered pedagogy and antiracist pedagogy, which are two forms of intentional pedagogy that became particularly relevant for public health faculty in this period. By “intentional pedagogy” we are referring to a process in which instructors attend and respond to events unfolding within and around the learning environments they facilitate. (There is a small existing body of literature on “intentional pedagogy”, which primarily addresses the role of teachers in early childhood education, though it does emphasize teacher presence and responsive improvisation as key approaches, e.g., <https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/64708/Clark-2023-thesis.pdf>, accessed on 12 July 2024) By using this term, we are highlighting that, in practice, the typical incentives and conditions of academia [5] inhibit the amount of active attention and improvisation that instructors apply throughout a course and that continuously intentional pedagogies are not as common as they might seem. We are also highlighting that students in this period have called for such pedagogies [1]. Intentional teaching might take many forms, including student-centered and active learning approaches [6,7]; trauma-informed pedagogy [8] and healing-centered pedagogy [9]; and/or antiracist, equity-centered [10], and culturally-sustaining pedagogy [11]. These approaches share an emphasis on orienting toward students’ needs and desires, building relationships with and among students, creating opportunities to bring their strengths, expertise, and experiences into the classroom, collectively working to cultivate safer/braver spaces, and recognizing and addressing inequities and differences that shape classroom dynamics and learning.

There is strong evidence in recent years that faculty are exploring intentional and antiracist pedagogy in public health. Faculty in this field have explored alternative student-centered approaches to grading and assessment that attend to student motivation and stress [12–14], have brought students’ self-reflections robustly into the learning process [15,16], and have sought to incorporate trauma-informed approaches and harm reduction into our thinking about classroom dynamics [1,17]. Experiments in antiracist teaching practices have also emerged, including using student-led photography to build the Public Health Critical Race Praxis [18] and developing an antiracist community engagement course [19].

Many pedagogical changes during this period—like the ones we describe in this article—were aimed at supporting students and better centering their needs and strengths. However, in addition to broad support for students, we are particularly attentive to the anti-oppressive teaching efforts that address inequities of harm and support. Such steps are deeply important considering the impact of systemic racism on communities of color and the importance of “ensuring that public health practitioners, and particularly our leaders, are drawn from the places they are charged with protecting and reflect the communities that they serve” [20]. As in many higher education fields, public health faculty are more likely to be White than their students [21], highlighting the need for both more intensive classroom-based and schoolwide work to bridge diversity in the classroom and cultivate a more diverse faculty. Racism is an enduring and central force in health and educational

inequities—hence our focus on antiracist pedagogy in this article. By antiracist pedagogy, we mean “an intent to actively acknowledge and oppose racism in all aspects of the course”, and we see this as a step toward broader efforts to improve inclusion and representation across multiple axes of oppression (https://sph.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/112/2020/08/Anti_Racist_Discussion_Pedagogy__1.pdf, accessed on 12 July 2024). This places our work in conversation with the forthcoming *Framing the Future 2030* report by the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH), which holds “inclusive excellence through an anti-racism lens” as one of its three core strategies [22].

Theoretical Orientations

While distilling meaning from faculty narratives of this period, two concepts helped to anchor and deepen our thinking. First is the idea of experience-nearness, as it has been theorized in the fields of psychology and anthropology. The second is the idea of critical consciousness, rooted in extensive literature in the field of education and community psychology.

Experience-near describes the knowledge gained from firsthand, direct, personal engagement with the world around us. According to philosopher and psychologist William James, experience-near concepts appear when “thinking of the plane of sense” [23]. These feelings are intense, tangible, and induced by direct life experiences. In contrast, concepts from which individuals maintain “experience distance”, or experience-distant concepts, are abstract and theoretical [24] rather than grounded in lived reality. In this study, experience-near refers to direct, lived encounters with suffering through and surviving the COVID-19 pandemic; direct, lived encounters with racial discrimination and systemic oppression; as well as direct, lived encounters with engaging with and caring for those in these circumstances. On the other hand, experience-distant understandings reflect a degree of psychological detachment from the realities of this period. This disjuncture can result from factors such as privilege, geographical isolation, or a lack of personal connection.

Critical consciousness stems from the work of Paulo Freire, where it is translated as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” [25]. Freire viewed the development of critical consciousness as a key process in equity-focused, liberatory education. Contemporary scholars define critical consciousness as having three components: (1) critical reflection, (2) political efficacy, and (3) critical action [26]. Research has identified a range of factors that increase the development of critical consciousness, including enhancing awareness of sociopolitical circumstances through small group discussion, welcoming critical questioning, and increasing collective identity [27]. Because Freire’s work focuses on the critical consciousness “of the oppressed”, some question whether and how critical consciousness can be developed by those who experience privilege [28] and how critical consciousness can incorporate intersectional understandings of oppression and privilege [29]. As Godfrey and Burson write [29], “conceptualizing experiences of oppression along single axes of marginalization is incomplete because oppression unfolds uniquely for every individual based on the interplay of social forces acting on each person”.

This project grew out of a desire to document and better understand the pedagogical shifts that faculty undertook in this period and the limits of these shifts. The distinct questions we take up in this paper focus on (1) how faculty engaged with intentional and antiracist pedagogy during this time and (2) what faculty narratives tell us about what moved them toward these practices. We then discuss these changes within the context of the specific institution and academia more broadly, and ways that schools of public health can continue building toward more intentional and antiracist pedagogy.

2. Materials and Methods

The Public Health Education Now (PHEN) project was designed as a collaborative, participatory oral history project to document efforts toward antiracist public health education from 2020–2022 in response to the many challenges, insights, and opportunities of

this time. The project was inspired and informed by existing public health and activist oral history projects [30,31]. A detailed description of the participatory design of the project was published previously [1]. We chose oral history in order to allow both spacious exploration of this time from the perspectives of narrators, contextualized by their personal histories (in which pedagogical choices and motivations to change might be rooted), and the ability to archive interviews for future use. Archiving was essential to us because we feared that the urgency around antiracist teaching that was present in this period would atrophy with time. We thus wanted to make accessible the generative tensions and discomforts of this period to remind ourselves and future users of the archive of what actions were taken, why, and what was possible (and not possible) in this period. Ultimately, we hope that the archive might help inform and seed ongoing efforts toward antiracist pedagogy.

2.1. Collection of Faculty Narratives

We recruited faculty and staff broadly from the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy (CUNY SPH) through meetings and newsletter announcements, as well as purposively (e.g., via announcements to the Antiracist Teaching Collaborative at the school). All narrators provided written informed consent. Two faculty team members interviewed eight faculty, including each other, over one or two interviews per person that spanned March–August 2022. While our sample is not representative of the faculty at the school, the narrators provided insights into a range of experiences with pedagogy and racial justice work within a public school of public health. The faculty represented three out of four departments; were tenure-track, tenured, and adjunct; and mostly identified as White, though Asian, Black, and mixed-race faculty also participated.

Our interviews blended the techniques of open-ended, in-depth interviewing with oral history's attention to personal histories that place current experiences in context. The interview guide, created by the original student–faculty team [1], covered topics including a narrator's background and identities, their personal and academic experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and racism/racial justice movements, and their experiences of and recommendations for public health education (see Appendix A for the interview guide). The interviews ranged in length from 45 min to 1.5 h, and two narrators (Faculty 01 and 08) completed two interviews. We thus collected an average of 90 min of material per narrator.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The narrators had an opportunity to review and make edits to the transcripts before considering what parts, if any, they wanted to include in the project's archive, which we envisioned as a publicly accessible version of these interviews (currently under development). The research was approved by the CUNY SPH Institutional Review Board and included both informed consent processes and a "materials release" process. The materials release process distinguished which materials could be used for anonymous research and which could be made available publicly through the project's archive. For the public materials, narrators could choose to share video and/or audio and/or transcripts only and decide whether they wanted to use their name or a pseudonym. The materials release process acknowledges that there are potential risks for the narrators associated with making these materials public and thus offers them the ability to change their choices about public availability and anonymity at any time.

2.2. Analysis of Faculty Narratives

From the beginning, the faculty co-leaders recognized the vital importance of inviting students to serve as co-analysts, to contribute their unique perspectives, and to enrich the analysis through triangulation [32]. Moreover, as the two faculty co-leaders were also narrators, student analysts brought outside perspectives and important questions to these narratives in particular. For students to participate fully, we needed to cultivate trust and safety within our group. Throughout this work, we have emphasized generous listening [33] and the value of collaboration/interdependency (e.g., [34]). In our regular analytic sessions in 2023, the faculty co-leaders emphasized the importance of co-learning

and each person's perspective and voice. We also took opportunities to integrate student-led analyses.

To analyze qualitative interviews, thematic analysis is a common approach, particularly in the field of public health. Thematic analysis is useful for identifying core ideas and patterned phenomena in a dataset [35]. It typically focuses on the transcribed text of interviews as the material for analysis. Instead, we chose to use narrative analysis in order to make the most of our oral history materials by (1) attending to faculty members' personal journeys in this period in the context of their broader histories and lived experiences and (2) centering listening to the interview audio, in addition to working with transcribed text. Listening was important for developing a sense of connection with the narrators and a deeper understanding of their motivations, including the emotional dimensions of these stories, which are often more audible in the recordings than they are visible on the page.

For this reason, the data analysis was guided primarily by Josselson and Hammack's approach to narrative analysis [36]. This approach consists of five sequential listenings to/readings of the data, which are focused on different tasks. These are as follows: (1) identifying initial thematic content and gestalt, (2) identifying voices with which the text is in dialog, (3) identifying patterns and unity, (4) identifying links between texts and theory, and (5) situating the narrative in relation to others collected in the study. In addition to offering a structured process, this approach emphasizes external and ideological voices that help to animate narratives. We wanted to attend to these voices in particular because of the importance of both disciplinary and cultural learnings (of many kinds—professional, academic, and personal/familial) in the faculty's pedagogical techniques. Josselson and Hammack's approach also explicitly addresses bringing the experiences of multiple narrators together, a rarity in narrative analytic guidance. In certain cases, however, we were also struck by the ways that individual narrators spoke through multiple internal voices (e.g., the voice of authority, the voice of vulnerability) and how these voices came together. In these situations, we used the techniques of Carol Gilligan's Listening Guide approach, especially I-poems and listening for the quality and musicality of voices, to delve more deeply into the tensions within a particular faculty narrative [37]. For the overall process, we assigned two close readers to each of the interviews, and each reader conducted the primary listening/readings and memo-writing for those interviews. Individual readers chose whether to only use the Josselson and Hammack approach or to add in the Listening Guide techniques as well. We compared and discussed listening and memos iteratively. Separately and together, we mapped data and memos into matrices and diagrams [38,39] in order to help organize our thinking and identify patterns.

2.3. Researcher Positioning

The team for this analysis was two faculty members, three doctoral students, one master's student, and one recent master's graduate. Emma Tsui and Spring Cooper are both researchers and faculty in the Department of Community Health and Social Sciences at CUNY SPH. Emma Tsui (she/her) is a mixed-race Asian-American and White woman who has worked in public health academia for over 15 years. Spring Cooper (she/they) identifies as polyamorous and bi/pansexual, is White, and has been working in academia for over 15 years. The remaining team members were all doctoral or current MPH students or graduates. Shari Jardine (she/her) is a first-generation Black Caribbean-American doctoral student who has an MPH, and serves as a global health leader at a large hospital system in New York. Michelle Dearolf (they/them) is a white, nonbinary, queer person with chronic pain who completed their MPH and worked as a researcher during the pandemic. Christine Whang (she/her) is a Korean-American doctoral student with over ten years of experience implementing public health programming and research. Ivonne Quiroz (she/her) is a first-generation Latina doctoral student with an MPH who is also an adjunct professor within the public health field. Ayah Elsayed (she/her) is an Arab American public health lecturer who was an MPH student during the pandemic.

3. Results

In these oral history interviews, we learned about the ways faculty saw themselves during this period and how they navigated their lives within and outside of the classroom. While all faculty narratives informed our results, readers will not hear from every narrator in this paper due to our desire to balance the clarity of findings with the complexity of particular stories and experiences. Ultimately, we have summarized our understandings in a figure that traces how greater attunement to the realities of students' lives in this period—sometimes accompanied by moves toward the development of critical consciousness—shaped the range of pedagogical shifts made by faculty. In the sections that follow, we first describe the Antiracist Teaching Collaborative (ATC) at the school, an important venue for many, but not all, of the faculty narrators, as well as the other paths that faculty took toward intentional and antiracist pedagogy. Next, we describe why faculty members took these steps.

3.1. *What Facilitates Faculty Movement toward Intentional and Antiracist Pedagogy?*

Many of the faculty at CUNY SPH who felt urgency around antiracism and pedagogy during this time came together to form the ATC. To provide insight into what this group was, we begin with the story of how a White faculty member with other marginalized identities (Faculty 03) began working to create what became the ATC, as well as how that work has unfolded in their view. We present this in Box 1 to allow readers to immerse themselves briefly in one of these faculty narratives while also developing an understanding of some of the early tensions within this institution around this work. We focus this paper primarily on individual-level trajectories of change but present information about the important institutional dynamics around these efforts in Boxes 1 and 2.

Most faculty narrators spoke repeatedly about the ATC as their primary space for learning about and experimenting with pedagogy in this period (see Figure 1 for a diagram of ATC activities). Narrators especially highlighted the community aspect of this collaborative learning. As Faculty 06 (White with a “privileged upbringing”) said, “There were faculty that clearly had spent a lot more intense time throughout their lives on this. And then, other faculty who maybe hadn’t spent enough time and were saying, ‘I’m now realizing that I need to start doing this better.’ So, we had a wide range. And to be part of that helped me formalize what I already knew, which was to get better. But to sit there on your own and say, I need to do better, and maybe do some Googling and learn stuff is harder and much less directive. But to be able to have a group of faculty that you can work together on [this] and learn from, was a blessing”. This narrator gestures at how some ATC participants had more experience in practicing antiracist teaching (and perhaps being more experience-near) and others less so. Members of this latter group, many of whom volunteered as narrators for the oral history project, described the work in the Collaborative as eye-opening and challenging, and when considering how the school should proceed, many suggested formalizing and/or requiring activities that were analogous to those they had experienced in the Collaborative. However, alongside this championing of the Collaborative, as the narrator above describes, there was a waning of interest, urgency, and energy in this group over time. (It is worth noting that several people who were regularly involved in the ATC did not volunteer to participate in the oral history project. These individuals tended to have less job security at the school (e.g., doctoral students working as adjunct faculty and tenure-track faculty) and were more likely to be faculty of color than those who did participate. Given that the goal of this work was to record oral histories that could be made available to the public, it is not surprising that these individuals may not have felt comfortable participating. Though we used a flexible narrator-centered release form and gave the option of using a pseudonym, potential narrators likely understood that fully anonymizing these transcripts would be impossible and that the interviews might be a risk to them if they were critical of the institution where they were faculty or students. Notably, we did have tenure-track and adjunct faculty members and faculty of color who chose to participate, even under these circumstances).

Box 1. Narrative of the Antiracist Teaching Collaborative's development.

After George Floyd's murder and other acts of police violence in the summer of 2020 and initially feeling "so helpless, and so unsure of any action that I could take that would mean anything", Faculty 03 began intensive personal work to learn more about racism and antiracism. They recounted:

[In Summer 2020], we were at [my partners'] parents' house and they had some friends over. One person that was there was a professor at some school in New York. He said, "Oh, I got an email, they want us to read this book [about antiracism] before we come back in the fall". And I was like, "Wait a minute. Schools are doing something about this in the summer? What?" I was like, "What are WE doing?"

And so I started calling people around the school. I was told not to push this issue. I was told when we get back in the fall, we'll see if we can form a committee. I was told, if students push this issue, that would be better. I was so angry. I was like, "We are such a diverse school. We have to be doing better for our students. We know that we live in a racist culture in America. We know that all institutions are racist. All of this. We've known forever, but right now we really fucking know it, and we have to do something". It felt like nobody cared. I was like, "How can you pretend you care about your job or about this institution or about our students at all, and not say that you're going to do something?"

I took some deep breaths and thought about, "Okay, what do I think we should do?" I kept reading as much as I could, and trying to learn before we came back in the fall. And then I thought, "Well, I'm just going to raise it in my department, because my department is full of caring people.

We had this first meeting of just people that care about racism, about ending its hold on our school, on our students. We said, "Okay, what are the things we can do?" What emerged from those, first, little planning meetings, was what we now call the Antiracist Teaching Collaborative. We have a decentralized leadership in the collaborative where we all contribute to ideas of what we want to do in the collaborative, and that might include reading books, watching films, inviting speakers in, doing role plays, practicing, how do we do these conversations? How do we help disperse power in the classroom? All of these things became very, very, group-generated, which was so exciting to me to be part of—I don't think I've ever been part of something that felt so co-created, and also so important.

We've done so much in this time, and yet we still have so much to do. We've worked on our own personal understandings of what racism looks like in the classroom and in the school. How are we changing these things on our own individual teaching level? It's still a fight for some people for us to explain what the problems are and why we need to change these things. Some people still don't get it. That feels like, "Okay, we'll just keep doing this. We have more work to do".

We, as a collaborative were meeting weekly for over a year, and then we've moved it to bi-weekly in the past year, but with longer sessions. We've gotten through several books together, not just reading them, but really talking about how are we applying the things that we're learning. Our numbers, I feel they're dwindling a little after two years of having this group. It feels scary to me to feel other people are like, "Okay, we've put in a couple of years to this, do we need to do it anymore?" And yeah, we do. How do we keep each other motivated and excited, and still understanding the importance of this? And recognizing that despite all the work we have done in two years that we have not created an antiracist school. The structures of the school are the same. We might have done things in our individual classrooms, which I'm very happy about and think are very important. But we have not shifted the culture of the school yet.

Yeah, we have a lot of work to do still. [...] Because the world is burning around us, and we need to actually address these systems right now. We need to feel safe. Our students need to feel safe in our classrooms to have the discussions they need to have, and they need to feel empowered. They need to feel like part of a learning community that I'm part of also, and not leading. That's the only way that we actually get to where we need to be in the future".

A few stories diverged from this centering of the Collaborative that are instructive. A Black faculty member (Faculty 08) spoke over the course of their interviews about their career-long work toward health justice, particularly their efforts to create classrooms and teams that were connected across racially, economically, and professionally diverse individuals (i.e., they had incorporated intentional and antiracist pedagogical practices into their work for many years). They participated occasionally in the Collaborative, but it was not narrated as central to their experience in this period (in part due to significant administrative responsibilities during this time). After being asked "how faculty should or could be supported in building relationships with and among students toward change and activism", this narrator raised questions that went beyond others' suggestions for more Collaborative-type activities. They said, "It's my question as well, I'll say that. I'm really challenged by it. [...] I think society as a whole has moved away from an understanding of how valuable [building relationships across difference] is. [...] the skillsets that are needed

to just really sit with people. [...] I think in terms of preparing faculty, without them having some prior knowledge and ideally experience of it, it's really hard to imagine that they could even begin to appreciate the value of it". This narrator thus identifies the broader societal challenges in centering relationship-building across differences and suggests that faculty (especially those trained primarily in research, they note elsewhere in the interview) generally do not have an orientation toward this.

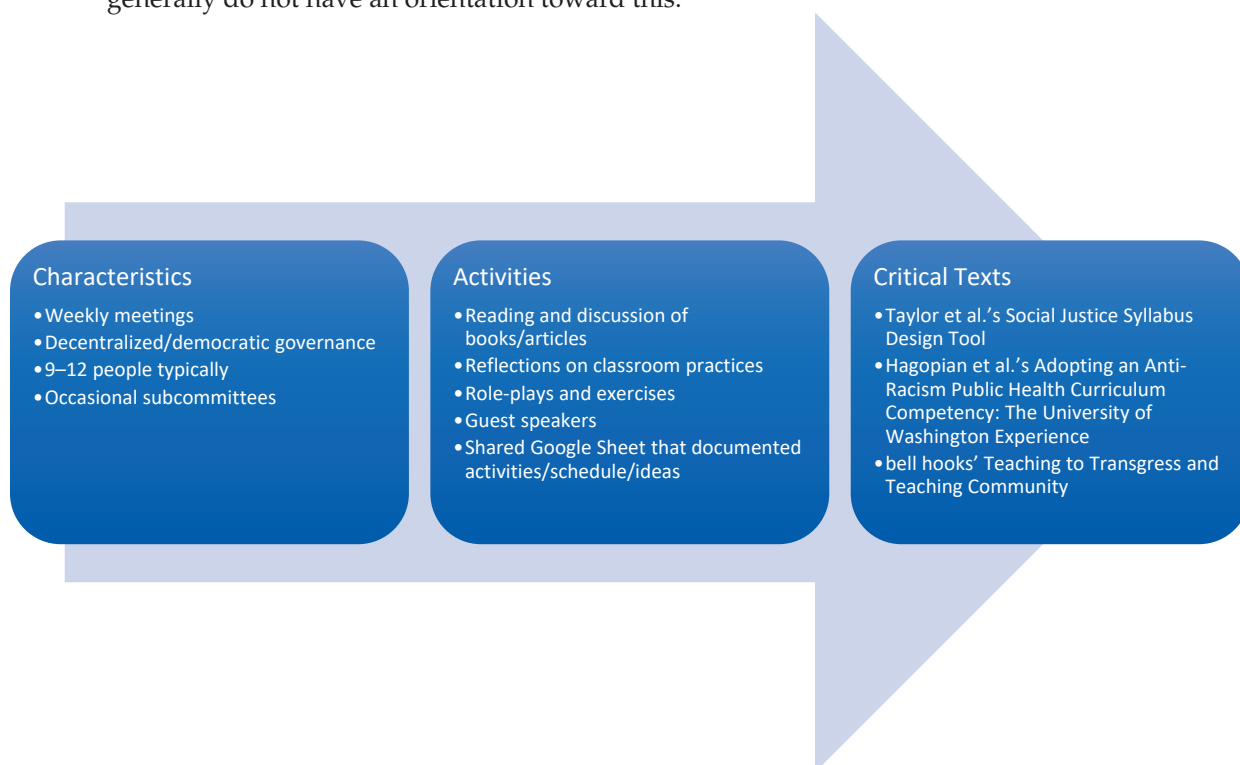


Figure 1. Antiracist Teaching Collaborative's characteristics, activities, and critical texts, 2020–2022.

A completely different type of divergence arose in another faculty member's narrative (Faculty 04, "from the Jewish working class"). This narrator felt that racism was overemphasized as a problem in the field, noting that gender and class were equally important (We note that engaging repeatedly with this interview highlighted to our research team experientially the complexities of connecting across differences that were noted as societally challenging by Faculty 08. Faculty 04 held views that were, in some cases, counter to the more antiracist views held by our team of analysts. Analysts were sometimes caught off-guard and/or upset by this interview, encountering resistance in returning to it as our analysis processes required.) For this reason, this faculty member was not a member of the Antiracist Teaching Collaborative and had engaged in no explicitly antiracist work. They did, however, describe empathizing with students during the most difficult days of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City and becoming more flexible around classroom assignments and deadlines—a common move toward intentional pedagogy that we discuss further below. An adjunct faculty member (Faculty 05, "first-generation immigrant") also did not participate in the Antiracist Teaching Collaborative but reflected deeply on their own experiences and positioning in this period. While their orientation toward liberatory education started shortly before the pandemic, the pandemic period accelerated this process. Faculty 05 described urgent engagement in a range of pedagogical training activities in this period (both within CUNY SPH and outside), which further shifted their practices in the classroom toward more egalitarian, collaborative, and connected teaching, as well as greater attention to the circumstances and needs of students of color.

3.2. *Why Faculty Moved toward Intentional and Antiracist Pedagogy*

Next, we take up the two key processes that led to faculty narrators exploring more intentional and antiracist pedagogical practices.

3.2.1. Attunement to Students' Realities as a Path toward Intentional Pedagogy

Narrators described their increased awareness of the difficulties of students' lived experiences during this period, the resonance this sometimes had with their own experiences, and the more empathic engagements that this often generated. As Faculty 01 ("privileged, White") said, "Once the pandemic hit, it was just like, [students saying] I can't get you this. [...] It was just having an understanding of how much people were now managing at home, with children, with parents, with working, with just how stressful the entire world was, I grew to be a lot more flexible. And now if I don't hear from a student, I am like, instead of being like, yeah, you know you missed our meeting... I'm like, are you okay, is everybody alive? Is everybody feeling okay? Do you have COVID? I mean, I don't ask these things, but these are the things that run through my mind. And I'm just checking in to make sure that you're okay. I think that has been a very positive and much needed shift that I needed to make". We conceptualize this as a new attunement to the lives of students, in which faculty paid close attention and calibrated some aspects of their pedagogy (deadlines, grading, or interactions) in response.

Though this process was often reactive, some faculty proactively made space in the classroom for students' realities. As Faculty 03 (White with other marginalized identities) said, "I had so many students telling me how bad their mental health was. How unconnected they felt. How isolated they felt. I think the icebreakers [which Faculty 03 used at the beginning of each class session] actually probably gave people some ability to open up to me, because we're creating a space where we're allowing for conversation and for sharing of personal things. I model that also. I'm always sharing things about myself. So students feel free to do that with me also, and I encourage that. I always tell students like, 'Come to me, tell me what's going on. So we can make new plans for submissions or for edits or for whatever you need'".

In the interview excerpts above, we see faculty as creating and acting on increased experience-nearness to students, which comes from listening and attunement. Working with voices in our analysis allowed us to hear that some narrators spoke about their and students' experiences of this time in more intellectual and professional tones and styles (more experience-distant), while others spoke with great emotion, presence, and vulnerability, eschewing more detached modes of expression and analysis. (See Appendix B for the table of voices identified through this analysis). Often, narrators in this latter group shared their experiences with students as vivid stories rather than conveying their experiences with or perceptions of students in broader, descriptive strokes. What we take from these different styles of narration is not straightforward. Narrators' modes of expression are complex and dynamic, reflecting a multitude of factors, which likely include narrators' communication tendencies, emotional presence, cognitive and emotional processing, as well as the context of the interview and interviewer. We wonder, though, if these modes of expression might tell us something about the ways faculty become more experience-near; for instance, that experience-nearness grows in the presence of instructors' emotional awareness and ability to view themselves and students as enacting a shared story.

3.2.2. Awareness of Social Position and Critical Consciousness as Paths toward Antiracist Pedagogy

Faculty members wove experiences of reflecting on their social position (i.e., race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, age, immigration status, etc.) and its meaning into their interviews in a variety of ways. For some, this appeared to be a long-standing reflective process that could not be isolated from their broader life and work trajectories. Faculty 08's narrative provides the most robust example of this. They described an early awareness of how they were interpreted racially in the context of elementary school ("as

the only black child for years in my elementary school”), how teachers and fellow students navigated this, and what Faculty 08 learned from these experiences. Their interview unfolded as stories of relationships and places that taught them about privilege, social justice, belonging, and otherness in the context of American racism again and again. Unlike most other interviews in which reflection on social position came up as a relatively brief response to our opening question of “background” relevant to pedagogy at this time, Faculty 08’s reflection continued mostly uninterrupted for an hour. At that point, they said, “Everything I’ve shared with you, I feel I have brought into my own pedagogy. I didn’t know that would be so long [laughs]”. And indeed, Faculty 08’s interview included an in-depth description of exercises and practices they use in their classrooms to help students connect across differences in experiences of oppression, stories of learning from students, and intentional efforts to cultivate respect, trust, and care with students, as antiracist approaches would have us do. (For a detailed description of these techniques, readers may email the authors for access to Faculty 08’s interview transcript while the public archive is still being created.).

For others, a greater reflection on social position was hastened by the events and racial tensions of this period. Faculty 02, for instance, while growing up Asian in a largely White, upper-middle-class neighborhood, described a mostly colorblind approach to race. The residue of this history inhibited seeing themselves racially until the early years of the Black Lives Matter movement and then more strongly as anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic grew. About that earlier time, they said, “I just was not that engaged with my racial identity. I thought of myself as who I am, this individual person walking around on the street, just being who I am in my life. I did not think of myself as an Asian woman of a certain age walking around on the street. And suddenly, through these violent incidents that have been happening in New York and elsewhere, targeting Asian people and targeting Asian women, I had to confront that reality. That that is who I am. And that this is how so many people in marginalized communities experience the world”. Faculty 02 linked this experience to their enhanced attention to racial dynamics in the classroom and their desire to create connected spaces in the classroom. They told a story of one important failure on their part to do this, where racial dynamics among students threatened to derail a project, leading to a more antiracist and care-oriented re-envisioning of this project through the use of restorative practices.

The ATC provided a platform for reflection that individuals took up to varying degrees. In some cases, faculty recognized the biases present in their treatment of course content (e.g., noticing which authors are prioritized on syllabi and rethinking the teaching of race as a quantitative variable). In others, they came to understand their participation in racist structures and dynamics in new ways. As an example, Faculty 01 described their role in managing racial dynamics in student group work and then reflected, “I look back on like all the group issues that have happened, so many have racial dynamics that I can’t even believe that at some point I wasn’t tapped into that, because it’s so clear in every single instance. It’s not the same things that are happening and not the same players, but it’s alarming how actively blind I was to it before”.

3.3. Integrating These Understandings: Drivers of Faculty Pedagogical Shifts

In Figure 2, we consider all eight faculty narratives together and depict our understanding of how faculty (1) became more “experience-near” to students and people of color to varying degrees, and how this combined (in some cases) with (2) reflecting on their social position and developing critical consciousness to varying degrees to shape their pedagogy. We see the attunement to student realities and production of experience-nearness as primarily influencing faculty members’ levels of student-centeredness (a form of intentional pedagogy) while reflecting on their own social position and developing critical consciousness influenced their levels of engagement with and adoption of antiracist pedagogy. The practices stemming from these pedagogical shifts in approach exist along a spectrum with simpler teaching practices on the top and bottom and more active and intensive practices

in the center of the spectrum, where student-centered and antiracist teaching converge. We do not see these as mechanistic relationships but rather as spectra along which faculty move and posit these as relationships that may be worth exploring further.

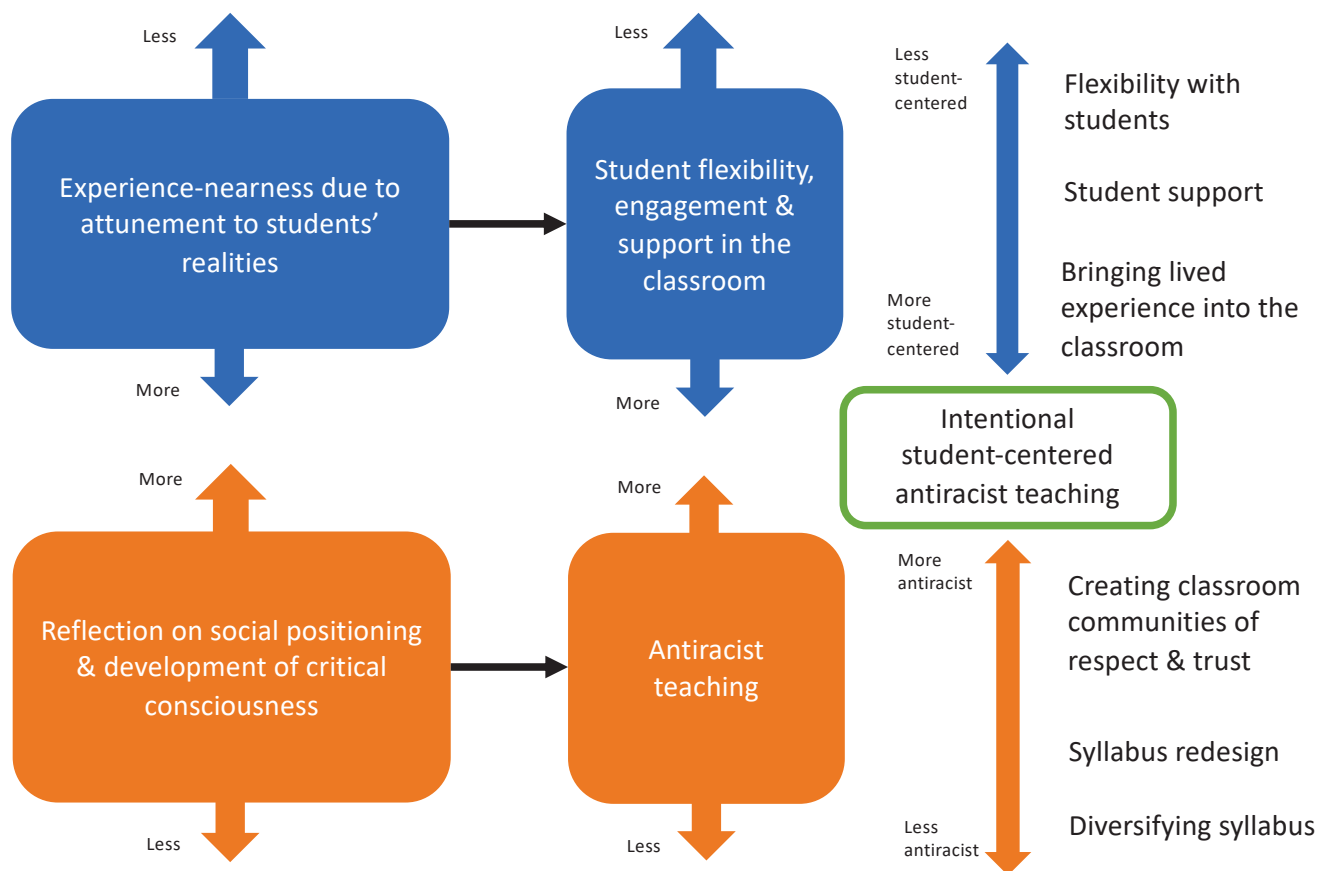


Figure 2. Individual-level faculty drivers of intentional and antiracist pedagogy, 2020–2022.

Box 2. Faculty shifts in an institutional context.

The story in Box 1 provides one example of how faculty members at CUNY SPH found themselves bound by the school's existing culture while recognizing the imperative for transformative changes at the organizational level. In the interviews, we hear that faculty who attempted to mobilize a response within the institution encountered resistance, regardless of how much power (defined by tenure, level of promotion, relationship to the administration, or other advantaged positionality within the school) they held. The barriers were different across situations, but the message that faculty walked away with was broadly the same. Despite recognizing the urgency of addressing racial injustices and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the institution's response appeared hesitant to initiate change. Frustration led some faculty to create and participate in their Antiracist Teaching Collaborative to promote introspection and change within the faculty, with a focus on taking concrete steps to better align with the institution's stated commitment to racial justice and inclusivity.

While faculty celebrated progress within their classrooms, they also acknowledged the limitations of their influence in effecting broader institutional change. They described frustration with institutional priorities, including the pressure to prioritize research over teaching. The tenure process was also identified as a contributor to the culture of deprioritized teaching, and some faculty emphasized the need to rebalance thinking about the importance of teaching, research, and service in faculty evaluations. Others voiced concerns about the inherently racist structures embedded in tenure approval and grant award processes. The faculty recognized the need for institutional backing to facilitate structural changes and shift the broader culture of the school towards a more pedagogy-focused and antiracist stance.

4. Discussion

This article explores how public health faculty in a public university viewed and engaged with intentional and antiracist pedagogy during 2020–2022. The narratives we

collected trace out the interaction between attunement to student realities and the development of critical consciousness and thereby faculty becoming more intentional and/or antiracist in their teaching. These findings provide a new window, using oral history, for understanding what facilitated faculty members' movement toward these practices, which we argue are critical adjustments to the way public health has historically been taught. They also provide insight into how we might broaden faculty interest in these approaches, as well as the tensions and complexities inherent in moving in these directions. Ultimately, this research helps us understand how faculty can better model and practice the societal care urgently needed to support public health, starting in the classroom.

Faculty narrators described varying levels of intimacy with students' realities in this period, though virtually all had become more aware of students' lives outside of the classroom. We wonder what allows some faculty to develop experience-nearness—to take on board or even invite and share personal experiences—while others do not. When present, this attunement aligns with bell hooks' idea of "engaged pedagogy" [40]. Engaged pedagogy encourages faculty and students to "regard one another as 'whole' human beings" [40] (p. 14), make "connection[s] between ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices" [40] (p. 15), and is foundational in facilitating learning about "how to live in the world" [40] (p. 15). This invigorating conceptualization has been put to the test in the literature, where scholars indicate that the road to becoming more experience-near through sharing about our personal lives is not a direct one. There are multiple complexities, including safety, boundaries ("the boundaries of the personal in teaching contexts are not fixed" [41] (p. 342)), and maintaining connections between personal and pedagogical material [41]. In studying this, geographer Kath Browne suggests attending to the specific contexts and conditions of our teaching [41]. Sample reflection questions for instructors include: To what degree and for what reasons do some students need to connect with others in the classroom more? What can personal experience bring to this course? What will be missed without this? Furthermore, an important and related question is how faculty can develop skills to facilitate experience-near learning where appropriate, given the rarity of training in meaningfully connecting across differences, as Faculty 08 observes. We see these as urgent questions for learning environments like ours, which serve a diverse (by race/ethnicity, economics, educational and professional backgrounds, and age) student body. Rooted in this project, we have generated specific recommendations for faculty seeking to work with students' lived experiences thoughtfully in the classroom [1].

Relatedly, we should address some of the challenges in developing critical consciousness among faculty, particularly privileged White faculty. Critical consciousness was conceptualized for oppressed people to be able to address oppression [25]. Some scholars use the term "critical pedagogy" to describe the efforts of a more privileged group of people (i.e., faculty) toward active allyship of the oppressed [28], which involves analysis of individual identities and voices and examination within the oppressors of how they can intervene for the benefit of the oppressed and challenge other oppressors to do the same [42]. This is in line with what Freire described as the "rebirth" of the oppressor. Other suggestions for modifications when building allyship with the oppressor include providing affirming examples of people and practices that are actively challenging oppression, addressing guilt, and teaching the process of love and humanizing the Other [42]. Importantly, many faculty hold intersectional identities and will not identify as the oppressor across all identities, but still hold a position of power within the classroom and have some level of privilege worthy of examination. This is work that is best done in a group setting, toward a common goal, where reflections, emotions, responsibilities, and positioning can be processed collectively, as faculty here did in the ATC (We might think of this as an extension of the individual reflective work in times of crisis, described by Lim [43]). However, without collective organizing of this type, faculty may experience challenges in individually taking up this work.

Even with this type of collective organizing taking place, such a movement can face real challenges when the crisis is perceived to be over, as the waning interest in the ATC suggests. Some narrators were among the core members of the ATC and are still actively seeking to revive it by building more popular support for valuing teaching, attunement to students, and developing critical consciousness. We are encouraged by work on social movements and community organizing that suggest that the periods when movements are perceived as a failure might be a predictable and expected phase while moving toward change (<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/surviving-ups-downs-social-movements/>, accessed on 12 July 2024). We see working with oral histories in this fallow period as a regenerative opportunity. As oral historian Amy Starecheski writes, “In periods of seeming movement decline, storytelling and history-making are essential to activist theorizing and learning, making these times productive in ways that often go unnoticed” [44]. Minor though it may be, sharing this article in progress with the narrators has kept their experiences in this period in their minds and has been a part of the reinvigorated engagements around pedagogy with some narrators (e.g., Faculty 05, the adjunct faculty member not initially involved in the ATC, now has relationships with multiple ATC members and is more engaged in pedagogy conversations at the school). We continue to actively brainstorm ways of continuing this work and intend to use ASPPH’s *Framing the Future Report*, with its emphasis on “inclusive excellence through an anti-racism lens”, as a point of leverage in these efforts [22].

Finally, we acknowledge an important limitation of this project, which is that what we learned is based on our self-selected sample. The narrators who chose to participate in this study were mostly on their way toward a more intentional and antiracist pedagogy, which is why they felt motivated to be a part of the research on how teaching was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 racial justice uprisings. This is reflected in the results: we were able to identify the facilitators of these teaching practices at the instructor level but not the barriers. Future research might emphasize recruiting faculty who teach regularly but who are not yet involved in moving toward intentional or antiracist pedagogy in order to more fully understand the barriers to doing so.

5. Conclusions

Schools of public health, like most educational institutions with entrenched cultures and substantial bureaucracy, face challenges in moving toward more intentional and antiracist teaching. Despite this, we see some faculty narrators in this project attempting to create healing spaces within public health classrooms, consistent with public health’s larger mission. In these spaces, faculty strive to be present with the lived experiences, suffering, joys, and needs of students while also taking account of the systemic inequities that shape both population health and classrooms dynamics. This treats the classroom as a microcosm of society and has the potential to join faculty and students together in learning through laboratories of care [34]. Given the devaluation of teaching and the lack of strong faculty development systems in many institutions, it behooves us to pay close attention to how faculty navigate and learn in the absence of supportive resources. Our research acknowledges the work of faculty in difficult conditions and eras, as well as the limits of these efforts, and serves as a basis for imagining how much further teaching might progress—in becoming more effective, engaging, and equitable—with investments in greater training and support. We thus encourage academic institutions and accrediting bodies to create much-needed roadmaps for supporting faculty development and to build infrastructure to cultivate intentional, student-centered, and antiracist pedagogy throughout higher education.

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Data Availability Statement: A public archive of these data is currently being developed. In the meantime, for access to publicly available interviews, email the corresponding author.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide for Faculty Oral History Interviews

The goal of these interviews is to capture your story of teaching and learning public health from this time and what we might learn from it.

- Our group is interested in this because we feel that public health teaching and learning is more important to society now than it has ever been in our lifetimes. We wonder how faculty, students, and staff are experiencing that and thinking about it in the context of their lives. We also see this time as an opportunity to ethically evolve public health teaching and learning and we are curious about how this comes up in people's stories.
- In this session we will talk about (1) who you are and your background, and (2) how the pandemic and movement for racial justice have impacted you and your work in the classroom. In the next session, we will focus on your thinking of how we might evolve public health education in light of these experiences.
- After we're done recording your interviews, you will be given a copy of the transcripts and have a chance to review the transcripts. At that point, you can decide to what extent we can use your interviews and if there are any pieces you would like to remove.
- Our hope is that our interviews can be a space for reflection and connection. Given our topics, it would not be surprising for us to step into territory that is emotionally distressing, and we expect this as part of the interview and we will be attentive to this and support you. That said, if I encourage you to answer a question you're not comfortable answering, feel free to say, "I'm going to pass". I want to empower you to hold any boundaries that feel important to hold.
- Do you have any questions before we get started?

This is [name of interviewer] and I am interviewing [narrator code] on [date] for the Public Health Education Now Oral History Project. I am interviewing from [place]. Where are you?

1. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background. Please feel free to share whatever you think is important to share about your life up until now.
 - I'd like to understand a bit more about move through the world, since that has so much to do with how we teach. What identities do you hold?

2. Tell me the story of the journey of how you came to be teaching public health at our institution.
3. Next we'll move toward talking about this period of time. What are some of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected you personally?
 - Another way of asking this is: What is your pandemic story? And how are you carrying it with you now?
4. Tell me a story about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your teaching and your work in the classroom.
 - What did you notice?
 - What happened?
5. Thinking back especially to June 2020, and the uprisings for racial justice. What were you doing in that time? Do you remember how it unfolded, what you were aware of, how it felt?
 - What are some of the ways that the Black Lives Matter movement and movements for racial justice have affected you personally?
6. Tell me a story about how Black Lives Matter and the movements for racial justice have affected your teaching and your work in the classroom.
 - What happened? (probe for detail—sounds, feelings, images)
 - How did you hold that, for yourself and your students?
 - How did your identity as a [identity]____educator shaped how you experience those moments?
7. Tell me about how you have taken care of yourself during this time.
 - What resources or supports have you used to continue teaching, learning, and/or supporting students specifically?
 - How did you find or cultivate these?
 - What else did/do you need to heal, teach, and support?
8. As you have lived the experiences of public health education you described to me, where did you feel there were opportunities to make change, if at all? What might this look like?
9. Did you ever have an experience where you left feeling like “yes, that is what public health education should be”? If so, what was this experience?
 - What made this meaningful to you?
 - What could the school do to sustain and support this kind of education, if anything?
10. What other thoughts or recommendations do you have that we should consider for public health education moving forward?
 - What should schools of public health be doing differently?
 - What additional skills do students need? What additional skills do faculty need? What additional skills do staff need?
 - How should students/faculty/staff be supported in doing this work?
 - What helps you feel seen in your identity, culture, and experience of oppression in the context of public health education? How could we amplify this?
 - What aspects of existing public health education and support systems are important to preserve?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Are there any questions I should have asked that I didn't? Anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix B. Voices Animating Faculty Narratives

Voices Being Drawn Upon	Description/Dynamics
Acquired knowledge/analysis	Expressions of internalized constructs and frameworks, which were largely professional/intellectual, and less directly experienced. Typically reflected the predominant values and analyses of academic public health (emphasis on population-level health and well-being, social justice).
Experiences of: • Teaching • Learning • Care/caregiving • Challenging the status quo • Privilege/inequities • Racialization as other	Narrators extensively described their personal and professional experiences. Those listed are especially prominent experiences in these interviews, only two of which were explicit topics of the interview guide (teaching and learning).
Experiential learning/knowledge • Intentional and antiracist pedagogy	Where personal and professional experiences have been reflected upon and metabolized (or appear to be in the process of being metabolized) into learning and practice.
Regret/not knowing	These voices often seemed to emerge when acquired knowledge/analysis came into conflict with experience in a way that the narrator was still working through.
Relationality & community	The values and practices of connection and collaboration were endorsed almost universally in these narratives, and at times their challenges and practices were explored also.
Workaholism	Stemming from American capitalism, culture of academia, culture of public health
Family members, friends, community members	These voices typically represented inherited ideas and values that narrators were thinking critically about to varying degrees.
Students	Students' voices were described as instrumental in helping faculty to empathize with students and, in some cases, to see and respond to inequities within and beyond the classroom.
School of Public Health/Academia	When this voice came up, it was often depicted as stifling greater emphasis on intentional teaching and was challenged by narrators to varying degrees.

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Article

The Role of Relationships in Resilience: Teachers Who Were At-Risk Youth Supporting At-Risk Students

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Abstract: Despite extensive research on resilience, little information exists on the resilience of teachers who faced adversity in childhood and the meanings they attribute to their current work with at-risk students. Thus, this study aimed to address this knowledge gap by examining the narratives of teachers who were at-risk children. Based on 30 semi-structured life-narrative interviews, the findings revealed the significant meaning that the participants ascribed to positive relationships. Whether such relationships were present or absent in their childhood, these relationships were instrumental in their choice to pursue a career in education. In supporting their students' resilience and becoming the teachers they wanted as children, they found meaning in their past experiences of risk and coping. The study's discussion applies the social mirroring theory to analyze how the participants resisted the negative image presented to them by others in their childhood and how a belief of hopeful prospects fortified them and led them to take on transformative justice as their life mission. Supporting at-risk children functioned as a form of healing for the participants, fostering both their students' and their own resilience. The study findings highlight the importance of accounting for teachers' childhood experiences as formative narratives that mold their educational work.

Keywords: narratives; teachers; lived experience; children at risk; resilience; relationships

1. Introduction

The social construction of childhood often conceptualizes and presents this time as carefree, happy, and untroubled by oppressive adult responsibilities. This concept is a myth, as, even in the healthiest of childhoods, balancing the complexities of development is akin to walking a daily tightrope [1]. Beyond normative challenges, children can also endure trauma and hardship [2], with ever-increasing extreme childhood adversities [3]. Adverse childhood experiences have been correlated with long-lasting interpersonal difficulties [4], professional challenges [5], and other potentially detrimental effects in adulthood [6]. Children who experience hardship continue to endure its harmful effects throughout their lives, and research has overwhelmingly been directed toward these negative consequences for both their physical [7] and mental health (e.g., [4]). While childhood adversity remains ever-present [8], governments, social systems, and private organizations [9] worldwide strive to combat its damaging effects by creating and implementing prevention and intervention programs.

The experience of trauma in childhood is often examined through the cycles of the risk paradigm [10]. However, it can be alternatively captured by the theoretical framework of resilience [11], which describes how insulating or mitigating factors [12] may allow an individual to cope constructively, rather than destructively, with adverse events and circumstances [13,14]. Thus, there are children who, despite their childhood hardships, develop well and even thrive [11]. Yet, what creates this variance? Why should the seemingly same circumstances lead to such vastly different outcomes? What are the particular circumstances of such unexpected results? Most importantly, how can we learn from these success stories to assist those who continue to bear hardships?

Despite the increasing interest in resilience, the meaning that teachers give to their own adverse childhood experiences and the impact of these experiences on their chosen profession is, as yet, largely unstudied. Therefore, the current paper seeks to reveal an insider's view among teachers who have contended with childhood risk and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. Furthermore, the research questions address how teachers who experienced childhood adversity attribute meaning to their current work with at-risk students. Using the lens of resilience, we can further clarify the adaptations they made to cope with events that carry an immense emotional toll [15,16]. Thus, the purpose of this study is to unveil the unique and subjective experience of teachers who cope with both their own history of childhood risk as well as that experienced by their students.

1.1. Resilience

Resilience describes the processes of successful coping and positive adaptation of individuals who cope with adversity [17–19]. However, the concept of resilience is also inclusive of the struggle involved in achieving this result (e.g., [8,20]). While research has indicated that at-risk individuals can exhibit resilience (e.g., [21,22]), the defining qualities of this phenomenon and the mechanisms that it entails remain an area of continued investigation and debate [23].

Thus far, resilience has been conceptualized according to various theoretical perspectives. Some theorists have emphasized resilience as a matter of personal disposition (e.g., [24,25]) and ability [26]. Other scholars have viewed it as a result of protective environmental conditions (e.g., [27–29]). Similarly, some see it as an integration that considers the dynamics of the interactions between the two aforementioned perspectives (e.g., [30–32]).

The personal qualities associated with resilience are mental acuity, problem-solving ability, drive, a strong self-image, and a sense of humor [33]. Gratitude, kindness [34], hope, and bravery [35] have also been identified as personal attributes of fostering resilience. Additionally, hardiness, defined as encompassing a sense of purpose and meaning, faith in one's ability to substantially impact the world, and the propensity to derive lessons from both agreeable and painful experiences have also been found to be strongly correlated with resilience [36].

Environmental factors that may contribute to resilience include the presence of meaningful pursuits or attachments outside the high-risk, harmful setting [19,37], along with strong, positive relationships with either authority figures or peers [38,39]. The ability to enter or construct alternative “spaces of being” away from the harmful, adverse environment may allow individuals to experience other, healthier forms of reality. Consequently, they might be able to integrate or independently fashion positive forms of coping [37].

Paradoxically, it should be noted that resilience has also been found alongside behaviors that are conventionally considered harmful, such as emotional dissociation and repressive coping [40]. In fact, these behaviors may even contribute to the buffering effect that constitutes resilience itself [41]. Hence, resilience cannot be distinctively categorized as positive or negative, rather, it should be understood as multi-faceted. Due to these distinctions, nuance is required when assessing resilience [18,30]. For instance, resilience has been evaluated using abstract indicators, such as self-reported wellbeing [42] and the quality of well-becoming, which is the belief in and use of future aspirations as well as a trust that things will be better in the future [43]. At other times, it has been evaluated according to an individual's ability to attain success, as understood in their particular social-cultural context (e.g., [19]), such as long-lasting interpersonal relationships or professional accomplishments.

1.2. Teachers Who Experienced Risk in Childhood

Teachers are among the professionals who most frequently meet children. Relationships with teachers are a primary example of an environmental factor with the potential to have an emolliating effect on at-risk children and assist them in developing resilience [44]. The study of teachers and resilience has largely been related to their ability to meet chal-

lenges in the workplace and teacher retention (e.g., [45,46]). However, teachers have also been included in the research on resilience among child-focused professionals with adverse personal backgrounds, including a limited investigation of their coping and meaning attribution in relation to their past experiences [47]. Specifically, among teachers, a history of adverse childhood experiences has been correlated with lower levels of teacher resilience, lower quality teacher–student relations [48], and lower quality classroom climates [49].

The study at hand, therefore, aims to contribute an insider’s view of the meaning-making processes of teachers who confronted risks and extreme adversity in childhood, including poverty, violence, and abuse. Can their personal life histories and tacit knowledge contribute to their students’ coping with childhood adversity? Resilience, which addresses coping without minimizing the experience of risk and trauma, is an effective lens for analyzing both teachers’ difficult experiences in childhood and the implications of such experiences on their professional and personal lives. In delving into this view of childhood risk and its impact, the research questions that guided the study were as follows: (1) how do once at-risk teachers construct their stories of resilience? and (2) what are the common themes among these teachers’ experiences?

2. Methods

The current study was guided by the constructivist paradigm, which ontologically places emphasis on how individuals actively construct their own reality [50]. The narrative methodological perspective within the constructivist paradigm gleans participants’ realities through their narrations of their lived experiences [51]. Since individuals conceptualize their experiences in a narrative form, narrative inquiry is a way of examining memory, that is, how one perceives and sequences past events. Researchers of various disciplines have explored narratives as a tool for fostering resilience [52], observing that reconstructing past experiences can allow individuals to extract and articulate new meanings [53]. This process is also influenced by one’s social and cultural group [54,55]. The present study is based on teachers’ narrated constructs about their biographies, as well as on how these personal histories have shaped their professional lives [56]. Therefore, the narrative approach of the constructivist paradigm was chosen as the most suitable for this study as it allowed to capture and describe how the participants made sense of and attributed meaning to their experiences of childhood risk and how they related them to their professional work [57].

2.1. Participants

Participants were selected using a criterion sample to ensure information-rich data [58]. The interviewers recruited research participants in their immediate area according to the following criteria: teachers in either Jewish or Arab schools in Israel with at least 5 years of teaching experience who, by their own description, had undergone severe childhood risk, overcome adversity, and were currently working with at-risk children. For the study’s purpose, the terms childhood and children refer to the developmental stages of individuals under the age of 18. These participants referred the interviewers to additional candidates via the “snowball technique” [58]. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved [58,59]. The participants were first contacted by phone to ensure they met the criteria, the study was explained to them, and their consent to participate was obtained.

The final sample included the life story narratives of 30 teachers, with a mean age of 42.8, who worked with children ranging from early childhood to high school age. Initially, participant sampling was conducted according to five risk types: (1) poverty; (2) survivors of violence; (3) survivors of child sexual abuse, specifically; (4) parents with diminished functioning; and (5) learning disabilities. However, during data collection and analysis, the participants were all found to have contended with multiple forms of risk and were thus all included in the same population sample. Beyond the described initial childhood adversity, the participants also contended with their parents’ physical, emotional, and medical neglect, parental drug use and alcoholism, childhood addiction and homelessness, and early exposure to crime and sex work. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to

30 years. The participants were 24 women and 6 men. Socio-culturally, the sample was composed of 12 Arab teachers (6 Muslim Arab, 3 Druze Arab, and 3 Bedouin Arab) and 18 Jewish teachers (3 national religious Jewish and 15 secular Jewish).

2.2. Procedures

Initially, three open interviews were conducted by the author, who utilized the findings to construct a narrative life story interview guide [60]. In these interviews, the teachers were invited to share their life stories in relation to the risks they experienced in their childhood and their educational work. Based on an analysis of the open interviews, a semi-structured narrative interview guide was developed [61], which included four categories: the experience of the teacher's particular childhood risk; the teacher's relationship with significant individuals, including their own educators in childhood; the teacher's understanding of resilience; and the teacher's professional and personal life in adulthood.

The remaining 27 narrative interviews were conducted by a research group composed of four Arab (1 Druze, 1 Bedouin, and 2 Muslim) and nine Jewish M.Ed. graduate students. They collected the data for the partial fulfillment of a seminar course on the topic of resilience and received ongoing, in-depth interview training to do so. The interviews were open to effectively capture the context and holistic view of the participants' experiences. As the interviews were intended to cover the narrative of the teachers' entire lifetimes, from childhood to the present, each participant was interviewed three times. Each of the interviews lasted between 45–75 min.

2.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative narrative analysis was conducted by the author and a research assistant with the purpose of unveiling the narratives and meanings constructed by the participants regarding risk and resilience through their life stories. The analysis was led by the research question of how teachers who experienced childhood adversity attribute meaning to their current work with at-risk students. To do so, narrative thematic analysis was conducted, focusing on the content within the interviews [62]. For this form of analysis, although the interviews were conducted in three separate sessions [63], all three interviews were considered as the component parts of the narrative of a single research participant [62]. As the analysis process examined the thoughts and emotions that animated the participants' narratives, a coherent, generalized picture of their subjective experiences of coping and the meanings they attributed to risk and resilience emerged [63]. This process was inductive and grounded in the data rather than outside biases or prior knowledge and research [64].

Following repeated viewings of the interview transcripts via Dedoose software, the author and research assistant then engaged separately in open coding [58], identifying and labeling the aspects that were deemed fundamental to the teachers' narratives [65]. Next, each prominent idea and meaning received a corresponding code [62]. Following this, the individual codes were integrated into a single consolidated codebook [58]. In the subsequent stage, the codes were consolidated into themes that represented the main, overarching narratives [62]. This process was considered complete when theoretical saturation was reached. Only those themes that offered substantive insights on the domains of risk and resilience were selected, revisiting the participants' accounts once more to further develop their analysis [66].

In the current study, two major themes that emerged are as follows: (1) the teachers' narratives regarding the experience of significant relationships in childhood, which included both the presence and absence of significant relationships, and (2) the teachers' narratives of life purpose through educating at-risk students in the context of their own childhood risk.

2.4. Rigor and Trustworthiness

To meet the standards of credibility and rigor required of a qualitative study [50,67], the research process was comprehensively documented via an audit trail, with all analyses

preserved alongside the data on which they were based [68]. Furthermore, representative participants from the various Jewish and Arab subgroups were provided the opportunity to inspect their interview transcripts and amend their answers [67]. The analysis team held weekly meetings to debrief regarding the data and to fine-tune the ongoing coding process [69]. The Arab M.Ed. students who conducted the interviews also contributed their insights to ensure cultural veracity and relevance. Finally, the author was advised by experts in children at risk, education, coping, resilience, and teacher welfare [70].

In presenting the findings, direct quotations from the participants were included to illustrate the basis for the researchers' interpretations. Such an approach provides readers the opportunity to assess the rigor of the researchers' claims [58]. Each quote was introduced using the participants' personal contextual details, followed by the researchers' analysis of the quote's use of language, implications, and connection to the overall theme being described.

2.5. Ethics

The study was granted approval by the ethics board of the author's academic institution. Before the study began, the interviewers ensured that the interview candidates were fully apprised of the research subject matter, the voluntary nature of any involvement, and the way in which their anonymity would be protected. They also conveyed that mental health resources could be provided, as needed, either during or after the interviews. The participants signed a consent form before being interviewed, with the clear understanding that they could refuse to answer any question at any time. After the interview concluded, the interviewers shared their contact details and those of the author, as well as the contact information of mental health specialists. In transcribing the interviews, the author removed all identifying details from the dataset.

3. Findings

Focusing on story content, structure, and meaning, the present study's findings revealed that meaningful interpersonal relationships were the central organizing feature of the majority of the teachers' narratives. The analysis of the narratives unveiled experiences that hindered the participants' coping with adversity, such as a lack of parental care and attention due to alcohol abuse and financial poverty as well as childhood sexual abuse, physical danger in the participants' childhood environment, and more. Additionally, childhood experiences emerged that were found to have assisted the participants in their childhood to cope with adversity, particularly receiving attention and assistance from educational figures and teachers, such as extra study hours, support in acquiring conceptual tools, and even weekend respite care.

From the analysis of the narratives, it was found that all participants placed great value on such relationships, framing their presence or absence as the key connector between the different phases of their lives from childhood to the present, and even to the person they hoped to be in the future. Notably, meaning was constructed around absence—that is, the participants' awareness of lacking important and caring relationships—was the most common trend. Conversely, a minority of the participants described the presence of life-changing relationships with educators and the benefits this conferred.

In both cases, the critical realization of the importance of such relationships consciously led the participants to pursue education as a profession. In choosing to be present for and protective of students at risk, they aimed to play a key role they recognized from their own pasts, whether from actual recollection or as something absent and hoped for. In this way, they aimed to foster their students' resilience. These meanings composed the backbone of the themes of this study: (1) the teachers' experience of significant relationships in childhood, whether present or absent, and (2) the teachers' experience of their mission to support at-risk students by fostering resilience.

3.1. *Between Having and Not Having a Caring Relationship When Facing Childhood Risk*

A central narrative that emerged through the life stories of all the educators from the different socio-cultural and religious groups was the importance of meaningful relationships with significant adults in their childhood. This narrative was evident not only among participants who described experiences of significant relationships, but also, importantly, among those who described an absence of significant relationships. As such, both the absence and presence of meaningful relationships in childhood played a central role in the participants' narratives of resilience construction.

3.1.1. "I Faced Everything Alone": Life Stories with the Absence of a Significant Relationship

The majority of the participants described feeling abandoned, invisible, or insignificant in the face of their adverse childhood experiences. Naama, a 37-year-old Jewish high school teacher and mother of three, was exposed to crime, drugs, violence, and sex work from an early age due to the socio-economic status of her area and circumstances. She stated that she "adopted the views" of her neighborhood and began smoking and drinking at age 13. She also emphasized the impact of her father as a violent and inconsistent presence and her mother as an inattentive and neglectful presence:

Do you know how hard it is to be a child who is neglected or rejected by their parents? What a horrible feeling that is? It colors your whole life; it leaves a scar. For the rest of your life, you feel like you're walking on shaky ground that may, at any moment, split open. You are constantly in a state of uncertainty. [...] You feel like you aren't worth anything, that you aren't like everyone else, you are constantly busy with shame, and you think, why couldn't I have been born to normal, well-established parents?

The lack of present, supportive parental relationships darkened Naama's worldview, leaving her with a sense that the world is, at its core, unpredictable and that she, herself, is marginalized and worthless. This feeling was so unbearable that, while describing it, she continuously said "you" as if to push the reality away from herself. Though she yearned for a different world, Naama saw the damage caused to her sense of self as permanent.

The participants described a childhood spent feeling unnoticed both in and out of their homes, as if they were invisible. Lital, a Jewish teacher in her late 30s, grew up in poverty and faced additional risks, including family violence and sexual abuse by an adult when she was a teenager. She described how these risks and, in fact, she herself, seemed not to exist to those around her:

The teachers [...] paid attention to me only to the extent of my achievements or lack thereof. [...] They didn't care about who I was and what was happening to me. All that mattered to them were my studies. With my family, I didn't matter to anyone. [...] They didn't see me. I was insignificant at school. No one asked questions, and no one was interested.

The adults in Lital's life failed to show an interest in her authentic self and well-being, as solely academic achievements provided her with any kind of recognition. With care and interest entirely absent from her life, she had to be her own audience and source of validation. Yet, Lital expressed outrage at being treated as unworthy of attention, implying that, currently, she is confident in her own self-worth.

Gadir, a 34-year-old Bedouin Arab middle-school mathematics teacher, recounted a narrative surrounding the extreme poverty and lack of parental care she experienced in childhood. Gadir shared a room with five siblings in a home without water, electricity, warm clothes, or blankets, and the little food they had often had to be shared with the animals they raised. She described how this material dearth was intertwined with a lack of attentiveness from her parents, particularly in conjunction with her father's addiction:

Whatever money we had would go to his cigarettes, he would leave us [the children] without food. [...] It was an extremely difficult childhood in every

way: a childhood that was meaningless; a childhood that was not experienced like other girls; [...] a childhood that was characterized by different kinds of deprivation, such as the lack of clothing, food, games. . . I kept asking for very simple things and I couldn't receive them because "there is no money". These gaps and disparities accompanied me throughout the later stages of my life.

Gadir was a child living in poverty who later became aware that, to her father, her basic need for food was secondary to his addiction. The absence of parental care left Gadir feeling insignificant and defenseless. Like the other participants, this sense accompanied her into adulthood and colored her view of life and herself.

The lack of care from attentive adults influenced the participants' experiences and coping throughout their lives. Dan, a 50-year-old Jewish high school teacher of low socio-economic status, in his childhood, started working at an early age to support his family, while his father spent the money he earned on alcohol. Dan cared for his father, who became dysfunctional and dangerous when drinking. Additionally, school was not a safe space, as Dan described how he was ostracized and physically injured by his classmates, with no one to defend him. One instance that still haunts Dan was when another child stabbed him with a pencil during class, and he was left to contend with this act with no support from the school: "No one spoke up. This teacher did nothing. The school didn't do anything about it either. The boy was from a family with established parents. They didn't do anything to him. No suspension, nothing". Dan believed that the other boy's privileged background led others to act on his behalf. Dan knowing no one would protect him, experienced a constant sense of danger that changed his perspective and behavior:

I distanced myself even more from children from school. [...] Now I became the type not to speak at all. [...] No one knew about my situation, no one knew about the things I was going through or anything. I didn't get help from school. I faced everything alone. The counselor knew, but there wasn't someone who called me or wanted to help me.

With children and adults alike failing to show any positive interest in him, Dan coped by distancing himself and accepting that he was on his own. Thus, a lack of environmental support from their peer groups and meaningful relationships with adults negatively affected the sense of belonging of the participants when they were children.

Today, Dan shared how these traumatic experiences left a scar. He spoke about feeling great anxiety over financial issues, and the presence of alcohol, particularly the smell, triggers memories of his father's violence as he associates the smell with harm. Naama, in contrast, suggested that struggling on her own was a painful means of gaining independence: "You learn to do everything with your own two hands. You fall and get up again, fall and get up again. You do this dozens of times until you learn to survive on your own". Naama's experience with hardship revealed her agency, which led her to construct an identity as a survivor, albeit reluctantly. Other participants expressed similar sentiments. Yet, overall, a childhood without meaningful, attentive relationships, particularly with caring adults, left the participants vulnerable to danger and with a damaged sense of self-worth. This low perception of themselves, alongside a vulnerability to harmful relationships, often became a pattern for the participants from childhood to throughout adulthood.

3.1.2. "Thanks to Them, I Had Something to Dream about": Life Stories with Turning Points around the Presence of Significant Others

A minority of the participants described relationships with educators as the source of a positive life change. Chanan, a 36-year-old Jewish high school mathematics teacher, lost his parents and then the grandmother who cared for him at an early age. He grew up in poverty and in a dangerous neighborhood where he was regularly violently assaulted by older teenagers. Chanan described his narrative as one of "fighting for everything," yet noted that a relationship with a teacher changed the way he experienced this reality:

She strongly believed in the power of thought and always said that “thoughts create reality”. I understood and recognized through her the power of the human mind to shape the existing reality. [...] What a person wants, he can achieve. That’s what she believed, and she taught me this way of thinking.

In the context of this positive relationship, Chanan acquired conceptual tools and came to believe in his ability to create a better reality. This prepared him to be active and conscious in taking advantage of opportunities to change his life circumstances:

In the end, I succeeded. I learned in a small class. All the students had difficult economic backgrounds and challenging family situations. [...] The school poured resources into us: extra study hours, hot lunches at the end of the school day. This was a springboard for me. So, what the school gave, I took with both hands.

Thus, Chanan attributed his success to both the extra resources he received and the empowering motivation of the significant adults around him:

I remember them today as key figures. People who lit the way for me with a flashlight, who sprinkled crumbs on the right path so that I would know where to turn. [...] It wasn’t easy for me at all, but I always had the thought that I wanted to succeed at any cost, that I was an equal among equals. The sense of capacity is a feeling that every person should develop, promote, and use.

These supportive relationships with school figures were both the lighthouse providing guidance in a stormy childhood and the foundation of Chanan’s motivation and competence. As in Chanan’s case, all of the participants perceived their teachers’ involvement positively as it was through their teachers that they received the support they so greatly needed.

The participants who had the opportunity in their childhood to be involved in groups and sports supported by teachers benefited from the positive impacts of having their confidence bolstered by their abilities and developing self-esteem. Dor, a 37-year-old Jewish middle school teacher specializing in humanities-related subjects, grew up with a learning disability. Dor described his childhood as one of frustration and helplessness: “Nobody understood me, and I didn’t understand what anyone wanted from me”. He did not receive support from his teachers, but he found acceptance and success in a Judo class and, specifically, in his relationship with his coach:

I loved training, fighting, and competing... I could release all the energy I had there. I would ask the coach to stay for the training of the older kids. For me, it was really the best place in the world. There, I felt proud and special. Mostly, I felt that I was very good. I felt no fear or frustration that I wouldn’t succeed. The coach was so pleased with me, and always cheered me on, supported me and pushed me forward. I felt that I could trust him.

With its positive environment and supportive coach, this alternative place of being provided Dor the space and foundation of trust to develop a sense of self-esteem and significance.

Ronit, a 54-year-old Jewish history high school teacher, grew up with a father who was an alcoholic and experienced extensive physical and emotional neglect from her parents. Ronit attempted suicide in 10th grade, yet she did not receive care from her parents or professionals. Despite this, her narrative focused on the positive experiences and relationships she had in school as a child:

My teacher would adopt me during weekends... She was like a mother. This way, I had the strength to go back to school in 10th grade. [...] What did this relationship give me? It gave me warmth and love and necessities. This teacher gave me a place to sleep; she fed me Friday meals, gave me food, a shower, gave me a home, a roof. It gave me a lot. [...] The other teachers gave me things that I like and what I do today: teaching history; being a consumer of knowledge, culture, literature; and dreams. Thanks to them I had something to dream about.

[...] No one believed in me at home. No one asked about me. No one taught me anything. But the light that began to ignite me—that first began with my teachers at school.

Ronit's relationships with her teachers constituted an alternative environment that enabled her positive development. These figures represented a safe space, providing not only physical necessities, but also the enrichment that led to a vision of a new and positive tomorrow. Thus, a select few participants experienced supportive, significant relationships. Both participants who had meaningful relationships and those who did not, described how the relationships they experienced in childhood shaped their educational calling as adults.

3.1.3. "I Try to Do Everything So That the Children Do Not Experience What I Went through": Being the Teacher That I Needed to Have

In emphasizing the significance of having or lacking meaningful relationships in their childhood, the participants' narratives also associated their experiences in their childhood with their professional outlook, goals, and ways of interacting with their own students. The majority described consciously taking on a supportive role for their students based on their tacit knowledge and experience of the needs of children in adverse situations. They attributed the centrality of this mission to their need to care for and protect their students and enact some form of personal healing for themselves.

The narrative of Shiraz, a Jewish teacher in her 40s with 15 years of experience, emphasized the love and care she received from her parents as she struggled with severe anxiety and shame over her family's financial insecurity (among other triggers) and related difficulties in school. Due to their financial situation, her parents were unable to spend much time with her due to work, so she navigated much of her childhood and the struggles she experienced due to poverty on her own. At school, she received little attention and was ostracized by the other children. She described how, as a teacher, these life experiences now inform her mission to protect her students from the effects of poverty:

It always reminds me of my own childhood, only I didn't have anyone to direct and help me. I feel a calling, I feel that this is my way of repairing the world. In this world, I don't leave any child alone until I lift them off the ground and make them stand on their own two feet and equip them with the tools for the journey.

Thus, she shaped her interactions with the children in her class according to her own firsthand knowledge of what they might be facing and need:

I remind the children all the time that I'm there for them, that they can call me, they can schedule a conversation with me [...] I can see how a child arrives at school in terms of their clothing, I know where the children live [...] I know what the parents do for work, and through this, I can know who is in more financial difficulty and who less. [...] I call that child and I try to check with them if they need anything from me, or I simply tell them that I noticed that their eyes are red, is everything okay? In short, I try to do everything so that the children do not experience what I went through.

Dalit, a 48-year-old Jewish school principal with extensive teaching experience, related how being taken under the wing of a local store owner as a teen impressed upon her the importance of making sure every child feels seen. As the youngest of ten in an impoverished family, she felt neglected and unnoticed and spent most of her time on the streets, where she was involved in drinking and violent conflicts. However, the attention of this mentor figure "gave [her] inner strength the legitimacy and drive to be expressed," a source of support she now strives to pass on to the children under her care. As an example, she shared the story of going to the home of one of her students, who had not been seen at school for several days:

The girl was very happy. It was amazing to see, it was as though I lifted her out of an abyss. Her bed is the sofa in the living room. I spoke with her, I told her, "I

came to take you to school". She got dressed and we went to the car. We spoke in the car. It made her feel important, and that I care about her. [...] Her mother was very excited and thanked us as if she had been waiting for someone to come. [...] The school was her safe place, and when I arrived her face lit up that finally someone was doing something for her. I know what that is because I was there, and unfortunately, no one took such a step. That's why it is very important to me to do this.

Like Dalit, all of the participating teachers aimed to continually remind their students that they are there for them, being the teacher that they themselves needed to have.

Personal experiences of hardship served as a source of knowledge, enabling the teachers to analyze their at-risk students' behaviors and support them. For example, Hatam, a 53-year-old Arab elementary school teacher of 27 years who is married with five children, described how her own childhood adversity allowed her to understand that of her students:

I understand the distress and difficulty that the poor students experience. I accept them, and I know where their behavior stems from. If, for example, a child took another's toy or food, I understand that he did not intend to steal, that his behavior stems from satisfying some need that is very difficult for them to give up. I constantly try to compensate them and explain right from wrong without embarrassing them in front of their classmates. My understanding comes from the fact that I experienced the same hardship and poverty in my childhood.

Dan, whose feelings of abandonment by the school system were described previously, shared his reason for becoming a teacher and his particular mission:

I wanted to start studying. So, what should I study? To work in the field of education. [...] And why? [...] To see the children in need. Because with me, nobody saw me. I was invisible, see-through. [...] And that's what was in my mind. This was my vision. To reach children who are in situations of risk, whether it be poverty, violence, children to alcoholic parents, drug addicts. [...] I knew I was going to work with children, and through education, to fix everything that happened [to me]. I came to fix things.

Dan's personal life story was his underlying motivation for becoming a teacher. His goal was to protect other children and prevent them from experiencing what he did, ensuring that the things adults ignored in his childhood would not go unseen on his watch. Thus, his life's work not only protects his students but also remedies his own past suffering.

Similarly, Omina, a 48-year-old Muslim Arab special education teacher with 25 years of experience, described the meaning she attributed to supporting at-risk students, which was echoed by the majority of the participants:

The experience of poverty is very painful and leaves a scar for life. Although I was able to deal with poverty and overcome the economic hardship and build resilience, I'm still hurt by the unforgettable experience, and every time I meet a poor student, that experience is renewed. Therefore, I make every effort to make it easier for my students, to accommodate them in their plight, to support them and help as much as possible to overcome what is lacking. . . Every time I make a child happy and help him, I feel happy and satisfied with myself. I empathize with him and soar with joy that I accomplished something very big for him, that he needed.

Thus, Omina described her work with at-risk children as both arising from the need to care for and protect the children as well as a form of personal healing for herself. Omina, like the majority of the participants, intentionally sought to use the wisdom she gained from her childhood experiences to assist the development of her students.

In constructing the narratives of their life stories, the participants drew from their own adverse childhood experiences and their work as teachers in adulthood. The connecting factor across these contexts was the meaning they invested in their interpersonal relationships, whether with educators in their childhood or their current students, as a central component of their resilience. This was the case in the presence of such relationships as well as in their absence, both of which contributed to the participants' sense of mission and purpose as educators supporting at-risk students.

4. Discussion

Resilience construction has received much scholarly attention over the past decades [71], with different theories describing multiple approaches regarding how adverse and traumatic experiences may be buffered to lead to outcomes where individuals can thrive [40]. Among the environmental theories of resilience development, the presence of strong relationships is recognized as central [72]. Thus, a supportive relationship with a parent, family member, caring adult, or close friend may protect against the effects of risk, promote emotional security [73], and provide an alternative space for social engagement [37]. Furthermore, these relationships could provide at-risk children a context in which they can develop a positive model of themselves.

4.1. *The Role of Teachers Working with At-Risk Students*

Beyond immediate family, the role played by teachers is among the most prominent ones in any child's life [74,75], and the personal relationships developed between teachers and students have been found to substantially contribute to children's well-being [76,77]. Hence, while supportive teachers are a valuable resource for students in general, for children facing adversity, the benefits are even more vital [78,79]. Consistent with the findings regarding protective environmental factors, strong relationships with teachers are particularly valuable in relation to fostering students' resilience [80,81].

Cultivating nonjudgmental, trust-building relationships, therefore, has been found to be the primary aim of teachers in their work with at-risk and marginalized children [82,83]. Emotional bonding between teachers and at-risk students has also been viewed by some pedagogists as far more essential than teaching academic content and the development of students' cognitive skills [43]. Sanders et al. [43] also found that at-risk students who perceived their relationships with teachers as positive—that is, respectful, responsive, and fostering students' personal agency—demonstrated prosocial behaviors, social participation, and held future aspirations, among other positive outcomes. Furthermore, Johnson [82] found that at-risk students placed a significant weight on their relationships with their teachers in the development of their resilience.

Nevertheless, to the knowledge of the author, no previous studies have described and analyzed the path from risk to resilience through the value placed on such meaningful relationships, regardless of whether the relationships were actually present. While an important minority of the participants did experience life-changing relationships with educators, most had negative or neglectful relationships with educators and other adults in their childhoods, leaving them feeling abandoned, invisible, or insignificant. However, paradoxically, these participants did not merely survive. They used their childhood experience of adversity—including the sense of invisibility resulting from a lack of positive relationships—as an impetus to “pay forward” to their students what they wished they had been privy to.

4.2. *The Importance of Student–Teacher Relationships in Coping with Adversity*

When present, strong relationships were a source of hope, a sense of well-becoming, and a model of how to interact with care. The participants took that hope for a better life, made it so, and passed it on to their own students. Yet, even when strong relationships were absent, the participants—with no model to guide them and without the sense of security that such relationships offer—emerged from their adverse circumstances to pursue a career

in education and promote the very type of relationship they lacked in their childhood. This enabled them to provide the kind of support and guidance they never received. Being the teacher they needed to have as children was both a way to heal themselves and protect their students, fostering resilience among both parties simultaneously.

4.3. *The Social Mirror*

This path of constructing resilience through finding an anchor in relationships, even in their absence, contradicts the existing knowledge of how environmental contexts contribute to this phenomenon [73]. Moreover, it contradicts theories of social-emotional development [84] and enculturation [85,86]. To understand this, it may be useful to consider Winnicott's [87] concept of "social mirroring", which proposes that a child's self-image is deeply rooted in the reflection of themselves they perceive from the people and world around them. While Winnicott emphasized the essential role of the mother, other family members, friends and acquaintances, authority figures, and the media also contribute to this effect [88]. When the mirror held up by society shows an auspicious picture, this simplifies the process of constructing a positive self-image. When the picture is unfavorable, it inhibits the development and reinforcement of a stable sense of self-worth.

4.4. *Overcoming the Negative Reflection in the Social Mirror: A Path to Resilience*

The teachers in the current study perceived a strongly destructive image in the social mirror of their childhood, leading them to feel ignored and unseen. Suárez-Orozco [88] et al. [89] applied the social mirror theory to the risk experiences of immigrant and minority children, describing their potential reactions in several forms. One option would be to accept and internalize the negative image of themselves and, consequently, adopt a self-effacing and pessimistic point of view that would inhibit ambition and cultivate a pattern of self-sabotage. On the other hand, they could also reject and retreat from the negative image, avoiding social relations to such an extent that they neglect their education as well as any interests and activities outside of school. Yet another possible resistant path is defiance, whereby some children react with hostility toward the unflattering image reflected by society, a response typically accompanied by combative or unsafe tendencies [88–91].

While the teachers in the study described themselves as feeling invisible and insignificant in their childhood—a plainly negative social mirror—they also overcame this self-perception and took the reins in constructing their own resilience. They appeared to resist not only the negative reflection held up by society, expressing outrage and indignation toward how they were treated and made to feel, but also the negative models of relationships they experienced. However, remarkably, this defiance did not result in retreat, aggression, or distancing from interpersonal relationships. Instead, it led the teachers to pursue their own well-becoming, be open to the possibility of a better future for themselves, and foster positive relationships with their students.

It remains unanswered precisely how the teachers knew to defy the social mirrors that were harmful to their self-image, development, and relations with others. Furthermore, it is unclear what led them to take on such a constructive, empowering, meaning-building role rather than a destructive one. Nonetheless, according to the teachers in this study, their ultimate achievement was the active maintenance and cultivation of hope in a humane future, which they contributed to creating for their students. It is through this method of resistance that their resilience emerged.

4.5. *Limitations*

The current study provides unique insights into how individuals who experienced adverse and traumatic childhoods provided meaning to both harmful and meaningful relationships in their life narratives. Several limitations warrant mention. Firstly, as this is a narrative qualitative study, the findings aimed to provide an in-depth exploration of the specific population of previously at-risk teachers. Consequently, the study is limited in how its findings can be generalized [92] regarding the understanding of pathways to

resilience. Examining the narratives of the teachers who were models for the participants, as well as other educators, their families, and their students, is also necessary to gain a holistic understanding of the specific relationships described herein.

Additionally, the heterogeneous nature of the sample was significant in a few ways. While it is not unusual for individuals to experience multiple and interacting forms of adversity, such as the participants' exposure to violence, poverty, and parents who were challenged by the responsibility of caring for them, future research should examine the impact of particular types of adversity in-depth, for example, CSA. Similarly, no systematic description was provided regarding the forms of risk experienced by the participants' students.

The population was also socio-culturally heterogeneous, including secular Jewish, religious Jewish, Muslim Arab, Druze Arab, and Bedouin Arab teachers, who had a range of years of seniority. However, the study was limited in its ability to closely examine each population due to the small sample size. As the definition of resilience is socially constructed and varies based on pertinent norms, future research on coping with past childhood adversity should also closely investigate cultural implications and contexts as well as examine the effect of seniority on reflective resilience construction. To address this dearth, the author's concurrent studies on resilience among educators are dedicated to analyzing and discussing specific socio-cultural and religious contexts.

Finally, there has not yet been sufficient attention paid to how teachers' personal histories and narratives might contribute to the classroom experience. This will bear upon future research seeking to expand existing knowledge of the social mirroring processes that occur in educational settings, perhaps leading to the development of new and innovative teaching practices that protect and stimulate students' healthy development.

4.6. Implications for Practice and Policy

Interventions to aid children at risk should integrate an understanding of the structure and dynamics of resilience. Current programs designed to foster resilience among at-risk children primarily focus on developing environmental and personal characteristics seen as elemental to this process. While such programs do emphasize on external means of support through significant relationships with competent mentoring adults and normative, well-functioning peers (e.g., [93]), as well as improving the quality of current relationships with caregivers (e.g., [94]), the potential role of teachers remains overshadowed. This study suggests that such relationships are not only crucial to providing children with hope for the future but also may be "paid forward" to the next generation.

While this is important knowledge for programs striving to assist in children's resilience construction, it is all the more radical for teacher education, overturning previous conceptions. The chief goal of educational practice and policy should be teachers' relationship construction with children. Policymakers should realize that the relationships formed within educational contexts, whether they involve teaching academic subject matter or extracurricular and enrichment programs, have effects that extend far beyond their specific fields. Lastly, educators and social services should reframe conventional thinking regarding the defiance of norms as detrimental and recognize the potential benefits of such resistance for children in adverse situations. Such a focus may hold the key for enabling those children who do not have external support to resist the negative self-image that society reflects onto them, offering a world of meaning, hope, and change to those children who need it most.

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Article

Exploring Staff–Student Partnership in Curriculum Design

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Abstract: Collaboration between staff and students for improved curriculum design is presented as highly beneficial in many contexts. In particular, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is seen as facilitating co-design and collaboration. However, students tend not to be actively involved in curriculum change, especially in whole programme design or review. Furthermore, few studies consider partnership with students in the context of ESD inclusion, which was the focus for this collaboration. The aim of this study was to explore staff and student perceptions of participating in a collaborative approach to the review and development of the undergraduate law curriculum in a university in the UK. A developmental evaluation using mixed methods was used to study the expectations and experiences of students and staff through a process of curriculum review and change to incorporate ESD. Our findings demonstrate the rewards of a collaborative process incorporating diverse perspectives. However, they also highlight barriers for students and staff, including perceptions of risk associated with student involvement in the process, and we offer reflections on navigating these potential risks.

Keywords: students as partners; curriculum design; co-creation; education for sustainable development; education innovation; developmental evaluation

1. Introduction

This article describes an example of collaborative curriculum change using the Students as Partners (SaP) model to update an undergraduate programme and incorporate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Recently in this journal, Kioupi and Voulvoulis, have advocated for participatory approaches to curriculum development [1]. The focus of this article is on one such approach, the SaP process; however, we see context and focus as entwined. Therefore, we set out below the connections between this process and contextual factors, notably embedding ESD in the curriculum in question, an undergraduate law programme in the UK. To understand if and how SaP might be used to enhance student engagement, this project invited students to be part of a periodic review of the law curriculum where the focus was on incorporation of ESD. This project thus considers SaP use in the context of legal education and SaP theory is described in more detail in Section 3 below.

SaP is a growing area of scholarship and practice promoting meaningful student engagement in higher education at several levels. These levels can include classroom activities, assessment design, research, and the wider curriculum. The example presented involved a formal institutional review of the whole curriculum where one of the key objectives was to incorporate ESD within the programme. The research aimed to gather data regarding participant understandings and aspirations and to identify factors that either inhibited or promoted the use of SaP in this context. We found that there were significant benefits for the outcome and rewards resulting from a collaborative process incorporating diverse perspectives. These included an outcome that was informed by student experience and direct input. Rewards for those involved also included for students, satisfaction

through contributing to positive change and for staff, an enhanced understanding of student views and needs. However, the data also highlight potential barriers for students and staff, including perceptions of risk associated with student involvement in the process, and we offer our reflections on navigating these potential risks.

SaP is built upon ideas about active learning and positions students as equal contributors to teaching, learning, assessment, and research practices. This means that collaborative approaches are central to the concept of SaP. Likewise, ESD is presented in policy as a means to “facilitate a culture of co-design and collaboration” [2]. This means that both policy guidance and information regarding student preferences appear to support a collaborative or partnership approach to curriculum development in this area. Furthermore, collaborative competency is one of the eight UNESCO key competencies for sustainability [3]. SaP is presented as a form of student engagement and aligns closely with the concept of “student voice” when used in the context of curricula co-creation. SaP seeks to enhance individual and collective experiences of higher education (HE) by incorporating student knowledge of what it means to be a learner in a particular context. Overall, SaP offers a framework within which to reconceptualise traditional approaches and relationships. A stated aim is to empower students to work with staff in any relevant area of HE to enhance experience, learning, and policy [2]. Thus, it positions students as active and agentic rather than as passive recipients or consumers of education [4]. Despite increasing interest in SaP, its use in curriculum design has been less well developed [5] and with notable exceptions [6], there are as yet, few studies considering SaP in the context of ESD. Furthermore, recent research considering curricula change and the extent of co-creation in the curriculum in the UK [7] indicates that while collaboration with students is often seen as an aspiration, it is not often enacted in practice.

Matthews et al. [8] have noted that the SaP literature often emphasises the benefits of its use, while “messiness” is occluded. This article therefore attempts to provide an honest account of navigating both the risks and rewards of a partnership approach to curriculum review. To achieve this, it describes an example in which SaP was used to inform the process of a formal review of the undergraduate law curriculum where one of the objectives was to incorporate ESD. It begins by situating the discussion within the current position of undergraduate legal education in the UK, including recent changes affecting curriculum design and content specifically as they relate to sustainability, addressing the potential congruence between the SaP process and sustainability. The article then reviews the SaP literature, its connection to the concept of student engagement, and its relevance to student involvement and co-creation within undergraduate legal education. It sets out the research design used to enable readers to consider both similarities and differences when compared to their own context. A discussion of the results and tentative lessons learned are then considered. While the limitations of this small-scale study are acknowledged, it is also argued that others might find value in understanding the knowledge gained from this experience.

2. Context and Background

The institutional context for this research was a new university in the northwest of England. The law school is small, comprising, at the relevant time, six staff and approximately fifty undergraduate students. Students are often the first in their family to attend university. A high proportion of students are commuter students and the student cohort at the time of the study was 78% female. The programme is generally viewed by students and staff in vocational terms, as a means to enter the legal profession, and while some students go on to alternative careers, many are employed within local legal service providers after graduation. The academic staff are 57% female and most have some background in professional legal practice. The institution operates using an academic departmental structure supported by professional service staff. Senior management staff tend to oversee specific areas such as student success, portfolio development, or learning, teaching, and assessment.

In England, the legal professions have historically exerted considerable control over undergraduate course content; this diminished to some extent in 2021 following a different path to qualification [9]. In addition to this loosening of professional bodily control, the revised UK subject benchmark for law [10] now incorporates a reference to the inclusion of sustainability in the law curriculum. These changes presented an opportunity to engage with the law curriculum in different ways [11] and it was considered timely to use a different review process that might facilitate contextual development of the curriculum away from previously high-level strategically controlled content [12].

ESD was taken as the key factor promoting inquiry and change to the curriculum. Sustainability was seen as of prime importance due to its local and global significance and the role of higher education (HE) in contributing to the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Local sustainability issues that were considered significant included the management of the local economy, including food production, energy infrastructure, and tourism. Globally, the UN 2020–30 Decade of Action highlights the role of HE in ESD and there is a growing community of interested parties in Higher Education for Research and Sustainable Development (HESD) covering all disciplinary areas. In this article, the definition of ESD used is that provided in UK guidance for HE [2], this is “the process of creating curriculum structures and subject relevant content to support and enact sustainable development” (p. 51). The aim was to take inspiration from the introductory remarks of one of the joint authors of this QAA guidance, Professor J. Longhurst, who states, “[i]f we as educators are serious about preparing our students for the future, we must embrace ESD and ensure that every graduate has not only the knowledge and skills but also the attributes that will enable them at least to cope and ideally thrive in the face of the multiple challenges they will face across their life course in the 21st century.” [2]. David Orr, a seminal writer in the area of environment and education, famously stated in relation to the development of environmental crises that confront the world, “this is not the work of ignorant people. It is, rather, largely the result of work by people with BAs, BScs, LLBs, MBAs, and PhDs.” [13]. This means that legal educators within HE have a potential part to play in ensuring that future LLB graduates have the knowledge and skills referred to by Prof. Longhurst. Existing disciplinary research has already pointed to the significance of sustainability for legal education and likened the concept of sustainability to higher-order goals such as democracy, justice, and the rule of law [14] which currently underpin the law curriculum.

However, despite the revised benchmark and guidance, there are potentially still significant obstacles. Graham [14] offers a detailed critique of legal education's taxonomy and anthropocentrism, while issues such as conservatism, narrow definitions of the curriculum, and bias towards vocationalism have also been highlighted as barriers [15]. Significant research regarding the integration of ESD in law curricula was reported by Lowther and Sellick [16]. In that study, students were involved in giving feedback on staff-designed curriculum change and the authors reflected on the difficulties of balancing traditional law content and ESD content, identifying a need for further research on ESD's significance to law students. Although there is no large-scale study considering this question in relation to law students as a group, a sustainability skills survey [17] showed that 79% of student respondents agreed that sustainable development is something all university courses should incorporate. This indicates that the use of more collaborative processes including students as co-designers may act to promote change in this area of curriculum development.

Early research regarding the incorporation of sustainability in the law curriculum [15] called for information and examples that examined the means by which sustainability could be addressed as part of curriculum review, also calling for models of implementation. The use of SaP can provide such a model because its utilisation is potentially beneficial and relevant to legal education for a number of reasons. Legal education has traditionally relied on the lecture format in which students are often passive recipients of information. However, this approach has been problematised as lacking in capacity for building a community of learners and encouraging more superficial engagement [16]. In addition, SaP

promotes inclusive and equitable learning environments which value diverse perspectives. This is another area in which it has been suggested that legal education might work to further enhance the flourishing of all students [18]. Thus, SaP has the potential to enhance legal education by fostering collaborative and inclusive HE environments which better prepare students for future legal practice.

This article will therefore provide a description and reflections on one example of ESD incorporation using the SaP model to facilitate co-design with students. Tun et al. [19] presented evidence of SaP use when integrating sustainable healthcare education, and this case study aims to present similar evidence in the context of legal education while noting the limitations regarding generalisability from one example. Thus, due to the centrality of law in “securing sustainable development and the wellbeing of future generations” [10], the objective in the example reported here was to embed ESD into the law curriculum in partnership with students. This was achieved in a way that accounted for staff expertise, student interest, and other academic quality requirements, capitalising on the potential congruence between SaP and ESD. Having outlined the rationale for the focus on ESD, the following section considers the relevant SaP literature and frameworks and situates these within the wider field of student engagement.

3. Theoretical Framework: Students as Partners as a Form of Collaborative Student Engagement

This section sets out a definition of student engagement and then situates and defines SaP as a collaborative form of engagement. It sets out some of SaP’s key characteristics and explains how SaP theory was used in this research. After clarifying the relationship between student engagement and the concept of SaP, this section concludes by considering in more detail one of the key issues considered in the literature: the question of empowerment.

Despite the fact that student engagement is a broad, contested, and ambiguous field [5] with many dimensions [20], it is almost universally accepted that student engagement results in “positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement.” (Trowler) [21]. The SaP literature can be seen as a subset of the student engagement literature [22]. It is an emerging area intersecting with research regarding student voice. SaP employs definitions that emphasise developmental collaboration and the most cited definition describes SaP as the following:

“a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis”. [23]

SaP is seen as empowering for students and thus an alternative to consumerist models of HE [5]. It encompasses the concept of the co-creation of a curriculum [24–29]. Although students are central, partnership can be with other students, staff, administrators, alumni, or employers [30]. SaP in the context of curriculum design and review, as is described here, can be seen as inviting students behind the scenes of institutional processes.

The conceptual framework developed by Healey et al. [5], a version of which is set out below (Figure 1), represents SaP within the wider field of student engagement, setting out four overlapping domains with a learning community as a central feature. In addition, it depicts nine key features of successful engagement, including inclusivity, plurality, courage, and empowerment. This framework offers a means by which to map various contextual practices. The example described below and considered in this article falls within the area of curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy.

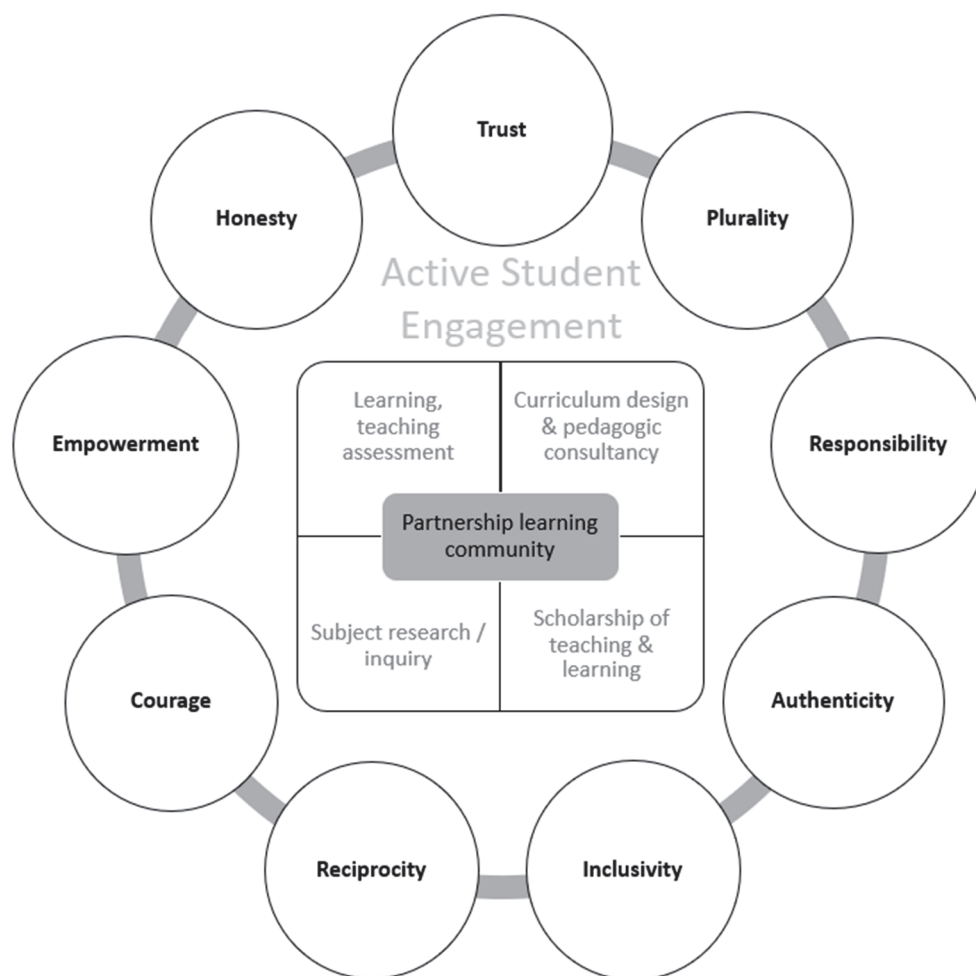


Figure 1. Students as partners model.

Reflecting the nine characteristics of SaP identified in Healey et al.'s model above, other research has suggested five propositions for good practice and working in "genuine" partnership [30]. These are the following:

1. To foster inclusivity;
2. To use dialogue and reflection to nurture power-sharing;
3. To accept uncertain outcomes;
4. To work ethically;
5. To aim towards transformative partnership.

It is clear that SaP is not necessarily an easy option. There are many challenges in moving beyond more passive methods, such as evaluation surveys, as a means of engagement. These include issues of power, scale, and context, staff and student vulnerability, questions of who is represented and who is not, the importance of language, resistance, risk, the time taken to create a partnership, and the level of perceived participation [25]. Healey et al. [5] added to this list of issues to consider, reward/recognition, transition, and the sustainability of the partnership. We will consider below in more detail the question of power imbalances and explain why, in this context, the notion of altering the balance of power between staff and students was seen as a risk rather than a reward of the process, by both staff and students.

Much of the SaP literature considers the concept of student power within the partnership and often presents power as on a continuum, from tutor-controlled curricula through curricula informed by feedback to a curriculum negotiated with students [31,32]. We aimed to create a negotiated curriculum incorporating ESD in a way that would involve

compromise, but also reflect the wishes of as many participants, students, and staff, as possible. Considering the continuum of student engagement in curricula, many mechanisms widely used to capture student voice can be categorised as feedback, relying as they do, on post hoc survey responses. For example, the UK National Student Survey claims to give “students a powerful collective voice” [33], but authors such as Velden et al. [34] note that overreliance on student surveys can create a significant barrier to student influence rather than an enhancement to it. Furthermore, survey fatigue and the negative impact of such data [35] are argued to impede change and disincentivise innovation whereas a more developmental, integrated use of staff and student data may allow for dynamic and responsive curricula adjustments [36].

When working with students as partners, imbalances in power can create barriers in activities and discourse. The literature on power is wide and varied, but within universities, social relationships between staff and students are an important element. Traditional hierarchies between students and staff are being reframed in relation to wider changes in higher education since the raising of student fees and marketisation of HE has brought about a relationship in which the power is with students as consumers to demand value for money [37,38]. These power dynamics may hamper collaborative working between academic staff and students. Indeed, the notion of the consumer student suggests a one-way relationship rather than a partnership. For example, Freeman [39] argues that student representatives are now part of HE consumerism, and partnerships are used by students to advance their commercial interests, rather than creating a more democratic decisionmaking culture. It has been noted by authors such as Williams [40] that the marketisation of higher education categorises students as complaining consumers, rather than giving them a proper outlet for influence. Instead, many processes operate to allow and encourage student complaints on issues such as service delivery, while excluding them from higher-level dialogue on issues such as teaching quality. Symonds, considering the relevance of power and context in partnership practice, notes that in UK post-1992 universities, there is an assumption of the “traditional power relationship. . .with undergraduate students who are less confident and thus, more likely to defer to the entrenched power of the academic teacher role, which conflicts heavily with the shared power of the partner role” [41]. This relationship will depend not only on the institution, but also on the programme of study and the culture within the department.

This article is based on experience within a small university department. The small class sizes (typically no more than 20 in a year group) allow the staff and students more time together on an individual basis and this helps foster relationships which are often open. While professional distances must be maintained, small groups facilitate relatively relaxed teaching and more time for interaction. Despite these contextual factors, and the achievement of what were considered by students and staff as the benefits of an excellent outcome based on an inclusive process, the potential pitfalls also generated concern. Both students and staff saw risks in a partnership approach. Therefore, after setting out some details regarding the research design, both the rewards and the perceived risks of partnership are considered in our discussion below.

4. Research Design

During the academic year of 2021–2022, a developmental evaluation using mixed methods was undertaken by one of the co-authors. This involved one cycle of curriculum review in which, together with a student survey, the qualitative perceptions of final-year law students, academic staff (including the co-authors), student union representatives, and professional and managerial staff were recorded using semi-structured interviews during three phases as illustrated in Figure 2. The questions guiding the research were the following:

- What are participant understandings and aspirations regarding working in partnership?
- What factors act to either promote or inhibit working in partnership?
- What are the implications for future practice and use of SaP in curriculum review?

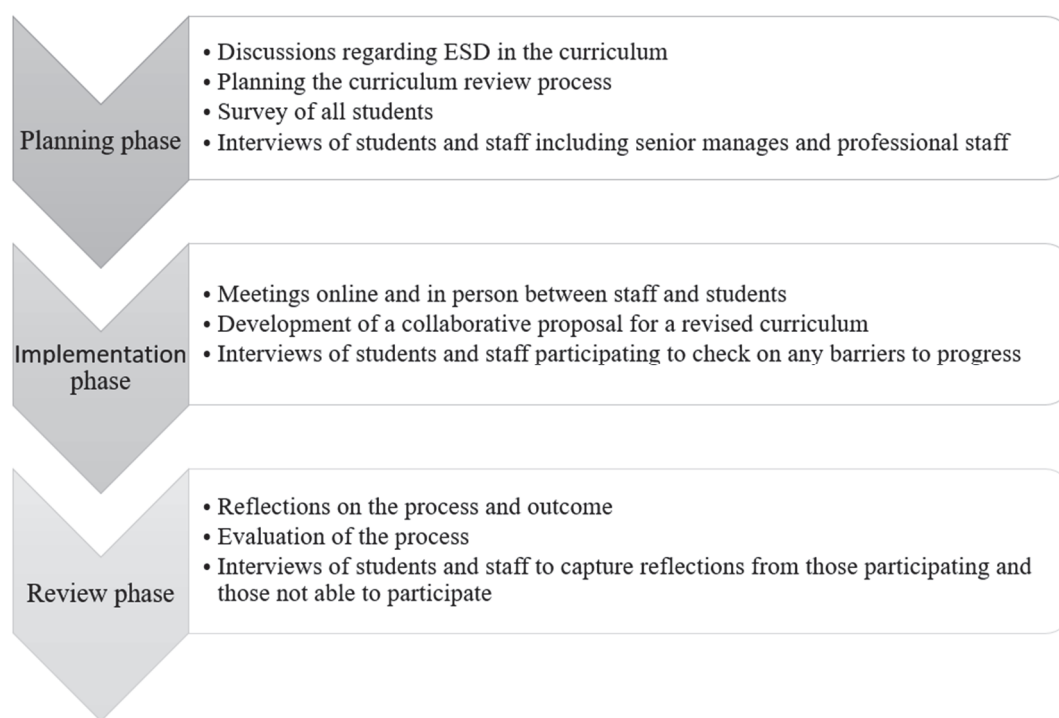


Figure 2. The three phases of the initial curriculum review cycle.

As we wished to explore the staff–student experiences of participating in a collaborative process of curriculum design, a mixed methods approach was chosen for this study. While quantitative survey data provided important baseline information regarding student understandings and aspirations prior to the review, participant values, beliefs, and reflections on the process were gathered using semi-structured interviews. Developmental evaluation is grounded in a philosophically pragmatic paradigm which tends to favour mixed methods [42]. In this case, comparison of quantitative and qualitative data was possible, but the dominant method was qualitative.

The process of change to be evaluated involved a staff–student partnership in curriculum review to embed ESD. Developmental evaluation is a recognised methodology which supports, inter alia, an innovation in the form of a system change. It is distinguished from other forms of evaluation as it allows for the monitoring of a developing situation as it is implemented, where the outcomes are not precisely specified. For this reason, it was considered to be appropriate in our research. Patton [42], the leading proponent of developmental evaluation, offers eight sensitising concepts which were applied throughout the process. These sensitising concepts require that, as far as is possible, developmental evaluation should adhere to the following:

Be Co-created—though led by one member of academic staff, the evaluation involved other staff and students. The co-creation of curricula using a Students as Partners approach working with all programme teaching staff therefore aligns with developmental evaluation.

Be Considerate of Complexity—the dynamic and complex environment of higher education [43–45] is recognised and its effects acknowledged.

Use Systems Thinking—consideration is given to relationships, connections, perspectives, and both intended and unintended consequences acknowledging temporal, spatial, and other contextual issues.

Be Developmental—this means that the change is evaluated as it occurs and there is often a cyclical element to the process of change, as in curriculum (re)design.

Be Driven by Innovation—the innovative change here was the partnering with students to incorporate ESD into the curriculum.

Be Utilisation-focused—in this case, the focus was on the identification of promoting and inhibiting factors regarding use of partnership in the context of curriculum review to inform future action.

Be Rigorous—using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data as appropriate [45] and testing existing theory, here in relation to Students as Partners.

Timely—the findings, some of which are set out as *lessons learned* below, are available as needed and can be used to inform future action.

4.1. Methods

During the year, the project was constructed, specific actions were planned, and a series of four meetings took place (some online and some in person) culminating in a formal review meeting involving an external panel member, law academics, a student reviewer, and two final-year students. In order to facilitate free and open discussion among all participants, the meetings did not form part of data generation. Data collection was conducted separately, via a survey instrument (Appendix A) and semi-structured interviews. Prior to the review process, the survey was distributed to all programme students seeking views on their aspirations regarding the process and its potential outcomes. The survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. Because all programme students were surveyed, it was not possible to pilot the questions. However, in line with the developmental evaluation approach, the survey was produced by programme staff. Questions were developed with reference to relevant theories regarding understandings and aspirations related to staff–student partnership and used a Likert scale [46]. Interview questions were guided by the research questions and a developmental evaluation inquiry framework focused on participant beliefs, knowledge, and action [45]. An outline of the participants, methods, data, and forms of analysis used is provided in Table 1, along with an indication of the phases during which the data was gathered. The quantitative survey data were not intended to be generalisable and were analysed using descriptive statistics. The interview data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis [47] and guided by the research questions. This method of qualitative thematic analysis was chosen because it facilitates the telling of a multi-faceted story across the whole dataset. It is worth noting that the number of transcripts does not correspond to the number of participants because firstly, some participants were interviewed in more than once phase and secondly, while all student interviews were individual, some staff interviews were conducted as group interviews [48].

Table 1. Data collected and analysed.

Participants	Data	Method	Analysis	Research Phase
Students	Numerical (n. 45) Free text	Survey (Appendix A) Open survey items	Descriptive statistical Deductive thematic	Phase 1 Phase 1
Students	Transcripts (n. 10)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Phases 2 and 3
Academic staff	Transcripts (n. 5)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Phases 1, 2 and 3
Professional staff	Transcripts (n. 4)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Phases 1 and 3
Senior management staff	Transcripts (n. 2)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Phase 1
Student Union Representatives	Transcripts (n. 2)	Semi-structured interviews	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Phases 1 and 3

Conducting this research introduced specific ethical considerations, most importantly, maintaining student anonymity. The necessary approval was obtained prior to the evaluation from the institution where the main researcher was registered for a PhD. This was also confirmed by the relevant senior staff in the institution where the research took place. These ethics requirements, which are also British Educational Research Association (BERA) compliant [49], included the anonymisation of all survey data and the use of pseudonyms

for all interviewees. The partnership process itself was open to final-year student volunteers and no cap was imposed on the number of students who might be involved. Students received no payment for their involvement. After the process was completed and changes to the curriculum incorporated, reflections were gathered via interviews with students (all individual interviews) and staff (some individual and some group interviews). This paper extends that reflection and begins the process of reflection and reconstruction for planning the next cycle of curriculum review. The research gathered data regarding staff and students' desires for, and perceptions of, SaP in the ESD-focused curriculum review process. It uses the results of the survey data and interview data from which to draw insights into participant understandings and aspirations and identify factors that either inhibited or promoted the use of SaP in this context.

4.2. The Curriculum Review Process

It was the aim of all the authors to give students a real opportunity to influence the existing programme of study. Students have firsthand up-to-date experience of their learning journey and know things that staff do not [50]. So, it was seen as important to fully involve the students in the curriculum review as partners in the process. However, it was recognised that a goal of achieving this level of involvement was ambitious and may be hard to achieve in practice. In response to the invitation to participate, eight student volunteers came forward.

Upon agreement being reached to proceed, a schedule of intended actions and meetings was devised to incorporate the staff–student partnership within the process, which would culminate in the formal curriculum review event. Preliminary meetings were arranged with all cohorts of students to explain the process of curriculum review and to invite them to participate in the survey. At the same time, the students were introduced to some of the themes of review, including the concept of ESD and its relevance within legal education. This was carried out using a modified version of open-access resources for ESD curriculum design [6]. The survey was then sent to all students to assess perceptions of their existing level of control over the curriculum, their aspirations for change, what they hoped to gain from engagement with the process, their motivation for involvement, and what barriers to success they anticipated.

After initial discussions regarding format and timing, a meeting took place between students and all staff to discuss preliminary views on areas of current satisfaction and dissatisfaction within the curriculum, identifying some possible areas for change. This initial meeting was facilitated by a member of professional staff. The review progressed via correspondence and further meetings, both online and face-to-face, and with different configurations of participants over the following weeks. Students' views on the process itself were sought as the review progressed. Some adjustments were made to the schedule of meetings that had been planned at the outset, in particular, to accommodate discussion concerning additional student-led proposals for enhancement of the programme in the area of student wellbeing. This specific element of ESD, relating to the achievement of SDG 3, was seen by students as central to their desire for change. They argued strongly for the incorporation of curriculum content that related to wellbeing and its relevance to the study and practice of law, that is, for their experience as students and as future legal professionals. Awareness of the high levels of stress experienced by law students, academics, and legal professionals is increasing and discussions regarding how best to address this within the curriculum are ongoing [51,52]. In addition to student participation, other third-party stakeholders, including local employers and external examiners, were also consulted. Contributions from these sources tended to see ESD as climate- and environmentally focused and were positive regarding the explicit consideration of the role of law and legal regulation in these areas. For staff, though the inclusion of subject content relating to individual SDGs such as the environment (SDGs 13, 14, 15), gender equality (SDG 5), justice (SDG 16), or wellbeing (SDG 3) was seen as offering opportunities to enhance the curriculum, their main focus was on the incorporation of key ESD skills and competencies within appropriate

module learning outcomes. These competencies are taken from UNESCO guidance [3] and are set out in national HE policy [2] as the following: systems thinking; future thinking; critical thinking; strategic competency; normative competency; integrated problem solving; self-awareness; and collaboration competency.

As the deadline approached for submission of formal documentation drafted by staff, student participants continued to be involved, with comments sought on the draft proposals for change. The final written curriculum proposal was submitted with the support and agreement of all participants. The central proposals following consultation were to embed both ESD and specific wellbeing aspects into the programme and to introduce a more streamlined system of assessments. All eight of the ESD competencies are now reflected within relevant module learning outcomes. For example, a module regarding constitutional law was adjusted to incorporate the development of systems and future thinking in relation to changes in the UK's constitution including protection of both human and nature rights. Additional programme outcomes were included to cover ESD and wellbeing, designed to run as a thread through modules across all levels. These require development of the *knowledge, competencies, and ability to pursue sustainable visions of the future and understating of the importance of wellbeing and its impact on learning, employment, and personal and professional relationships*. A further specific example of a change that resulted directly from student requests was the reintroduction of timed exam assessments. To the surprise of staff, students felt the need for exams to prepare them for later post-graduate professional assessments. Staff therefore separately discussed and formulated draft proposals reflecting these views, which were then endorsed by students. The formal curriculum review event took place shortly afterwards, led by internal and external panel members and attended by law academics, two student representatives (who had been part of the SaP process), and a student reviewer. The curriculum proposal was approved unconditionally, noting collaboration with current students as an item of best practice.

Throughout the process, different motivations and priorities concerning ESD together with reservations regarding the benefits and use of a partnership process were discussed. As noted above, staff conceptions of ESD tended to focus on broader ESD subject knowledge and skills, while students' main focus was on wellbeing. All participants saw great value in the inclusion of diverse perspectives but highlighted the risks of increasing student power and diminishing staff expertise. These issues were captured in the research data and are discussed in more detail below.

5. Results

In this section, the results of the data analysis are considered. In the following section, they are then discussed in light of the SaP literature and theory regarding partnership as a form of student engagement.

The results of the survey of students were instructive. Students' perception of their existing control over the curriculum tended towards either ambivalence or negativity. Whilst 43.8% did feel that "tutors have control but are informed by student consultation or feedback", a further 21.9% felt that "students are consulted but have no actual influence" and 9.4% felt that there was no consultation at all. Only 9.4% responded positively that "students have influence through negotiation with tutors". When asked what level of control they ought to have however, 31.3% felt they should have influence through negotiation with tutors and a further 25% felt they should have influence over certain aspects of the curriculum. None felt it acceptable for there to be no consultation or influence. This indicates that students saw a more democratic model as desirable. We use the term democratic here in a deliberative, rather than directly representative, sense. This reflects the fact that partnership is not the same as student voice, but nevertheless values plurality, inclusivity, and participation. Notably, a large majority of respondents also felt that their views ought to be taken into account in the light of their tuition fees paid. This indicates that, at least in part, students understood their role to be as consumers.

As regards their motivation to be involved with the process, the most important factor identified was an altruistic one: the hope of benefitting future students. This can be seen as a perception on the part of students, rather than a definite outcome. It appeared to be based on the fact that the curriculum would be improved, but due to the fact that questions might be interpreted in various ways in surveys, a precise interpretation is not possible. Interestingly, this aspect was rated higher than gaining skills through experience or influencing the quality of the programme, which had been identified by staff as key benefits of students' participation. The least important of possible promoting factors for taking part was the idea that engagement was a policy requirement: students did not wish to see their involvement as a box-ticking exercise or their role as followers of institutional or political agendas. Nevertheless, views on barriers to the process indicated surprisingly little cynicism regarding the purpose of the invitation to participate, and most felt that their involvement would make a real difference to the outcome. The main discouraging factor was identified as time pressure and how any time necessary for the project might impact upon academic study and completion of assessments, as well as on outside work commitments.

Cook-Sather et al. [23] set out a number of positive outcomes of SaP for staff and students. For students, these include increased confidence, a stronger sense of identity, insight into staff pedagogy, and a contribution to the academic community. For staff, they include transformed thinking about teaching practices, a deeper understanding of student needs, and a reconceptualisation of students as colleagues. We now consider the benefits in terms of curriculum enhancement and the rewards for staff and students taking part in the process before moving on to discuss some of the risks perceived by participants.

The interview transcripts were analysed by one of the co-authors using NVivo and subjected to Reflexive Thematic Analysis [47]. This method of analysis allows for the generation of multifaceted themes across a whole dataset. This means that an overarching story that brings together multiple perspectives is represented. No group of participants is privileged, and theory, as understood by the researcher, informs, but does not dictate, theme generation. This is in contrast to other forms of thematic analysis which can be used to highlight predetermined topic areas for specific groups such as benefits or concerns. The three overarching themes generated were the following:

- (a) The more voices the better—reflecting strong positive attitudes towards increasing the diversity of those involved in the review;
- (b) It's not just box ticking—reflecting aspirations for partnership as a means by which to achieve personal, institutional, and societal outcomes but not policy compliance;
- (c) There's a risk—reflecting concerns and understandings that might inhibit partnership.

The interview data showed that the majority of student participants were highly positive when reflecting on the experience. For example, one volunteer reflected, *"it's been brilliant, you know, we've talked, you've listened, you've talked, we've listened, and I think it's been a fair exchange of ideas and hopefully we've created something great"* (Lilly, phase 3). The advantages highlighted by Cook-Sather et al. [23] listed above were all evident in the data. This may be closely related to the strength of the altruistic motive within the student partners. This is a notable finding as altruism is not commonly reported as a promoting factor for SaP, although Noufou et al. [53] found that altruism was a "significant predictor" of students' willingness to mentor their peers. Participants reported satisfaction through giving back, both to the institution and also to future students. This aspect also appeared implicitly within the review process through their support for embedding wellbeing into the new curriculum. For example, another volunteer noted, *"I want to help people and this is like another opportunity where I can help people, and I think knowing that I've helped people... I found that quite rewarding"* (Nicki, phase 2).

For academic staff, the advantages outlined above were also evident, including a recalibration of their relationship with the students involved. However, within this research, the potential for problems in a shift towards a more collegiate relationship was also identified. For example, one academic explained, *"[Y]ou start thinking more in terms of colleague rather*

than student, which you don't want to fully do when you're still marking their assessments and having to approve their request for extensions of time. There is an appropriate distance that you have to maintain to make sure that you're being fair to everyone" (Alison, phase 2). This concern regarding an appropriate distance between staff and students meant that the extent of reconceptualisation as colleagues was partial and limited to interactions within the process. Other risks, identified by students and staff at all levels, appeared to relate to various risks in taking a partnership approach. For example, one senior manager warned,

"[W]hat we don't want to do is open a massive can of worms for both staff and students. . . I think the key thing around that, is managing both student expectations on that, but also giving staff sufficient guidance. So they're clear, so they don't . . . feel they're under particular risk of getting it wrong" (Rick, phase 1). Nevertheless, at the end of the process, there was recognition of the particular power of the student voice when combined with academic staff voices in adding support to the final proposal and enhancing its reception by third parties.

6. Discussion

In this section we discuss the results and consider the extent to which they align with, or challenge, current partnership theory. In addition, evaluative lessons learned are offered, not as a generalisable recipe for action, but as informative, context-dependent conclusions from which others might draw inferences for their own practice.

There has been some critique of the partnership literature which notes the positive bias in reporting with less consideration of more negative aspects of partnership processes [8]. In acknowledging the less positive aspects, we indicated above that several concerns were also raised by students and staff regarding risks within the review process. The first area of concern related to the rationale for the SaP approach. There were differences of opinion amongst staff as to the likely practical impact of student involvement upon the content of the review. While some were positive, others were wary of the impact on the process in terms of the time taken to conduct meetings and the impact on their ability to speak freely. Doubters nevertheless recognised that there might be rewards beyond the content of the curriculum proposal allowing students to take on an apprentice-style role, to achieve greater insight, enhancing their learning and thus aligning with the recognised advantages of SaP [23]. Tutors were also conscious of possible suspicion from students that their collaboration was being sought to satisfy an administrative requirement rather than there being any real intention to incorporate their ideas. This appeared to be justified by a student comment that, although they were happy with the outcome, at the beginning, *"it kind of felt like you kind of have to do it, you know, I mean get our input . . . but you didn't necessarily need to actually listen to it"* (Carrie, phase 3). In fact, there was no political agenda mandating the process in this case. It was therefore agreed that clear explanation and reassurance regarding staff motivation were key to instilling trust within the process.

Secondly, though it was recognised that diverse and more democratic engagement and the inclusion of a wide variety of perspectives ought to lead to a better outcome, it was clear that priorities regarding change to the curriculum were often different, especially between staff and students. Staff voiced concern regarding the management of student expectations, but in fact, both students and staff reflected on the value of accommodating divergent priorities in achieving the final outcome. There were also clear differences regarding the practicalities of the project in terms of the means of contact (either online or face-to-face or a combination), with different participants voicing contradictory views regarding how to generate both the best quality and quantity of discussion. Such differences are characteristic of a complex environment. Though these differences were not correlated with student or staff roles, this nevertheless required considerate management based on trust, compromise, and discussion.

The final area of concern related to the perceived risks of involving students in an "equal partnership" [23]. There was discussion concerning the importance of defining what was meant by "partnership"—a word with some specific definitions within the legal context—to ensure all participants were clear about the intended purpose of their

involvement. Some staff were concerned not to raise students' expectations of proposing changes which if not later included could be a cause of dissatisfaction or even complaint. There was discomfort from staff regarding expectations of equal partnership, because it was the academic team's ultimate responsibility to put forward a good proposal. Both staff and students highlighted broader systemic issues, including the need to comply with a variety of university and professional requirements, restrictions, and guidance of which students would mostly be unaware. In addition, the idea that including students throughout the formal review process could challenge and perhaps alter staff–student relationships was raised as both a potential benefit and a potential problem. Beneficial elements included increased democracy in decision making and additional student learning. For example, one student volunteer reflected, *"diverse opinion[s] should be involved, I think it was really, really beneficial"* (Hazel, phase 3). Problematic elements concerned increasing the relative power of students and therefore diminishing the power of staff. Participants appeared to see power as zero-sum and thus the highest level of participation by students, i.e., student control, as a potential though extreme outcome of the process [54]. One academic, anticipating the role of student partners, stated, *"[m]y concern and fear would be if ... they weren't aware of why they're involved and what their role of involvement is. If that was misinterpreted to a power issue, an issue that I have power and I can tell you what to do ... I think that would be a heavy risk of dissatisfaction and problematic review"* (Ben, phase 1). However, as Ashwin and McVitty [55] point out, more student engagement is not necessarily always better (p. 356). Seeing power not in zero-sum terms but instead as inherent in a community of inquiry, comprising students and staff, reflects the value placed on democracy and diverse viewpoints but avoids the risks perceived in a rebalancing of power relationships. We found that the learning community at the centre of partnership activities in the SaP model (Figure 1) can usefully be seen as a community of inquiry. Within HE, the concept of a learning community can take many forms and learning communities are used in various ways [56,57]. We agree with Lower [58,59], who suggests the use of a community of inquiry in processes of change in curriculum where staff and students act as partners in knowledge production. The community of inquiry model focusses on empowerment through collaboration, situating power within the learning community of staff and students [56,60]. The associated theoretical community of inquiry framework [61] was designed for use in blended online and face-to-face environments. The framework uses a practical inquiry model [62] comprising four phases: problem identification as a trigger for inquiry, followed by exploration of the subject including reflection, leading to integration and application of newfound knowledge towards resolution. In this process the triggering event was the question of how to incorporate ESD in the curriculum, exploration involved students and staff considering alternative proposals, and integration of their priorities finally led to resolution in a revised curriculum.

Developmental evaluation promotes the articulation of lessons learned based on high-quality information and evidence. Having discussed some of the perceived risks and rewards of the process, while highlighting the lack of direct generalisability of this study, we set out below some of the key lessons learned. Although student volunteers were involved in evaluating the process, the lessons below were developed by academic staff.

6.1. Getting Academic Staff Onboard Early

We found that early focus should be directed towards gaining the support and confidence of academic staff involved in taking an innovative approach to the review. An exploratory meeting creates the opportunity to explain the rationale, air views, and identify and discuss reservations. Practicalities including which cohort(s) of students to involve, and the nature and extent of their involvement can be decided in this planning stage, alongside the preparation of a timeline and project plan. Consideration could be given to including final-year students as a priority. This cohort have had the longest experience of the programme and may have developed an altruistic sense of wishing to share their insights and experience to benefit their programme and its future students.

6.2. Seeking Volunteers and Establishing Trust in the Process

The process of seeking volunteers requires careful planning. Potential participants need sufficient context of the procedure and what is being requested of them. Reassurance should be given regarding likely concerns, which may include doubts about the nature of the proposed partnership, the value of their contribution, and their likely time commitment. It will be important to dispel the idea of the collaboration as an administrative requirement of the process and instead portray a more positive aim where diverse views are highly valued. Placing emphasis on positive rewards for students is a helpful strategy: they can gain useful professional and employability skills through liaison with professionals, discussion, negotiation, and teamwork; they will gain personal learning through insight into the process behind the scenes; and they may achieve great personal satisfaction from helping the next generation of students by being involved in the process of co-creation.

6.3. Encouraging Volunteers to Speak Freely

It can be anticipated that despite being willing to participate, some students may still feel unsure about expressing views openly in meetings which are subject to a different dynamic than that previously experienced in the lecture theatre or classroom. Once volunteers have come forward, it will be important to expand focus on the nature of the “partnership”. Within the SaP process, it is intended that students “have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways” [23]. It is suggested that at a first meeting with volunteers, the meaning and extent of the partnership should be discussed and explained fully. Students may be concerned that within the existing power relationship, their views could be disregarded or even that opinions critical of the current programme might cause offence. The perceived power of academics should be reframed as their responsibility for the programme, which includes attaching significant respect and value to student contributions. Barriers to expression might also be present due to a sense of a lack of expertise. Reassurance can be given that it is recognised that the student perspective is different and that while academics and students have different perceptions, responsibilities, and areas of expertise, student participants have valuable observations to offer and a diversity of views within a discussion will create a firmer foundation for debate and change.

6.4. Being Open to Diverse Motivations and Unexpected Outcomes

As discussed above, participants in the curriculum review described here had different motivations for engaging in the process. Furthermore, none of these completely aligned with all the stated proposes for using SaP from the relevant literature. Despite this, the process was seen as valuable and the outcome, as having been enhanced. Overall, while the academic staff’s desire to incorporate ESD was more influenced by relevant HE guidance and broader policy, students’ motivations appeared to be based on personal experience and related to the effect of change on their peers. Bringing these together created an unexpected but arguably better outcome in this case.

6.5. Seeing Power as a Tool to Be Used within a Community of Inquiry

By avoiding presentations of power as being held or relinquished by either staff or students but instead used together in collaboration, some of the perceived risks of partnership practice might be avoided to some extent. Presenting collaboration as enabling the empowerment of a community of inquiry may be useful in motivating participation while emphasising joint action. This has the advantage of focusing on potential action rather than highlighting risks such as those raised in this example by staff and students of complaints, inappropriate use of expertise, or loss of power despite continuing responsibility.

7. Conclusions

We have argued that collaboration and partnership are fundamental to ESD. Collaborative competency is one of eight competencies highlighted within ESD. Furthermore,

SDG 4, education, and SDG 17, partnership, highlight the significance of education and partnerships in achieving the goals. Addressing this, we reported on a developmental evaluation undertaken within a small cohort of law students during which students worked in partnership with staff to incorporate ESD in the law curriculum in ways that reflected participant priorities.

This highlighted the different motivations of staff and students within a complex environment, but also the perceived value of their diverse perspectives. The rewards of the process were seen by participants to encompass both their own learning and development through the process and the outcome in the form of an enhanced curriculum. However, risks were also highlighted by students and staff, some of which appeared to arise from the prospect of a rebalancing of the power relationship between them. It appeared therefore, that participant understanding and aspirations could act to both promote and inhibit working in partnership. Therefore, mitigation of inhibiting factors such as concerns regarding risk or power might promote use of partnership in practice. Concerns regarding power can be linked to systemic issues including the concept of students as consumers. We suggest that such concerns can be mitigated by focusing on the empowerment of a collaborative community of inquiry to address the problem of curriculum change. Further research in this area might usefully test the relevance of the Community of Inquiry framework to SaP activities. When undertaken in a developmental way, the innovation of co-creating curricula can address current challenges in a timely and iterative fashion. We found this to be one of the main advantages of a developmental evaluative methodology, which was also sufficiently flexible to accommodate the methods of data collection that were felt useful and appropriate in this context. However, developmental evaluation is a relatively new, and therefore untested, approach in educational research. In other contexts, where the timing of institutional processes is different, there may be tensions between these processes, data analysis, and optimal evaluative timeframes [63]. We acknowledge the limitations of small-scale context-dependent research which is not generalisable. In addition, our consideration of the community of inquiry framework theory was necessarily brief and this could usefully be the subject of further research in similar contexts. However, we offer our experience and recommendations based on the process described for others to consider when planning their own curricula changes.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the possibility that participants may be identifiable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Page 1

What is your year group?

Are you, or have you been in the past, a student representative for your year group?

☐ Yes - in the past

☐ Yes - currently

☐ No

Thinking about the LLB as a whole, please indicate the extent to which you agree that a review of the LLB curriculum should consider changes to the following:

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
Academic legal knowledge	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Skills development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Methods of teaching (lectures, seminars, workshops)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Delivery format (face to face, blended, online)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure A1. Cont.

The order in which modules are studied	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Methods of assessment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Preparation for legal practice or other employment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Integration of a sustainable development perspective	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Integration of an equality, diversity and inclusion perspective	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Are there any other aspects of the LLB not referred to above that you consider important to include in a review of the curriculum?

The curriculum review process will take place between January and May, and may include a training event, online meetings including staff and students, reviewing draft documents and helping to make decisions. Thinking about this, please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
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Figure A1. Cont.

Students should be involved in the curriculum review process	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Only the confident students would take part	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would be a token gesture to comply with university policies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would enable students to learn from staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It could give students too much power	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would enable students to work with staff towards improving the curriculum	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would enable students to contribute to decision making in the university	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would improve student satisfaction	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The university may want to do it for marketing reasons	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would be a more democratic process if students were involved	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Figure A1. Cont.

Volunteers from year 1 and year 2 should also be included	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Students might use it as an excuse to make complaints	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is important for student views to be taken into account in view of the fees they pay	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would not make much difference to the outcome	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The views of participating students will not be representative of other students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would give students more power	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It would result in a better curriculum	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How much control do you think students **currently** have over the curriculum? Please indicate the level you think best fits your view.

- ☐ Students are in control of the curriculum
- ☐ Students have influence through negotiation with tutors
- ☐ Students have influence over certain limited aspects
- ☐ Tutors have control but are informed by student consultation or feedback
- ☐ Tutors have control with limited student choices

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Figure A1. Cont.

- ☐ Students are consulted but have no actual influence
- ☐ No consultation of students takes place
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

How much control do you think students **should** have over the curriculum? Please indicate the level you think best fits with your view.

- ☐ Students should be in control of the curriculum
- ☐ Students should have influence through negotiation with tutors
- ☐ Students should have influence over certain limited aspects
- ☐ Tutors should have control but be informed by student consultation or feedback
- ☐ Tutors should have control with limited student choices
- ☐ Students should be consulted but have no actual influence
- ☐ No consultation of students is needed
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

If your year group was represented in the review process meetings, how likely would you be to volunteer to take part in meetings and to review documents as part of the curriculum review?

- ☐ Very likely

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Figure A1. Cont.

☐ Likely

☐ Unsure

☐ Unlikely

☐ Very unlikely

☐ I have already volunteered

If you would like to explain your answer to this question please do so here.

If you were able to take part in the review, what would motivate you to volunteer? Please indicate all that apply and their importance to you.

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very important	Quite important	Not important	Not at all relevant
To learn about the process	☐	☐	☐	☐
To gain new skills	☐	☐	☐	☐
To comply with university policies about including students	☐	☐	☐	☐
To contribute to the discussion	☐	☐	☐	☐
To influence the quality of the degree	☐	☐	☐	☐
To put on my CV	☐	☐	☐	☐
To benefit future students	☐	☐	☐	☐
To help tutors see the student perspective	☐	☐	☐	☐
To make the process more democratic	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure A1. Cont.

Are there any other reasons not listed above?

Are there any further comments or views you would like to add?

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Figure A1. The survey instrument, showing all questions but omitting initial ethics and consent information.

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Article

A Narrative Exploration of One Teacher's Storied Experiences of Online Learning during COVID-19

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Abstract: The hubbub of teaching lives is enriched by the relationships between students, colleagues, parents and the larger schooling community. When these relationships are disharmonious, attending to the dissonance within these relationships may offer insight into teachers' relational work. This autoethnographic article focuses on one international elementary school teacher's experience of teaching online in West Africa during COVID-19. Teaching online in a developing country with political and physical instabilities compounded the chaotic experience of living and working during the pandemic. Guided by this research question, "How did online learning impact my relationship with students?", the author utilized writing as an inquiry approach to make sense of the challenging aspects of her online teaching experiences. By delving into narrated moments, the author engaged in reflexive analysis of storied experiences. This process illuminated the meaning-making steps that she took to appreciate the nuances contained within specific moments that she had with a student and his father. Through storying and re-storying these moments, the author wondered and metaphorically wandered to unearth potential emotions, assumptions and motivations that permeated her experiences. Such an explorative focus on teachers' subjective meaning-making process augments the wider body of work on online education and, in particular, this study's inquiry into the complexity of educational relationships through a narrative lens offers insights into the inner workings of teacher emotions and feelings. This paper reveals how teachers may benefit from adopting a reflective and reflexive sense-making approach towards understanding their emotions, feelings, responsibilities and relationships with students and parents, especially during a time of crisis. This article contributes to the ongoing discussions about the complexities of teachers' relational work and it enriches the extant literature on online education by shedding light on the individualistic ways that teachers cope with the uncertainties of teaching during a time of crisis. Deepening our collective understanding of how teachers cope can help us to provide better support for teachers and students during crises such as COVID-19.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; teacher narratives; online learning; teacher and student relationships; COVID-19; emotional and relational work

1. Introduction

Teaching experiences are influenced by the connections that teachers make with their learners. Understanding the subtleties within these connections is critical because they may include affirmative or adverse feelings and emotions that shape teachers' experiences [1]. One avenue of investigation into teaching experiences could be through teacher stories, which enables teachers to explicate their sense-making process. Delving into the inner workings of teaching lives illuminates how teachers make meaning of their experiences; these meanings may make visible insightful ways for us to better understand and support teachers and their well-being.

This autoethnographic paper is about one elementary school teacher's inquiry into her online teaching experiences during COVID-19. Due to mandatory quarantines, travel bans and social distancing protocols during the 2020 school year, the author started teaching online in mid-August 2020 and taught sixteen third-grade (eight and nine years old)

students. As was commonplace with international schools, these sixteen students belonged to eleven different nationalities even though most of them were physically located in the same country. This school was located in West Africa and catered to Pre-Kindergarten (two year olds) to Grade 12 (eighteen year olds) students. It was a small (approximately 130 students), private, community run, not-for-profit school that provided an American-style education to foreign and local nationals. This school was located in a politically unstable country that had frequent power, water and internet disruptions.

These contextually bound factors placed unique organizational, cultural and physical challenges that affected the author's experience in addition to the chaos caused by COVID-19. They also inspired the author to draw upon Richardson's (2000) [2] writing as an inquiry approach to document and analyse her experiences of teaching online. With the research question, "How did online learning impact my relationship with students?", the author sought to detail the reflective and reflexive methods that she used to negotiate the challenges of developing educational relationships during online teaching. In this paper, the author narrowed her narrative lens to analyse the relational dynamics between her, a student and his father.

2. Teacher Stories as a Way of Making Sense of Lived Experiences

Storytelling as a humanistic endeavour has brought attention to the ways that we communicate, connect and, on an emotional plane, commiserate. The narrative turn [3] indicated the ways in which stories become narratives or research data, and the ensuing use of narrative methods of analysis that are purposefully used to elicit meaning. Turning stories into narratives can be a confronting, idiosyncratic and emotion-laden process. When narratives are used to expose the inner workings of teaching lives, it allows teachers to inquire, as an insider, who tells the story, whilst adopting the role of a researcher and an outsider, who meticulously unravels the threads of meaning within the experience. It is this autoethnographic space that Richardson (2000) [2] celebrated as a valuable space for inquiry. Following in her narrative writing method of inquiry, teachers can be encouraged to inquire into their experiences by writing to reflect and then analysing reflexively to explore how they managed themselves within the experience. Whilst inspired by Richardson's (2000) [2] autoethnographic writing as a space for inquiry, this study departs from autoethnography in the way that it focuses on the author's sense-making explorations. These narrative explorations borrow the qualities of autoethnography (a study of the self in relation to a broader socio-cultural/socio-political context) and self-study (a study of the self that is framed within an educational context) in the way that they explore the self [4], but, ultimately, this study is anchored to its narrative intentions and roots because it is a narrated exploration of lived, storied experiences of one teacher.

When teachers tell their stories, they open their lives up to examination. Paying attention to storied experiences encourages teacher voices to be recognised, valued and prioritized as a site of knowing [5]. When teacher stories are restructured into artefacts for examination, they are formalised into narratives [6] which can be viewed as snapshots of insider perspectives of the educational experience. This paper builds upon an existing body of work into teacher stories and narratives [7–9] and it delves into the inner sanctum of teaching lives. Its particular focus on online learning experiences magnifies the complexities of teaching relationships, thereby enriching existing work on understanding online student relationships and engagement [10–13] through a narrative lens.

Ongoing narrative work on teaching lives has produced a diverse body of work. Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) [14] aptly called for teacher narratives to be contextualised and pursued with a close eye on the sense-making journeys that teachers take. While the fundamental elements in narratives can be whittled down to their settings, plot and characters, acknowledging teachers as storykeepers and storytellers allows them to intentionally tell stories to relay meaning, embolden practical ways of knowing and engage others in reflective musings about relational work. Any effort to investigate the relational perspectives that flush out the "response-ability" [15] (p. 249) that teachers need in order

to nurture meaningful learning is helpful because teacher narratives bring to the fore the relationships that teachers can have with people, places or objects [7]. Capturing these narratives celebrates the emotional, relational and psychological labour that connects teachers to their communities, and it also permits contextualised insights into authentic teaching and learning ecosystems. When Clandinin and Connelly (1998) [16] coined the term “stories to live by” to capture the landscape of school reforms, they paved the way for storied teaching realities to be recognised as a legitimate way of studying the complexities of schooling. Since then, the body of work around teacher narratives has blossomed and touched upon a multitude of layers within teaching lives [5], providing an opportunity to study the narrated truths within individual experiences [17].

Stories that become research narratives are the objects under scrutiny. However, stories that we live by, as Caine et al. (2013) [5] described, are framed within the lived and re-lived experiences. Thus, to inquire narratively is akin to seeking the humanistic essence that lives within words, transcending the physical, temporal and social space. Storying experiences into narratives turns these storied moments into research artefacts that pause time by allowing memories to be articulated and reconnected to assumptions and presumptions. While dissecting memories can be cathartic, which can be imagined as a mental cleansing or purging process, likewise, the process of studying narratives can be mentally and emotionally draining, because it demands the researcher to self-interrogate the assumptions, beliefs and values that underpin and permeate thoughts and actions.

From a mental health and recovery narrative perspective, storytelling and sharing have gained recognition as remedies that reject the hard, rational and cold distance purported within the science of medicine. In their systematic review of mental health recovery narratives, Llewellyn-Beardsley et al. (2019) [18] found that recovery narratives were fluidly constructed to communicate meaning to others. While this paper is by no means a recovery narrative, it is inspired by the notion that teachers can write, reflect and muse in order to make sense of challenging experiences. In this paper, I examined how teachers can use storytelling to better understand themselves and their practice, with an additional focus on storytelling as a form of healing or a means to manage difficult experiences.

In their investigation into the complexity of teacher and student relationships through narratives, Rytivaara and Frelin (2017) [19] underscored the commitment that teachers put into connecting and building trusting relationships with others. In my case, I needed to better understand my own commitment to educational relationships in order to understand my experiences. By retelling my story, I imagined, I re-lived and I paid close attention to my unexamined sense-making process in order to unpack the chaotic and stressful moments that I had when I was teaching online during COVID-19. Based on this study, I believe that teachers could benefit from learning how to tell and write personal stories in order to cope with the demands of relational work that is embedded in teaching.

3. The Methodological Process

To preserve the confidentiality of the relationships that will be discussed, pseudonyms have been used throughout the study. Relevant details about the school, the student and his father will be provided to give readers a contextual and background understanding of this study. It is relevant to state that the primary aim of this study is to interrogate the singular, narrated perspective of the author in order to illuminate her meaning-making process.

As a teacher–researcher, I wrote and analysed my lived experiences over a period of two years, from 2020 to 2022. I took mindful steps to protect the identity of my student and his father by focusing on my interpretation of events. The research question that guided the study, “How did online learning impact my relationship with students?”, was aimed at investigating how teachers such as myself had coped with the effects of pandemic-compelled online education. Commencing with pieces of journal reflections that grew into longer fragments that were stitched together, these moments morphed into paragraphs of thoughts that were dissected, rested and reframed as lines of inquiry into the stories that I told about my online teaching experiences. This process of storying and re-storying my

experiences encouraged me to identify the ways in which my storied voice differed and it challenged me to question aspects of myself from my motivations, reactions, beliefs to values. The resulting sense-making process became a repetitive cycle of writing to question as well as writing to clarify the meaning that I had attached to events.

Within this explorative dance of thinking, feeling and naming my experiences, the narrative methodology that I subscribed to fell within the methodological realm of narrative inquiry, which I defined as inquiring ontologically (viewing the world narratively) and epistemologically (framing narrated experiences as a way of knowing experiences) into experiences [5]. In my reflective space, I revisited my memories through raw moments as well as unrealized aspects of the stories I carried with me. Through a fluid, interrogative lens that was inwards, outwards and sideways, I looked for the cracks, the obvious and the hidden. Only by pushing beyond the obvious was I able to uncover, consider and question the nuanced meanings that I had attached to my experiences.

This narrative study applies aspects of autoethnographic, self-study and narrative approaches [4] to examine the experience of one teacher; in this case, the researcher is the teacher under study. It is the “truth of educators’ unique but similar experiences” that studies such as this can offer to the body of knowledge about teaching lives [20]. Going beyond the idea of ego-centric, navel-gazing conceptions, an individualistic focus celebrates the depth and nuanced analysis of the inner sanctums of teaching minds. To uphold measures of rigor and trustworthiness, the author focused on narrative verisimilitude, working towards the notion that the moments highlighted would resonate with other teachers; verisimilitude (the quality of believability) and resonance are criteria well suited for alternative, qualitative methodologies that privilege idiosyncratic meanings [21]. What will be presented in this paper are insights, musings and probabilities that invite the reader to question and engage in discussions about the possibilities that percolate in teachers’ minds when they attempt to make sense of their experiences.

For the sake of clarity, I italicised the voice of my remembered and analysed self, because this was the reflective voice that told and retold my stories. Through re-storying, I attempted to capture, analyse and reimagine my memories in order to uncover the meaning that I had attached to those memories. This repeated process of getting to know myself through memories encouraged me to seek out the significance that I had attached to the relationship that I had with Oscar and his father. By delving into my relationship with Oscar, I gradually realized how my inner turmoil had coloured the stories that I carried about Oscar and his father. The following sections will outline the chronological path of inquiry that was guided by my subjective act of meaning making.

4. Getting to Know Oscar

I began writing about my teaching experiences more regularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a chaotic year of teaching on and offline in a developing country with challenging political and physical difficulties. I intended to delve into my experiences with online learning and the impact online learning had on my relationships with students. After multiple explorations, I noted how my experiences with Oscar stood out.

When I think of online learning during the COVID pandemic, I think of Oscar. I felt that being online helped me to get to know Oscar better. Beginning our relationship online gave me an intimate understanding of him that I don’t believe I would have had in a normal classroom setting.

I believed that teaching and learning were interdependent processes. This meant that I subscribed to the significant role that meaningful relationships played in education, on and offline. In Miller’s (2021) [22] qualitative research on graduate-level teacher education during the pandemic, she found that online learning heightened in-service teachers’ attitudes towards re(building) teacher–student relationships in schools. This suggested that online learning had compelled teachers to pay closer attention to teaching and learning relationships. Perhaps being online with Oscar compelled me to spend an increased amount of individual time with him, which is a luxury that few teachers have.

While unintended, schooling routines often reduce the time and opportunity for teachers to maintain close bonds with their students. With routines disrupted during online learning, it gave me time to develop ways to spend extra individual time with Oscar. Similarly, Fawns et al. (2019) [23] eloquently reported how strong educational relationships can be fostered regardless of physicality. This alluded to the connection that educators make with their students rather than attributing the quality of relationships to physicality. Relational labour takes time, effort and persistence and, in terms of Oscar's situation, being online gave me the chance to provide him with individual attention early in the school year.

Prior to starting online schooling, I had two early indicators that Oscar might require extra attention. One was from the school counsellor who described him as being a stubborn, smart but potentially difficult student. The other was from his father who emailed me to wish me luck getting to know his "active" son. These two alerts piqued my curiosity and led me to guess that he might need extra attention, not necessarily from an academic standpoint.

I welcomed the school year with a strong desire to get to know my students as quickly as possible but, as Miller's (2021) [22] expressed above, the busyness of schooling makes it challenging to carve out time and opportunity to provide individual attention. Although previous impressions and/or (in)formal anecdotes from others may inform my view of students, I believed in developing my own understanding and impression of students. As an experienced educator, I was also acutely aware of the pivotal role that relationships play in learning. In Anderson and Taner's (2022) [24] metasummary of expert teachers, they described how expert teachers subscribed to the significance of "interpersonal relationships" and found ways to foster and demonstrate care and support. This metasummary also underscored the importance of relational labour in teaching because it underpins how teachers engage, motivate and manage learning behaviour. While I deemed myself to be an attentive teacher by being fluid, responsive and empathetic, I wondered if I would have adequate time to get to know him holistically.

Oscar was eight years old and he had been at this school for three years, working with the same group of students since Kindergarten. He was from a multilingual family who spoke primarily French and Italian at home. While he had an older sister, she was living elsewhere but visited from time to time. He was usually at home alone with his nanny and two cats. He was alone at home with his father, and removed from his extended family overseas. School was his means of socializing so COVID and being online exacerbated his feelings of loneliness.

Delving further into Oscar's background allowed me to better appreciate the challenges that he was confronting in addition to online schooling. In a systematic review of the impact of lockdowns during the pandemic on child and adolescent mental health, Panchal et al. (2021) [25] indicated that increased levels of anxiety, loneliness and anger were found despite the increase in quality time within families. In Oscar's case, despite his father working from home at the time, he may not have been able to fulfill Oscar's need for similar-aged playmates. However, Oscar was from an expatriate family. Thus, feelings of loneliness and isolation in expatriate families are not uncommon; in fact, Sterle et al. (2018) [26] outlined the ways in which digital technology has ameliorated some of these feelings through virtual connectivity. Interestingly, at the time of the pandemic, Oscar and his father were novice users of social/digital media and the internet. Since stringent COVID-19 protocols at the time included lockdowns and quarantines, these had diminished Oscar's ability to arrange playdates or sleepovers at his house or elsewhere. These compounding factors, in addition to the new social, technical and learning protocols of online schooling, could have exacerbated Oscar's stress levels.

I still remember the first week of online schooling vividly. The first week was so chaotic that I wrote daily email updates to parents to smoothen out the process. Amidst the chaos, Oscar stood out because he was frequently disruptive throughout the day.

My daily email updates were written to inform parents/families about my goals for learning progress and outcomes, amidst the chaotic interruptions within my online classroom. When Liao et al. (2021) [27] investigated the online practices of award-winning elementary teachers, they underscored the significance of parent and teacher relationships in successful online learning experiences. While the developmental needs of upper and lower elementary students varied, these teachers believed that parents or family members required clear roles and a good understanding of online learning expectations. These beliefs aligned with the guidelines provided by the U.S. Office of Educational Technology (2021) [28] regarding parental involvement; they stated that home support played a crucial role in supporting effective online schooling experiences. Similarly, research on Turkish parental experiences of pandemic-related online learning [29] highlighted that active parental involvement was needed to stand in for the academic, technical and physical support that teachers would normally provide at school. However, in adopting these teaching roles, parents felt that they carried the “burden” of teaching, which affected their relationships with their children adversely [29]. In Oscar’s case, even though his father worked online in the next room during schooling hours, his father was unable to support him. Although he checked in with Oscar from time to time, Oscar demanded more attention than he was given. Even though his father made an effort to teach him digital literacy basics such as accessing Google Meet, the online platform used for schooling, Oscar was often unable to function independently online.

5. Oscar and His Father

Oscar’s disruptive behaviour was one of many factors that contributed to the chaos that ensued in the first week of online school. While there was a larger mix of context-related challenges such as power and internet disruptions, slow internet connectivity, the lack of quiet and private spaces for online learning in some family settings, and the steep learning curve that sixteen eight and nine-year-old students with low digital literacy skills had to negotiate to learn, it was Oscar’s first experience of being online.

It was difficult to run lessons when he kept trying to talk above everyone. He did not want to work quietly even though he understood it was disturbing others. I would usually spend a lot of time during the first week of school with community-building activities that would help everyone to settle into a rhythm and routine of learning but persistent internet and power disruptions caused routine processes such as beginning lessons with a book or a pencil to become chaotic and disorganized because some students would drift in and out of connectivity or only have heard intermittent instructions. While Oscar’s anger and frustration did not escalate, they did not dissipate either. Despite exhibiting negative emotions such as anger, frustration and impatience, Oscar was usually one of the first students who signed in punctually by 7:30 most mornings. I took this as one of few promising signs that he wanted to be connected to the group despite his continued struggles with online learning.

Needless to say, the first few weeks of online learning were challenging for most learners globally as face-to-face interactions were replaced by disembodied experiences. For younger students who tended to be less able to self-regulate during online learning [30], as was the case for Oscar’s group, the need for explicit and clear routines was urgent. I believe that student-centred routines allow teachers to be less reliant on disciplinary or punitive approaches to managing learning behaviour [31]. In fact, I treated Oscar’s disruptions as one of the many challenges that needed my attention and this helped me to be more tolerant of his outbursts. This acceptance helped the group to focus on community building and support rather than the multitude of issues that disrupted their learning. As reported in Yan et al.’s (2021) [30] age-delineated investigation of online learning experiences, younger students were more likely to gravitate towards synchronous interactions with adults such as teachers and parents, while older students tended to be more self or peer reliant. While Oscar’s group demonstrated a largely positive desire

to remain connected to each other and me throughout the school day, Oscar's need for connection was slightly different from his peers.

I was constantly worried and dubious of the quality of Oscar's online learning experiences, especially when his video and microphone were turned off. When we first started online learning, he was not able to mute himself or turn off his camera but over time, he regularly muted himself and stopped his video feed. Some days, I wondered if he was online to be connected to us, or if he was forced to be online because his dad was working in the next room. Beneath this worry, I was concerned about his unmonitored access to the internet because I had very little insight into how he was spending his time during online learning.

These ongoing uncertainties required me to employ Hochschild's (2012) [32] concept of deep acting, where a professional front of care, understanding and tolerance was projected because I believed that it was my responsibility to do so. After many years, deep acting becomes the adopted persona and the performer may lose sight of their authentic selves [32] (p. 37). While I was conscious of my worries, I was experienced enough to not act upon these emotions. Nyanjom and Naylor (2021) [33] described this as the "emotional suppression" [33] (p. 158) that teachers endure in the pursuit of professionalism. During the pandemic, online education redefined how educators performed emotional labour; thus, as teachers were learning how to teach online, they were also crafting their online teaching selves [33]. My conception of professionalism required deep acting that included emotional suppression that allowed me to prioritize my concerns for Oscar over my raw emotions. Over time, my suspicions about Oscar's inappropriate use of the internet were exposed.

During the six to eight weeks online, we got more comfortable with each other so I got to know Oscar a bit better, which resulted in him telling me about his favourite YouTube gamers. He described how he enjoyed watching gamers narrating and playing mature-rated games (i.e., for 18+ gamers). There was one occasion that we watched one of these videos together. During the video, I commented about the violence and gore in the video game. He laughed but was thoroughly fixated on the video and game. It was quite clear that the game and video were not meant for under 18 viewers as the video was peppered with expletives, rude gestures and sustained yelling.

My initial reaction to Oscar's YouTube video habit was helplessness. I felt helpless because I did not think it was useful to report his behaviour to his father. Two thoughts guided my decisions at the time: I thought that it was irrational to expect teachers to "control" online behaviour and I assumed that Oscar's father would place the blame on me in terms of online behaviour management. My fear of negative repercussions stopped me from asking Oscar's father about his stance on online gaming and videos. Despite my knowing that parents needed to play a central role in managing online behaviour at home, I did not think it was realistic to expect Oscar's father to closely monitor Oscar's behaviour during online learning because Oscar's father also had to work online.

To understand the link between anxiety and online gaming behaviour of young children, De Pasquale et al. (2021) [34] studied Italian children aged 8 to 10 during the pandemic. They found that "parenting styles and family rules" [34] (p. 2) played a significant factor in reducing negative effects such as exposure to violence and aggression that could induce anxiety or antisocial behaviour. Interestingly, they also noticed how male children reported an increase in self-control and interaction amongst fellow gamers [34]. If Oscar's attraction to gaming videos is framed as a means to connect with others, it would allow for a more nuanced appreciation of how Oscar may have felt alienated from other children during the pandemic. At the time, with lockdown measures in place, Oscar was only able to interact physically with his father and nanny. By watching YouTube videos and playing online games, Oscar found a way to connect with others.

Since I did not want to break the fragile trust that we had built, I focused on dissuading and asking Oscar to think about the bad language he was listening to and getting excited about. When I asked if his father allowed him to watch these videos, judging from his downcast reaction, I think he knew that he did not have his father's permission. Even

though these moments were brief, they gave me a valuable insight into how Oscar was exploring the internet.

At the time, I paid close attention to Oscar's behaviour because he frequently had outbursts of anger and frustration. Thus, when he exhibited excitement or any positive emotion, I felt compelled to investigate further into the trigger, context or situation for clues that could help me to better understand him. This heightened state could be interpreted as the anxiousness that I constantly associated with Oscar. Frenzel, Daniels and Burić [35] (p. 252) suggested that teacher anxiety was under-reported due to its negative connotation, and perhaps its synonymy to vulnerability and weakness. In Oscar's case, my anxiety stemmed from my inability to consistently engage him and influence his behaviour. However, in this encounter, his excitement was contagious. It was similar to what Frenzel, Daniels and Burić [35] (p. 252) described as "catching" feelings. Even though I did not agree with his online viewing preferences, I was caught up in the positive emotions that he displayed. At the time, I may have considered this a sign of trust, indicative of a developing bond between us.

The significance of physical proximity in managing behaviour of young children cannot be understated. For example, Oscar's downcast and perhaps guilty reaction to my question about his father's permission could be interpreted as the strong influence that his father had on him. Additionally, even though I was online or virtually present with Oscar, my influence on his online behaviour was negligible in comparison to his father's. Rawlings et al. [31] (p. 407) described proximity as a means to communicate and appease students physically. When working with younger students, such as Oscar, physical proximity can be reassuring as much as it can be intimidating. My inability to influence Oscar's behaviour online supported Liu et al.'s (2010) [36] assertion that physical proximity in online learning for younger learners was a necessity. In their study of pandemic online learning, Lau and Lee (2021) [37] also emphasized the key roles that parents or families played in order to guide online learning behaviour.

Without adequate parental support for young learners online, unfettered access to the internet could have dire consequences. By being visible or readily accessible, parent proximity would mimic the level of close supervision that younger students would generally experience in school. While I sometimes reminded Oscar of his father's physical proximity, this reminder was used sparingly. I was cautious with this approach and applied it when he was extremely uncooperative. In the early weeks of online learning, I might have also assumed that Oscar's father's proximity was an adequate substitute for my presence, but I quickly learnt otherwise. Chen (2021) [38] stated that teacher emotions can impact their efficacy. I felt a loss of efficacy due to the continued sense of helplessness that dominated my relationship with Oscar during online learning. When we returned to face-to-face learning, it was quickly evident to me how much physical proximity made a difference for Oscar. There were far more instances where I could deter his YouTube and gaming habits in class by standing next to him or engaging him in other actions or conversations. In person, I felt that there was a higher chance that I was more able to influence Oscar's online behaviour.

I believed in empowering rather than enforcing so my gradual and persuasive approach of teaching Oscar to self-manage his use of the internet yielded slow and inconsistent results. Most days Oscar could be persuaded to work independently on tasks but on rougher days, when he was tired or irritable, there was little that I could do to engage him. On those days, I felt guilty because I felt that I had let Oscar and his dad down. According to Oscar, he felt that his dad wanted me to be stricter and to be less indulgent of him. At the time, I felt that there was little that I could do on days that Oscar hung up, turned off his video or when he was muted but online in class. In hindsight, I wondered if I could have done more, perhaps I could have emailed his father each time any of these behaviours occurred. Even though this guilt tapered over time, it still eats away at me and I often still wonder if I had made the right choices with him.

Anxiety, insecurity and inadequacy permeated my thoughts of online learning with Oscar. For some teachers, being online reminded them of the importance of teacher–student relationships [22] and I can rationalise that being online expedited the process of getting to know Oscar individually. As a teacher, I often actively sought varied methods to make meaningful and healthy connections with my students because I believed that teaching is a relational act. In a longitudinal study of high-school student engagement, Martin and Collie [39] (p. 872) investigated the cumulative influence of teacher–student relationships to show how these bonds impact student learning behaviour. They recommended the cultivation of positive relationships rather than attempting to mitigate the potential implications of negative relationships [39] (p. 861). Since I normally focused on building positive, caring and honest relationships with my students, Oscar’s outbursts and unpredictable behaviour made it challenging to nurture consistent positive interactions. If the disembodied nature of online learning can increase students’ need for attention and support [40], there was also the possibility that Oscar’s behaviour was a means to seek attention from his teacher and peers.

I consciously made an effort to maintain positive interactions with my students because I believed in the importance of decreasing the probability of Dewey’s [41] (p. 8) “miseducative” or inhibiting learning experiences for Oscar. It is not novel to state that teachers play a crucial role in the lives of their students; their emotions can affect and have an effect on their students [38]. Since online learning achievement and satisfaction are closely related to the quality of relationships [42], I wondered if my inability to manage Oscar and his behaviour online produced “miseducative” experiences that were harmful rather than harmless.

These purposeful choices and musings shaped my emotional management of inward and outward displays of emotions. Burić and Frenzel (2021) [43] theorized that teachers perform emotional labour within invisible “emotional labor rules” to ensure that the expected behaviour is exhibited. In this case, I continued to project an optimistic front that urged and cajoled Oscar to behave appropriately despite having little faith that these actions were influencing his behaviour and choices. This optimistic front was informed by the impression that I had of teachers being relentlessly hopeful, positive and encouraging.

When teacher behaviour is framed as emotional labour, it makes the rules that teachers may unquestioningly follow to regulate their actions, emotions and expressions visibly. Burić and Frenzel (2021) [43] stated that teachers hid their feelings and faked emotions for different purposes. I utilized both strategies in my relationship with Oscar. For example, I had to feign excitement and interest when he shared YouTube gaming videos that contained images, language and actions that I would not normally view. These fake emotions were necessary to gain his trust. My true emotions would have been surprise, shock and horror at the violence that this eight year old was viewing. Instead, I chose to suppress these feelings in order to gain an insider view of his online behaviour.

Over a prolonged time, these emotional management strategies that employed surface acting could have adverse effects on teachers in the long run because they would be cognitively and physically demanding [43]. I cannot deny that my relationship with Oscar was mentally draining because I continually questioned my efficacy, choices and actions. For example, I often wondered if Oscar’s exposure to the internet would have been delayed if he did not need to be online unsupervised at eight years old. I also questioned if there were worthwhile online learning moments that could counter the cost of exposing Oscar to the inappropriate content, language and behaviour he had seen and heard. I was acquiescing to inappropriate behaviour to prioritize my relationship with Oscar. The dissonance between my behaviour and beliefs was jarring, but at the time, it was a choice that I made in order to understand Oscar. It was more important for me to gain a deeper insight into his behaviour than to reprimand, which could have caused irreparable damage to our relationship. These gnawing doubts did not disappear when we returned to normal, face-to-face learning because Oscar continued to use bad language and had angry outbursts on the playground and school bus.

Over time, Oscar's father voiced his concern over his escalating behaviour and argued that these were school-acquired bad habits. Although Oscar's father's complaint was presented with a positive and problem-solving intention, it was clear that he blamed me, the teacher, for being unable to control his son's behaviour and choice of words. When I spoke to Oscar's father, I employed deep acting strategies that allowed me to project confidence and empathy. Based on previous teacher–parent encounters, I learned not to show vulnerability because it equated to culpability and weakness. My experiences with other parents also taught me that some parents needed the teacher to take on the blame in order to find a solution for their child(ren). My rational self could rationalise that Oscar's behaviour was not entirely my fault, but I could not avoid feeling hurt and helpless. In order to move forward, I have learned to accept that sometimes it was unavoidable to be viewed negatively by parents. To move beyond the stress of uncertainties, challenges or setbacks, I hung onto my belief in the strength of meaningful learning relationships with my students and parents. Making a conscious effort to ground myself in my beliefs and values of education helped me to reflect, heal and move forward.

Through this process of writing to reflect, analyse and understand my relationship with Oscar, I made time and space to flush out my raw and repressed emotions about him. Tangled within these negative emotions were also moments of joyful, positive and happy moments where Oscar and I joked, giggled and bonded over mutual interests such as anime characters.

6. Making Sense of My Relationship with Oscar and His Father

I went through a few long pauses when I chronologically explored the moments I had with Oscar. Reliving those memories stirred up the unhappy parent emails, lengthy seven-and-a-half-hour days online with 18 eight and nine-year-old students, and the challenges of living in a developing country with consistent power and internet failures. My mind projected vivid images of me sitting in my living room staring at my computer screen and my body remembered the kinks in my neck and the stretches that I did during breaks. It was still early in my honeymoon phase of resettling in a new country, at a new school and attuning myself to the group of eager third-grade students.

Nevertheless, I could still smile when I pictured Oscar's face, with his unruly hair, large grin and booming voice over the computer. It was easy for me to develop a soft spot for him from day one of school. His need for attention was palpable: from acting out to disrupt the group, which elicited negative attention from his peers, to cracking jokes (appropriate and inappropriate) as a way to fit in. Interestingly, when I dived into these memories, I noticed how I felt a continued sense of guilt that I had not done enough to help him.

Teasing out these simmering emotions and thoughts involved naming, describing and conjecturing. Throughout this analysis process, I felt a need to recognise and identify my fleeting thoughts and buried emotions. Identification allowed me to seek and play with words to try to describe the thoughts and feelings that enveloped the memory. By assigning words to my embodied experience, I "tasted" words and allowed them to "percolate" and "ripen" in order to evaluate how they represented how I felt and thought.

This analysis process was guided by curiosity and Hochschild's (2012) [32] work on feeling rules. Separating emotions and feelings entailed defining emotions as the visceral experience or the mental state of feelings, and feelings as the visible or performance of emotions. The rawness or unfettered emotions were difficult to ascertain and recall because they had been numbed over time. Additionally, tuning into the feeling rules or management process that I had routinized as a teacher necessitated pauses, distancing and finding the frequency of "me" within the experience.

I was patient, was that enough?

I was curious, was curiosity helpful or should I have been firmer?

I focused on him, but did my student-centred approach exacerbate his need for attention?

I tried to include him, but was he learning anything from me?

The naming of emotions and the ensuing feelings was generative and exhausting due to the examples of dichotomies displayed above. However, these dualities helped me to explore the conceptualisations within Hochschild's (2012) [32] "surface and deep acting". I wondered about the days when I needed to taper my emotions and tap into my impression management skills. My belief that teachers needed to be caring and patient fed into my need to repress any emotional turmoil I had in order to project the image of a calm, persevering and encouraging teacher. When such efforts into surface acting are performed habitually, they may blur into deep acting [32] over time or result in mental breakdowns. My internalized self-talk in both forms of acting sought to align the emotions that surfaced with my rationalised feelings. Through this process of analysis, I discovered that my impression management efforts to convince myself that it was imperative to manage my emotions (internal) and feelings (external) to uphold my idealized image of a good teacher had inadvertently disconnected me from most of my authentic emotions. It made me wonder if it was realistic for teachers to be authentic with their emotions and feelings.

It is undeniable that the socialized nature of teaching requires teachers to be adept at managing their emotions and resulting feelings. In their exploration of emotional labour and teacher burnout, Bodenheimer and Shuster (2020) [44] theorized about the likelihood of mental exhaustion when teachers over utilize Hochschild's (2012) [32] surface and deep acting as a means to cope with the pressures of teaching realities. Surface acting can be imagined as a way to conceal or conjure emotions in order to deceive others. On the other hand, we employ deep acting as a way to rationalise and justify the expected emotion by deceiving or denying ourselves our raw emotions. These emotional constructs illuminate the emotional labour teachers engage in daily. By suggesting "emotional autonomy", Bodenheimer and Shuster [44] (p. 73) alluded to the notion that the surface and deep-acting mechanisms that teachers apply may be shaped by external forces such as pressures from administrative measures or educational policies. When emotional autonomy is promoted, it can empower teachers to question internal and external pressures and galvanize existing discourse on more humanistic ways to decipher teaching lives. Such discourse would inspire teachers such as me to be more authentic with emotion and feeling work.

Learnings from this reflective and reflexive process helped me to differentiate between the lingering emotions that I had about Oscar and his father. This critical understanding prompted me to reconsider the emotions and feelings that were woven into the fabric of my stories about Oscar. Helping teachers tease out the differences between emotions (invisible) and feelings (visible) could be useful when learning how to manage or negotiate difficult relationships with students and parents. Recognising the differences between inner thoughts and outer actions could help teachers get to know themselves better, especially when they are under duress or managing stressful situations.

I am uncertain if being authentic with one's emotions and feelings would be the ideal equilibrium for teachers given their powerlessness to change or control larger, external influences on their lives. These influences may require teachers to repress their emotions and feelings, producing acquiescence that materialises as surface or deep acting; however, if these are unaddressed, teachers may wind up feeling burnt out or exhausted [45]. In their study about emotional labour and burnout, Näring, Briët, and Brouwers [45] mentioned that a way forward for emotional labour research could be to explore aspects of education that enable teachers to thrive and be empowered. Identifying supportive factors that could taper the negative effects of prolonged surface acting, which has been shown to increase depersonalization and dissonance in teachers [46] will be beneficial.

Likewise, encouraging teachers to learn how to navigate and manage their emotions as an integral part of their professional development could also equip teachers for the increasingly demanding responsibilities that teachers confront daily [46]. Teaching requires mental fortitude because teachers are required to manage their feelings and emotions, as well as teach others to manage theirs [47]. Online teaching during COVID-19 heightened our need for physical connection and it also highlighted the assumed but invisible role that

teachers play in cultivating healthy relationships and emotions at schools. What is clear from this study is the value of promoting professional development opportunities that can help teachers to understand and acquire skills that may help them to manage the impact of their emotions and relational labour. Purposeful, reflective and reflexive examinations of experiences may help teachers to get to know themselves better and offer timely space for teachers to work through their thoughts and memories.

Identifying supportive factors that could taper the negative effects of prolonged surface acting, which has been shown to increase depersonalization and dissonance in teachers [46], will be beneficial. Encouraging teachers to learn how to manage their emotions as an integral part of their professional development could also better prepare them for the increasingly demanding responsibilities that teachers confront daily [46]. What is clear from this study is the need to encourage teachers to reflect on their experiences so that they may better understand and manage the potential emotional strain that they may have experienced. Purposeful reflective and reflexive examinations of experiences may help teachers get to know themselves better and offer a timely space for them to work through their thoughts and memories.

7. Closing Reflections

This writing contained an exploration of one teacher's storied experience of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlighted the possibilities that teachers can consider when they attempt to make sense of their relationships and responsibilities to students and parents. The intentional weaving of these particularities produced a nuanced, authentic and contextualised narrative of how online learning experiences can impact the lives of students, their families and teachers within and beyond the classroom.

Since the aim of this study was to illuminate the meaning-making process that teachers can employ to understand their experiences, it is pertinent to state that the conjectural insights presented were designed to promote dialogue amongst teachers, teacher educators, educational researchers and policymakers who seek to ameliorate the complexities of educational relationships in online education. Through the idiosyncratic narrative lens on teaching lives, this paper supplements existing narrative work on the subtleties and challenges within teaching lives.

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Article

An Autoethnography of Teaching Drama to Student Teachers in Hong Kong

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Abstract: Schools in Hong Kong are encouraged to engage students in learning activities to strengthen moral and values education. The use of fairy tales in drama teaching—in this case, Mr. Fox—is an approach to learning that can present opportunities to positively engage students in a range of issues, such as moral and value education. The aim of this research was to enhance moral and values education by taking an autoethnographic approach to exploring my experiences of using and adapting a Western fairy tale with local student teachers learning to teach drama as part of their Master of Education degree at a university in Hong Kong. The use of various narrative genres to engage in the process of self-dialogue emerged as an important source for developing understandings of teaching and learning. Through this reflective process, I gained insights into my own teaching and the challenges and benefits of using fairy tales and structured drama in moral and value education. This research also revealed that fairy tales, as cultural treasures passed down through generations, may hold immense value as a resource for personal enjoyment, drama teaching, and academic exploration.

Keywords: Mr. Fox and Bluebeard; applied drama; cultural translation; ethnography; moral and values education

1. Introduction and Background

In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau suggests that schools should make use of everyday life events to strengthen the coordination of learning activities and enhance the connections between various cross-curricular domains in values education. Drama aligns perfectly with this imperative by incorporating everyday life events to facilitate moral and values education.

The use of fairy tales in drama teaching is an approach to learning that is known to present opportunities to positively engage students in a range of issues, such as moral and values education (Saxby, 2022) [1]. The aim of writing this paper is to enhance moral and values education by using an autoethnography as an approach to explore the author's (i.e., my) experiences of using fairy tales as a vehicle for engaging student teachers in a drama course. This article focuses on the experiences of one university teacher (i.e., me) teaching students in a Master of Education program who were studying drama as a component course of the program. Hereafter, I will use first-person pronouns, as I am using the methodology of autoethnography.

I developed one of the drama lessons in my course by adapting a Western fairy tale for student teachers. Drama in the Curriculum was a course I introduced to the Master of Education program in the then Open University of Hong Kong (now renamed as Hong Kong Metropolitan University). The course was taught by myself and a few part-time Tutors.

This is also a reflective narrated piece concerning my teacher education process in which I use both literary and sociological approaches, as I have touched on multiple disciplines including the analysis of literary texts, the provision of drama education, and the handling of translation. Such hybrids of disciplines are inevitably arranged, in terms of methodology, in a variety of narrative forms.

This reflection is a retrospective account about two similar lessons in a master's program for two cohorts of in-service teachers, one conducted by Mr. Felix Du in 2015 and the other conducted by me in 2016. Over the years, this Mr. Fox lesson plan has been used a few times, and I still remember the interesting responses from my student teachers back in 2016. This does not mean that there were no interesting responses in other cohorts, but in my work with teachers in the context of postgraduate education, it was a significant experience in my teaching. Using Western materials with students in Hong Kong has been a typical teaching method, but it also poses problems, especially in terms of cultural transfer. Therefore, in this paper, I would like to inquire into the journey of my teaching, i.e., choosing and adapting the Mr. Fox material, and then move on to using the material with my students. During this narrative journey, I intend to derive meanings from the choices I made through a self-dialoguing structure—meanings about teaching, translation, social significance, and interactive processes.

The paper starts by explaining the use of autoethnography as a methodology for exploring my experiences of teaching drama to student teachers. With a focus on my personal experiences, I then reflect on my role as a literary and dramatic interpreter of Mr. Fox and Bluebeard. How Jacobs' Mr. Fox was used in two teacher education sessions by my Tutor Felix and myself is then discussed. Drawing on these experiences, the final part of the paper highlights key learnings that emerged from the research.

2. Methodology: Autoethnographical Narrative Inquiry of My Character as a Teacher Educator

In *Essentials of Autoethnography*, Poulos described autoethnography as follows: "...an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings)" (2021: 5) [2].

Poulos (2021) [2] went on to suggest that there were various methodological tools that could be used for data gathering in autoethnography; these were participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, focus groups, narrative analysis, artifact analysis, archival research, journaling, field notes, thematic analysis, description, context, interpretation, and storytelling. For this research, autoethnography was my choice of methodology because I combine different tools for data collection to explore my experiences of using fairy tales in my drama teaching to understand how they might contribute to values education. This occurred as I reflected on the choices I made in my teaching. This also involved exploring my feelings towards teaching and social contextualization and the dramatic processes in the lessons that impacted me with memories and strong images.

In this study, I collected and analyzed data, referred to as "field texts" (Clandinin, 2023) [3], by reflecting on how I analyzed the fairy tale and positioned it in the context of moral education and by narrating my observations of the three-dimensional dramatic field texts. This inquiry is characterized by a three-dimensional exploration of temporality, sociality, and place: "The three dimensions in the inquiry space are interconnected and interwoven; temporality is threaded into place and into events and emotions" (Clandinin, 2023: 50) [3]. Methodologically, this perspective of co-constructing life experiences highlights the social interaction of culturally shaped life systems (Roberts, 2002) [4]. It aligns with Clough's notion of inquiry that seeks to establish a connection between the individual's "micro" world and the institutional meanings of the "macro" world they both inhabit and contribute to (2002: 12) [5].

Neelands (2006) [6] described the use of the critical reflective practitioner approach for rethinking habitual methods and operations to create "emancipatory" knowledge concerned with praxis. When the notion of the reflective practitioner is evident, teacher agency comes into view, which means that the teacher's ability or potential to act and the achievement of agency are impacted by three temporal dimensions, namely iterative (impacts of the past), practical-evaluative (engagement with the present), and projective (aspirations

for the future) dimensions (Priestly et al., 2015: 22) [7]. This underscores the importance of employing an autoethnographical method in my research.

The recollection of lesson preparation work follows a chronological sequence. Subsequently, this preparation was followed by human interaction within the classroom space. The lesson culminated in critical debates that evoked various emotions, prompting a deeper exploration of the multiple meanings embedded in human experiences. This exploration encompassed the relationships between individuals and their world, as well as the dynamics of cultural, institutional, and linguistic negotiations (Clandinin, 2023) [3].

Van De Mierop, Clifton, and Schnurr (2022) [8] argued that both big stories and small stories are significant in narrative analysis, particularly when the smaller stories that emerge during daily social practice (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008) [9] might be overlooked. These smaller stories were embedded in “do[ing] things” such as “blaming, accounting for action, building acceptable moral identities, and so on” (Van De Mierop, Clifton and Schnurr, 2022: 1) [8]. In this paper, I will document these small stories as events and discussions that took place during my drama lesson.

The approach of using narratives from a subjective perspective is akin to recounting the stories of the worlds that the researcher has explored. This type of qualitative research “is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 12) [10]. But the subjective eyes are not totally subjective. Wortham (2001) [11] tried to show how the dialogic approach to interactional positioning works by introducing two Bakhtinian concepts, namely “double voicing” and “ventriloquation”, as tools for interpreting interactional positionings in narratives (Wortham, 2001: 62–63) [11]. This implies that storytellers employ a juxtaposition of different voices from different characters, allowing readers to interpret between the lines. In this narrative, I am attempting to utilize this concept by looking at my own character as a teacher educator—not only creating dialogues and positioning between characters, but also by establishing dialogues between different episodes through the interpretive positionings. I make this shift by borrowing Spence’s (1982) [12] psychoanalytic theory, which says that a narrative piece appropriately chooses unrelated events and makes sense by filling the gaps between these events. Hermans and Hermans-Jansen called this process of creating dialogues with oneself or another person “self-reflection”, and through these dialogues “valuations are organized into a single narratively structured system” (1995: 15) [13].

As a drama educator, I happened to use narrative inquiry largely in my research life for exploration in the field of applied drama, because I have been an avid enthusiast of story-telling (Shu, 2006) [14], and I noticed that narrative inquiry has been a useful methodology in the field of applied drama and theatre (Zatzman, 2006) [15]. As a piece of narrative inquiry, I acknowledge Van De Mierop’s (2021) [16] use of the concept of “narrative genres”, such as canonical narratives and non-canonical narratives. One intriguing aspect to consider is that while I am documenting non-canonical narratives, I am also engaging in discussions about the use of canonical narratives, such as Bluebeard and Mr. Fox. This embrace of canonical narratives, along with their interpretation, initiates an exploration into further blurring the boundaries between literary narratives and non-canonical narratives in the context of narrative genres within narrative inquiry. I propose that this paper also serves as a meta-analysis of narrative genres, shedding light on the interconnectedness and fluidity between different narrative forms.

3. Data Collection Process

There were ten student teachers in the 2015 class and another ten student teachers in the 2016 class who talked with one another and with the teachers, thus interactively creating positionings organized in this paper, which involve discussions about intersubjectivity that echo the discussion of narrative genres below. In the 2016 class, there were about a handful of student teachers who shared experiences about the use of canonical narratives. In Poulos’ (2021) [2] terms again, I am using tools such as storytelling and interpretation in the former half of the reflection, including translating, interpreting, and adapting the fairy

tales; in the latter half, I am using participant observation, focus groups, and journaling with photo-taking, including eliciting feedback from the student teachers about the lesson plan. All through the whole paper, I am using narrative and thematic analysis through the juxtaposition of episodes and positionings.

4. My Experiences as a Literary and Dramatic Interpreter of Mr. Fox and Bluebeard

In my drama lessons for student teachers in 2015 and 2016, I utilized Winston's lesson plan, which was adapted from Joseph Jacobs' *Mr. Fox* (1890) [17]. It is worth noting that Jacobs himself acknowledged that his version of the story was a re-written variant of *The Robber Bridegroom* (1857) collected by the Brothers Grimm. Additionally, the name of the antagonist, Mr. Fox, was derived from Halliwell's murder story titled *An Oxford Student* (1849) [18]. Fairy tales and folklore often exist in different versions with similar themes or storylines. Fine (1987) [19] observed that Jacobs' most controversial and widely recognized contribution to folklore was his retelling of fairy tales.

4.1. Episode 1: *The Curious Teacher That Thinks like a Learner*

I remember I came across a Chinese translated version of a revised edition of the Brothers Grimm tales. The book, when translated back to English, was titled *Folklores by Brothers Grimm that Frightens*, and it was rewritten by two Japanese female writers using the pen name Kiryu Misao. In this book, all the fairy tales were retold in a manner that showcased terrifying characters who would kill or mistreat others. I had a fascination with dark and cruel stories, and I believed that students would also be captivated by them. After all, who does not love such tales?

I also came across various critics who had written extensively about the works of the Brothers Grimm. As a student of literature and translation, I pondered on the idea of examining whether there were any discrepancies between the original source and the interpreted version. It seemed necessary for me to undertake this investigation before proceeding with the translation and adaptation of this secondary source for my own teaching purposes. By doing so, I was able to enhance my confidence in explaining the rationale behind the selection and utilization of teaching materials to my student teachers.

As a drama teacher, I knew that my biggest task was to find out the dramatic moral of the story. First, I noticed how Lady Mary was attracted to Mr. Fox: "No one knew who Mr. Fox was; but he was certainly brave, and surely rich, and of all her lovers, Lady Mary cared for him alone". While bravery could be a stunning quality to Lady Mary, richness was an all-time attraction, not to mention that Mr. Fox lives in a castle. I also noticed that Lady Mary was so curious as to open three castle doors, with the last one having "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold, Lest That Your Heart's Blood Should Run Cold" written on it. I decided that my drama lesson should demonstrate how learners could explore issues like curiosity, risk-taking, and the value of fighting for oneself.

4.2. Positioning 1A: *A Drama Teacher Who Grew Up in the Contemporary Era*

I studied English Literature in my undergraduate studies. Therefore, I was much alert when I decided to use Winston's lesson plan, which is based on a fairy tale. Reflectively, I was even more alert, because a teacher should first figure out the meanings in the original literary source before going on to understand any adaptation of that source.

I noted that critics like Maria Tatar (2004) [20], Shuli Barzilai (2009) [21], Casie Hermansson (2009) [22], or Jack Zipes (2012) [23] focused on comparing different versions of the story, tending to take Charles Perrault's *Bluebeard* (1697) [24] as the origin of the serial killer story. Zipes (2008: p.xvii) [25] noted that Perrault's classical tales "tend to reinforce patriarchal and patronizing notions of gender and power", trying to "illustrate what [the female characters'] 'proper' place was in particular situations and how to best act in a civil way". After reading all these critics, I felt a bit relieved because I found that these references did not deviate too much from what I thought I had understood about the story.

As previously indicated, my background as a drama student and practitioner during my second master's degree, PhD, and third master's degree prompted me to undertake a fresh analysis of the two versions from a dramatic standpoint. Remarkably, what captivated my attention the most were the attributes of the female characters and their striking resemblance to women in the contemporary era. These qualities encompassed the pursuit of autonomy, inquisitiveness, courage, intellect, and a commitment to gender equality. As a drama student and teacher, I was happy to derive these themes from the fairy tale.

I experienced an interesting internal struggle between my identities as a literature student and a drama student. The study of literature provided me with a foundation rooted in structured frameworks and classical perspectives on canonical literary works. On the other hand, my engagement with drama fostered a sense of creativity and a readiness to assert my own voice. I found myself deliberating over whether literary critics would endorse the dramatic interpretations I, as a teacher, was inclined to adopt. While the resounding call of an emancipated reflective practitioner resonated within me, urging me to "Be Bold, Be Bold", there was also the subtle whisper of a more conservative voice cautioning, "But Not Too Bold".

4.3. Positioning 1B: My Translator's Mind to Deliberately "Misinterpret" and Transform Existing Narratives for Drama Education

During my first master's degree, I pursued a major in translation. The focus of my thesis revolved around the discourse surrounding the degree of faithfulness a translated text should maintain to the original, particularly when it came to translating cultural meanings. As some translators would disagree, I inclined more to the liberal camp of translators who maintained that a piece of translation should speak to the readers of the translated text and, when this happened, the translator might need to necessarily change the meanings in the original text if the readers were bound to misunderstand if the translated words were too "faithfully" or literally rendered (Shu, 1996) [26]. This positional view perfectly matched my role as a translator of dramatic plays, because the audience simply could not have time to flip the dictionary when they were sitting in the theatre and listening to the lines which embedded some awkward words and phrases as a result of word-to-word translation. Additionally, the extreme view in this camp of translators regarded the translated text as a re-creation of the original text (Shu, 1996) [26].

Having said this, therefore, I was particularly drawn to Carter's translation of Perrault. Zipes pointed out that Carter "definitely had to 'misinterpret' [Perrault] and reshape his tales so that they could become more earthy, more in tune with Carter's radical vision of aesthetics and the efficacy of storytelling" (2008: xix) [25]. In *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Zipes further asserted that "[o]vershadowing, transformation, and remaking are key functional components in a memetic process that enable a particular fairy tale to become popular and classical in Western culture" (2012: 44) [23]. Of course, this position of remake and interpretive creation will become a central focus of discussion in the remaining sections of this paper.

I believed practitioners and scholars in the field of applied drama and theatre largely held similar views to the idea of active reception and interpretation. In *Drama, Narrative and Moral Education*, Winston drew upon theories offered by Bruner, Goldberg, and Bakhtin, with subjunctivity and dialogism emerging as key concepts, observing that "traditional tales are resistant to these concepts and that debate over their moral significance is characterized by profound disagreement over their didactic purposes", and therefore he proposed that "the [original] narrative form is inappropriate to moral teaching of a straightforward, didactic nature" (1998: 7–8) [27]. He categorized Zipes and Tatar as "revisionists" and post-structuralists who advocated the need to revise fairy tales, and Bettelheim in the opposite camp as the "traditionalist" (1998: 32–35) [27]. Winston's description of Bettelheim's taste was interesting, if not ironic:

There is no ambivalence in the fairy tales favored by Bettelheim: the good win, the bad lose. The use of unambiguous characters and the lack of psychology are important

features of this process. As the good figure is straightforwardly and obviously the hero or heroine, the child will identify with it (1998: 35) [27].

I respectfully question the effectiveness of relying solely on such simplistic categorizations when children begin to grapple with the complexities of human psychology in situations where distinguishing between good and bad is not always clear cut. However, it is worth noting that the Asian perspective may be more receptive to an unequivocal judgment of right and wrong. In Hong Kong, moral education has traditionally been implemented through didactic classroom lectures delivered in an authoritarian and monotonous manner. This approach may not necessarily foster a deep moral commitment in students, as it primarily focuses on instilling and indoctrinating them with “correct” moral values (Cheung and Lee, 2010: 577) [28]. Instead, moral education needs to strip off its authoritarian atmosphere to bring in a liberal, discursive method. Conversely, “the fundamental problem with moral education in general is the lack of educational resources, notably talented moral educators who are skillful to implement the above changes. Apart from conveying didactic content, such educators need to play a crucial role in facilitating moral discussion under a just community context” (Cheung and Lee, 2010: 587) [28].

In Hong Kong, as specified on the Education Bureau website, “Taking cultivation of proper values and attitudes as the direction, schools should make use of everyday life events to strengthen the coordination of learning activities, and enhance the connection, among various cross-curricular domains in values education, including moral education, civic education, national education ..., anti-drug education, life education, sex education, media and information literacy education, education for sustainable development, human rights education under the legal framework, etc. so as to provide students with all-round learning experience conducive to their whole-person development”. (<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/sch-admin/sbm/handy-tips/learning-journey-for-SMC-members/curriculum-development/values-education/index.html>; accessed on 4 May 2024) [29].

The method of using drama aligns perfectly with the approach of incorporating everyday life events to facilitate moral and values education. Drama revolves around the study of human actions and reactions in various life situations. When a learner assumes a dramatic role, he/she becomes immersed in the thoughts and emotions of that role within the given circumstances. This compels him/her to contemplate appropriate actions and reactions based on the personal significance and implications of such choices.

While Zipes took a step away from literary formalists to concern audience’s and reader’s subjective interpretations of both written and image texts, I am going to take a further step on the dramatic interpretation as well as creation of personal significance and meanings as a process of learning for children using fairy tales, particularly Mr. Fox, as source texts. Toye and Prendiville (2000) [30] referred to drama as the “putting down the book” method, as opposed to the ordinary storytelling method on the carpet, which took two elements from the story, a character and a particular situation, suggesting that the children should not be locked into the narrative. Instead of just acting out the narrative, the children should turn their attention to key moments, key characters, and dilemmas so as to be “liberated to explore what they understand of the original author’s ideas” and “can embellish, expand, create new ones” and to embark on “journeys of narrative exploration” (2000: 17–18) [30]. Neelands added that “[F]amiliar traditional stories...are not merely entertainment for children in the early years; they are vital sources of knowledge about the world and its ways” (2000: vii) [31]. However, this view was not going to be straightforwardly accepted by my in-service student teachers, who started a debate after experiencing a drama lesson plan I introduced.

A note on autoethnographical observation: I am glad to see that I was achieving agency by going through two temporal stages—iterational and practical—evaluative. First, I was ready to creatively adapt the fairy tale for educational purposes, just like the playscript translator I used to be (as an impact from the past), and to pay attention to the social context of my audience/students (as engagement with the present). But the action I show below unfortunately exposes a lack of sensitivity to my social context.

5. My Adaptation of Mr. Fox as a Learning Medium Encountering Critical Debates

In this section, I will discuss the utilization of Joseph Jacobs' Mr. Fox in two teacher education sessions. These sessions were conducted by my Tutor Mr. Felix Du and myself in two consecutive years. The purpose was to showcase to student teachers how improvisational and participatory drama and theatre can be structured as a creative process in a school setting, specifically targeting young individuals aged 10–14. To provide our students with a convenient reference, we referred to this form of drama education as process-driven dramatic learning, or simply process drama (O'Neill, 1995) [32] or conventions drama (Shu, 2012) [33]. The lesson plan described below was created by Professor Joe Winston and delivered in my drama education course for mainly in-service teachers, with slight adaptations including names of characters, time periods, and contextual elements.

5.1. Episode 2: The Challenged Drama Lesson

When I first heard my Tutor, Felix, say he would like to use Joe's plan, I was more than happy, as he was a teacher in my Warwick studies and has been a long-time friend. I did not directly observe Joe use it. Alternatively, Felix showed the written plan to me, and I became much drawn to it because of its interesting representation of a well-known fairy tale.

I read the fairy tale Mr. Fox to grasp the essence of this lesson plan. I was struck by Lady Mary's proactive strength and cleverness. It instantly reminded me of the powerful women of our era who possess the determination to shape their own destinies. Considering the backdrop of Hong Kong as an international city and financial hub, it is likely that this attribute is influenced by the complexities of modern information dissemination and materialistic culture (as discussed in Positionings 1A and 1B).

Before I go on with my teaching experience, let me write down a step-by-step version of an excerpt from Joe's lesson plan for Mr. Fox written in the University of Warwick in 2004. This version only includes the steps relevant to the content of my discussion.

Step 4: Discuss with the students how many old tales end with a wedding but that this one is different, as it begins with one. Draw attention to the following letter:

Dear friend

I know this letter will surprise you but I wish you to be one of the first to share the happy news. I am to be married! Yes, married, to the most handsome, charming and mysterious of men. And in just one week's time! I have known my future husband for a month but that has been more than long enough for me to realise that he is truly the man of my dreams.

His name is Mr Fox and I met him ... well, there will be time enough to chat when I see you. Suffice it to say for now that he is the most gallant and wealthy of men and of all my many suitors, he alone has captured both my heart and the approval of my brothers—which is just as important of course! They still think of me as a silly young girl without a serious thought in her head, I'm afraid.

When we marry we are to live in his mansion. Oh, he has described it to me on many occasions and I look forward to seeing it for the first time on the day after our wedding.

My brothers have commissioned the most wonderful of presents for us. It is a series of five tapestries to adorn the large hallway of our home. Each illustrates a different happy event in the long life that I know we will share together. Do come and view the present before the wedding. It is now on display in the great banqueting hall of my brothers' castle, where the wedding is soon to take place.

I look forward, dear friend, to seeing you within the next few days. Yours as ever

Lady Mary

Step 5: Discuss with the students what will be illustrated on the tapestries (wedding/christening/children grown?). In groups, students are given one of these subjects to create a tableau of the tapestry image.

Step 6: Teacher in role as Mr. Fox, who views the present alone, making a few comments but insinuating a sinister nature under a superficial charm: “Is that the future they envisage for me, a happy stay-at-home family man? How little they know me!” A gesture such as the crushing of a wedding carnation can be particularly effective.

Step 7: Back to the present. Teacher in role as Lady Mary, who is agitated and calls a meeting with her friends and tells them about her experience at Mr Fox’s mansion the evening before. Halt at the moment Lady Mary opened the door of the chamber. Do not tell students what Lady Mary saw in there but indicate from the way she looks, speaks, etc., that it was something horrific.

Step 8: In groups, students make images of what they imagine to be in the bloody chamber. As a whole class, whisper the phrase “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold Lest Your Heart’s Blood Runs Cold” and then freeze into the images. Perform each in sequence and then have the class scream (as Lady Mary) after the final image. Students can then talk of what they saw in each of the images and perhaps one or two can be looked at and examined in detail.

Both Felix and I used the above letter (translated into Chinese) in Joe’s original plan as an introductory drama activity to start the lesson. I thought it was a clever dramatic input as an introduction of Jacob’s Mr. Fox. Joe’s letter was indeed a smart move to kick-start the lesson with some drama. It totally changed the storyteller’s voice from being distant and impersonal to a more personal and subjective female perspective. And that voice perfectly matched my impression of Lady Mary in the fairy tale—she is bold and in control, especially when it comes to her love life and finding Mr. Right, just like how she carries herself in the letter, I suppose.

In the session conducted by myself (in 2016), I changed the name Lady Mary into Rosemary, which is also the name of a Hong Kong young model and singer. Mr. Fox became Mr. Siu the Dude (in Chinese 蕭公子), which is also a typical last name (蕭 Siu), incorporating a way of referring to rich, handsome, womanizing guys (公子, the Dude). This last name actually coincides with the last name of a few Hong Kong male celebrities who possess characteristics such as rich, womanizing, or talented and charismatic. The talk of the town, especially in places like Hong Kong, has always been about the social phenomenon of rich second-generation commercial tycoons getting married or moving in with gorgeous young models and pop stars. It is a topic that is always buzzing and gets people talking. With such adaptation, I decided to further “misinterpret” the story for the students’ discussion of women’s choices in the materialistic world, complicated by the playboy culture, metropolitan rumors, and true love.

To kick off the first activity, I took on the role of Rosemary’s best friend who received the letter via email, so as to achieve a more contemporary taste. She then portrayed Rosemary and read the letter to her fellow friends (portrayed by the learners as they listened). By this little back-and-forth shifting between Rosemary’s perspective and that of her friend’s, I made an effort to channel Rosemary’s subjective voice and transform it into her female friends’ voices, aiming to capture the essence of the broader young female community in Hong Kong.

The second activity developed the dramatic context for Rosemary by asking the students to form sculptures to show what presents were given by Rosemary’s brothers. The presents in Winston’s original plan are tapestries, which are very Western home accessories, but not in Hong Kong. I changed them to sculptures, which is not a very culturally appropriate adaptation for Hong Kong—perhaps paintings could be another choice. The third activity now quickly developed the dramatic action by letting myself play the role of Mr. Siu in order to unveil his monstrous sneer towards the presents while he saw them arrive at his mansion. (I changed “tapestries” and “castle” in the original letter, which were too British, to “sculptures” and “mansion” in my version.) These few steps in the drama process built up the suspense surrounding the female protagonist’s crisis, which revolved around the possibility of domestic violence—a pressing issue in Hong Kong as well. The drama developed until the point when Rosemary decided to open the door on which the curiosity-driving line “Be Bold,

Be Bold, But Not Too Bold, Lest Your Heart's Blood Runs Cold" was written. Different cohorts of students, including Felix's (in 2015) and my own, all confirmed that this moment was equally exciting for both children and adults, when they agitatedly demonstrated acts of murder and the display of body parts from different previous wives, now with an empty bottle expecting to show Lady Mary's lips (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Body parts of previous wives displayed and treasured on the right, creatively presented by student teachers. Another group of student teachers on the left playing Lady Mary opened the bloody chamber door. The Tutor facilitated in the middle.

The wrap-up discussion touched upon the purpose of oral tales and got us all thinking deeply about the morals embedded in this specific story. We explored themes that really struck a chord, like the clash between true love and materialism, and the pitfalls of city life. I gathered some feedback from the student teachers, and one of them excitedly remembered it as the Bluebeard story, picturing a room filled with all sorts of gruesome stuff. But then, a male student teacher, always one to be critical, reminded me of something important I should keep in mind. He challenged with confidence: "In your story we had to imagine a big mansion with doors and staircases, etc., but Hong Kong students might not be able to imagine that situation as, you know, Hong Kong is such a small place. You might need to consider about students' ability and background. Also, a Hong Kong girl will not take the risk of going to such a mansion in order to find out about her dream boy. We needed to consider the entire ecosystem of people in Hong Kong".

I asked myself: Was it also inappropriate to change the name Lady Mary to Rosemary and the letter to an email so that students would be drawn to imagine the contemporary Hong Kong context which could be too close to their real life? Should I forget about the metropolitan changes and just use Joe's original Lady Mary context so that the castle could make better sense for them?

In addition to the male student teacher, there were also some female student teachers who expressed concerns about the plan being "too open", particularly regarding topics of love and sex. Like many teachers in Hong Kong, they appeared to hold more conservative views and may not have been fully prepared for the possibilities and demands that the drama process could present. "Oh no", I thought, "If she is not convinced of the moral worth of the plan, she probably will not use it on her moral education lesson".

As the session neared its conclusion, the critical discussion evolved into a lively debate about the feasibility and importance of cultural translation. Some student teachers proposed simply replacing the Bluebeard element with a Hong Kong film classic featuring a serial killer who uses human flesh to make steamed meat buns. This is referring to a locally produced film in 1993 called *The Untold Story* (《八仙飯店之人肉叉燒包》), literally meaning Steamed Pork Bun with Human Flesh in the Eight Fairies Guesthouse). On the other side of the debate, initiated by a language and literature teacher, there was an argument in favor of using drama as a means to culturally introduce foreign classics like

Shakespeare. All in all, the class ended in a reflection of curriculum objectives and teachers' readiness to make the best use of dramatic methods.

5.2. Positioning 2A: *Be Theoretically Firm as a Learned Drama Educator and Practitioner*

Despite the awareness of possible metaxis (Boal, 1995) [34] going on in the drama classroom where students were able to exist in both the imaginary dramatic world as characters in the fictional context as well as the realistic world as learners in the school classroom, I have to agree with the critical student teacher regarding the high level of cultural consciousness that he perceived in his students' minds. It could be exactly metaxis that gives the students the ability to separate emotional engagement from rational disbelief. For instance, as the drama unfolds, the students could become fully engaged in the thrilling moments and eagerly immerse themselves in the experience. They might even enjoy physically exploring the grand mansion and pretending to walk down the stairs, just like in a suspenseful thriller story; but after they get out of roles and sit in a circle to discuss the moral of the drama, some safety-conscious girls might refuse to engage again in Rosemary's experience by asking, "How can she be so stupid as to run down the dark staircase—I'd prefer calling my boyfriend to find out what's up instead. After all, I can whatsapp him easily". Her disbelief in the role's perceived stupidity being portrayed by a modern, intelligent Hong Kong girl could be attributed to the negative distancing effect of the historically situated drama. This might hinder her from exploring concepts such as curiosity or materialism further. Or was the distancing too great here? Alternatively, the distance could be slightly shortened, by injecting more character objective with the mentality of a modern Hong Kong girl into the dramatic situation with the additional use of props. A modern girl would not be so stupid as to run down a dark staircase in a big mansion simply because of the "Be Bold" line written on the door. She probably still needs some other things for the curiosity to work. Maybe there is also a bunch of rosemary wrapped with a little key on the top of the staircase, giving her a deceptive lure to some precious or expensive present behind the door downstairs, lovingly prepared for her. The problem was not the big mansion, but the 19th century *mentality* of Lady Mary, who was indeed a replicate of Rosemary. Indeed, it is common sense that wealthy individuals in Hong Kong do reside in large mansions. In conclusion, it is the responsibility of the drama teacher to enhance the dramatic context for their students, and I firmly believe that metaxis can still be effective when the dramatic situation is properly understood and portrayed.

Upon reflection, the discussion experience described in the lesson was truly valuable. The student teachers provided insightful comments on more effective methods of culturally translating teaching materials. They engaged in introspection regarding their teaching objectives and contemplated the use of drama for their specific purposes. I consider such a concluding discussion to be highly meaningful, as it successfully demonstrated the desired outcomes of a lesson for the student teachers.

5.3. Positioning 2B: *Teacher as Ethnographer*

As a teacher, I am used to students' critical comments, which many times inform me to choose the right frame(s) for a dramatic theme. The word "frame", adopted from Goffman and applied by Heathcote to refer to "the viewpoint individuals will have about their circumstances and which helps them to make sense of an event or situation" (Bowell and Heap, 2001: 59) [35], is an essential concept the teacher must consider when planning his/her lesson. To achieve a good grasp on the frames of the participants, the teacher needs to assume a number of roles. It has been discussed that a drama teacher should assume the roles of manager, animateur, facilitator and actor/dramaturge (Neelands, 2004) [36], or co-artist (Taylor and Warner, 2006) [37].

These roles mostly address the qualities of the teacher as an implementer of a lesson. At the lesson-planning stage, I would suggest that the teacher should assume the role of a researcher, specifically an ethnographer. Gallagher suggested that a critical ethnographer should engage in "questions of interpretation and representation of both the social reality

and the drama practices in an education setting” (2003: 64) [38]. In this reflective paper, I have come to the realization that adopting a critical ethnographer’s lens was particularly fitting for narrowing the focus and facilitating a conclusive discussion on the interpretation and adaptation of the fairy tale and drama lesson. Gallagher further commented on this criticality as having two aspects—power relations in the drama classroom participants and Habermas’ notion of emancipatory interest: “How do the dialectics of self and other, of local and global, of democracy and domination play out in drama’s pedagogy? ... There is an intertextual relationship between the fictional roles enacted in the dramas and the so-called real ones of classroom or workshop life” (Gallagher, 2003: 69) [38].

What I discovered in this teacher education session was the very interesting “intertextual relationship” between the fictional roles of Mr. Fox/Siu and Lady Mary/Rosemary and the real classroom social roles of a male and a female student teacher. For example, it was my intended objective (or my emancipatory interest) for student teachers to experience the fictional role of Rosemary and her possible affection towards the rich Mr. Siu, so that they could compare those feelings and thoughts with their cosmopolitan feelings and thoughts of being a woman yearning for a man. But their real social role of an in-service teacher urged them to be critical towards the feasibility of the drama plan (i.e., to exercise their learner’s power and hence to reflect on their authoritative teacher’s role in their own everyday classroom), such as the above critical student’s observation of an adaptation that could address the “entire ecosystem of people in Hong Kong”, the traditional teacher’s view towards the plan’s being too open on issues about love and sex, or the literature teacher’s crunch on its potential learning opportunities of canonical classical stories. This condition is particularly obvious in in-service student teachers, as compared to pre-service student teachers, because the in-service teachers are, to a greater extent, institutionally “framed” in their working contexts.

In addition, the power relations are indeed in dialogue with the emancipatory interest in consideration. To find out how this dialogue might possibly develop, I need to further use the notion of an (auto)ethnographer. Of course, Gallagher noted the questions to be asked by the ethnographer who observes the social and dramatic contexts: “What questions, in the context of the drama world, were left unanswered by the participants? And conversely, what observations of the cultural dynamics in the group penetrated the drama constructions/imaginaries?” (Gallagher 2003: 71) [38].

To answer Gallagher’s first question, I would say my student teachers did not indulge in answering the moral inquiries proposed by the story of Mr. Siu, although they were quite happy to take up the dramatic roles and had fun. This was less ideal, as the drama should be evoking thoughts about reflection on human values and human habits, and this should be a core learning outcome in a drama lesson, because if the participants were impressed by the drama and the dilemma of the story, their future possibility of using the drama method and the specific drama plan could be enhanced. To answer Gallagher’s second question, the student teachers were “conversely” more excited when they took back their cultural roles and started to propose suggested changes in the drama construction, such as the use of a Hong Kong serial killer film. They were more conscious of their being teachers, and less immersed in discussing the issues implied by the imaginary dramatic story.

6. Conclusive Discussion: The Narrative Inquirer Who Reflects on the Methodology

The use of autoethnography as a methodology was beneficial for this research. As I highlighted in the first half of this paper, my interpretations of the text Mr. Fox contributed a lot to the formation of my emancipatory interests and hence the framing of the drama teaching plan. The autoethnography also raised my awareness. The students’ learning in my class revealed the cultural capital that individuals possess, such as their educational backgrounds, thinking patterns, and the sociological contexts in which they reside, including social trends, economic practices, religious perspectives, and regional variations. Additionally, the autoethnography enabled an exploration of the institutional factors that impact learning, such as govern-

ment policies, school cultures, student abilities, and parental viewpoints. Lastly, the research methodology of autoethnography that I employed in this paper aligns with my concluding perspective that a teacher should function as an ethnographer of his/her own practice. Therefore, I am introducing the idea of ethnographer as a result of undertaking this autoethnography approach through which I reflected on the benefits I, as a teacher, gained by conducting fieldwork and recording the events and interactions taking place in my everyday teaching activities, so that I can learn more about teaching and learning. Other performance ethnographers may “couch their findings in feminist, post-structuralist, phenomenological or other theoretical approaches” (Bacon, 2006) [39]. I share this sociological and phenomenological approach to ethnography.

In addition to being attuned to their students’ needs and experiences, teachers should also be aware of their own social context, ingrained thoughts, habitual positioning, and the language and linguistic symbols they use, particularly when navigating cultural shifts. It is crucial for teachers to possess self-awareness and sensitivity towards their own role in the educational process. Before I close this discussion, I am asking myself ethnographically: Was I burdened by my academic past and therefore was too much into the minds of a literature and translation student? What contextual needs of my students should I consider when I adapt a piece of teaching material originally designed for students in a foreign culture? As a drama student and teacher, I should know that adaptation, or what I call translation, might not be limited to changing the names of people (such as Rosemary) or objects (such as the letter) only. I should carefully look at the *drama*, which includes the characters’ backgrounds, their situations, their mentality and, of course, their actions. Matching these with the ethnographical needs of students, the dramatic adaptation should be able to work nicely on both levels of metaxis.

Using the method of juxtaposing the dialogues between the narrated events and positioned reflections, I have experienced a combination of narrative genres, including canonical and non-canonical narratives, grand narratives and small stories, and certainly autobiography presented in the form of fictional reality. Yes, parts of the episodes are fictional, and why not? (Clough, 2002) [5]. Indeed, Clough was quite right when he argued for the use of fictionalization in narrating real events, that the “understanding of others” takes place “in an act of imagination driven by profound symbols; the event symbolises in a way which data and analysis could never do” (2002: 17) [5].

Fairy tales, as cultural treasures passed down through generations, hold immense value as resources for both personal enjoyment and academic exploration. Beyond that, they also serve as invaluable educational materials for fostering children’s creativity, logical thinking, and moral judgment. The examples of Perrault’s Bluebeard and Jacobs’ Mr. Fox help to demonstrate the studies on the inevitable metamorphosis of stories for the purpose of cultural influence on gender positioning and life choices. The example of Winston’s Mr. Fox drama lesson plan, along with my reflective ethnographic narratives, serves as a compelling demonstration of how this concept of metamorphosis can be introduced to young individuals who possess a curiosity for stories and are yearning for more engaging learning experiences. Through improvisational participatory drama processes, this learning approach not only captivates the students but also challenges the critical teachers who are eager to receive drama training and are willing to question their own preconceived notions and those of others. It opens up new possibilities and expands the framed worlds of both students and teachers alike.

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Article

Content and Sentiment Analysis of Autobiographical Narratives of Experienced and Well-Evaluated Teachers in Spain

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Abstract: Analysing the content and feelings of teachers' autobiographical narratives provides relevant information about teaching processes, challenges in professional development, performance, and identity. In this work, we analysed the narratives of five well-evaluated Spanish teachers with more than 10 years of experience. We used Iramuteq, RStudio, and TextRazor to describe the main themes, analyse the emotions, and check whether evidence-based teaching practices were mentioned. The results showed that emotional aspects were central, with positive feelings dominating. In the content analysis, themes such as mental health, inclusion, immigration, war, empathy, critical pedagogy, and autonomous and emancipatory education stand out. The analyses are relevant for teacher educators, policy makers, researchers, and teachers in training or in active service.

Keywords: autobiographical narratives; analysis of feelings; content analysis; experienced teachers; evidence-based educational practices

1. Introduction

Autobiographical narratives are personal and reflective accounts that teachers write about their professional, personal, and pedagogical experiences. They can cover a range of topics, from significant professional moments to reflections on teaching practices, classroom challenges, successes, frustrations, and changes over time [1].

The shared experiences, lessons learned, and perspectives on teaching described in narratives often explore the emotions, values, beliefs, and influences that have shaped a teacher's approach to teaching and training. Such narratives not only help teachers to reflect on their practice and learn from their own experiences [2] but can also be a valuable source of learning for other educators, students, researchers, and policy makers [1].

In a study, Rego [3], referring to teachers' autobiographical narratives, states that this act of remembering is an attempt to stop time or to capture a portrait of something lived, while at the same time trying to preserve the mosaic of fragmented emotions and events that appear juxtaposed or faded in the house of the present. This is one of the most valuable premises of autobiographical narrative for teachers themselves, and its formative role for those who write is also recognised and emphasised by other researchers in the field [4].

As for the readers, Rego [3] points out that through such narratives, it is also possible to distinguish new perspectives, important parts of the human condition that relate to the inside and the outside, the universal and the local, the general and the specific, the visible and the invisible. This possibility of interpreting the meanings that the narrators attach to their own experiences can help to inspire and motivate readers as well as provide useful insights for dealing with similar situations, allowing them to be permanently and constantly redefined [5].

More recent publications also highlight autobiographical narratives as relevant sources of knowledge for the critical development of teachers [6]. According to these authors,

reflecting on writers' past and present experiences can lead to improved teaching practice by identifying successful approaches, acquired pedagogical skills, and more effective strategies for teaching in particular contexts.

Knowing that autobiographical narratives can provide a unique and detailed insight into the realities and complexities of the teaching profession and contribute to a deeper understanding of educational work, their study should be encouraged and stimulated so that the knowledge they contain can be socialised and applied.

In view of the above, the present work proposed to analyse the autobiographical narratives of experienced teachers—with 10 or more years in the career—who were well-evaluated by their students and immediate supervisors. The content analysis of the material aimed to identify (1) the main themes addressed in each narrative and whether there was a relationship between the themes addressed by each teacher, (2) the sentiments expressed in the autobiographies, (3) potential challenges faced by the teachers, and (4) teaching and/or assessment methods considered effective by the teachers and their basis in the literature, i.e., whether or not the use of these educational practices has been scientifically proven to be effective.

The effort invested in the study is justified considering that its results can contribute to the field of teacher training by addressing transferable strategies, challenges, and suggestions that support the daily practice of experienced teachers, as well as possible ways to improve professional performance.

2. Materials and Methods

Characterisation of the research

This is an applied research project with a mixed approach [7]. In terms of objectives, it is descriptive–exploratory research, as it aims to describe and explore aspects present in the narratives of teachers experienced in different contexts; in terms of procedures, it is bibliographical research [8].

Selection of teachers

To be included in the list of authors, teachers had to meet the following criteria: (1) be experienced teachers, i.e., have at least ten years of teaching experience; (2) be highly rated by their immediate supervisor; and (3) be highly rated by students in the most recent proposed evaluations at their institution.

The proposed criteria were based on the literature. With regard to experience, research shows that time in the teaching profession is positively associated with better student achievement and higher school attendance and that more experienced teachers bring benefits to colleagues, students, and the institution [9,10].

However, it is well-known that experience does not always make a good teacher [11]. In this context, one metric for evaluating teaching practice that has been considered in the literature and is commonly used in educational institutions is the student evaluation of the teacher. Students speak confidently about their experience of a course, including factors that clearly impact teaching effectiveness, such as the audibility of information, readability of notes, application of interdisciplinarity, contextualisation, and availability of the lecturer to help [12]. These authors have reservations about using student assessment to define a good teacher. This is because not all students have the maturity to evaluate certain pedagogical and formative attitudes, especially when these go against their wishes and preferences [13]. Moreover, there is subjectivity in the process, as the concept of a “good teacher” varies from student to student [14]. Therefore, in addition to student evaluation, an evaluation by immediate supervisors has been included to provide a more accurate measure of teachers' work [15]. By analysing the opinions of students and managers simultaneously, these authors argue that a broader view of the professional is obtained, that behaviours such as proactivity, willingness to work in a team, and good interpersonal relationships with colleagues are better valued, and that not relying on a single source of data for teacher evaluation reduces subjectivity.

Combining the indicators described above, five teachers were selected, two women and three men, all affiliated to educational centres in the Valencian Community (Spain). In order to differentiate them, the teachers were defined according to their educational level, i.e., whether they taught in early childhood education (ECE), primary education (PE), secondary education (SE), baccalaureate education (BE), or higher education (HE).

Structure of the autobiographical accounts

The autobiographical narratives were divided into two blocks. In the first block, the teachers were asked to write a letter as if the addressees were themselves at the beginning of their career. The letter had to be an honest and clear disclosure of their main experiences, decisions, challenges, and formative professional orientation.

The second block was entitled “What I have learned: successful experiences and mistakes I have made”. In this section, the teacher was invited to share, in 25,000–30,000 characters, pedagogical practices that have worked, those that have not, and any failures or mistakes they had made during their career, along with suggestions for improvement.

Content analysis

A flow chart summarising all the steps of the methodology is provided in Figure 1.

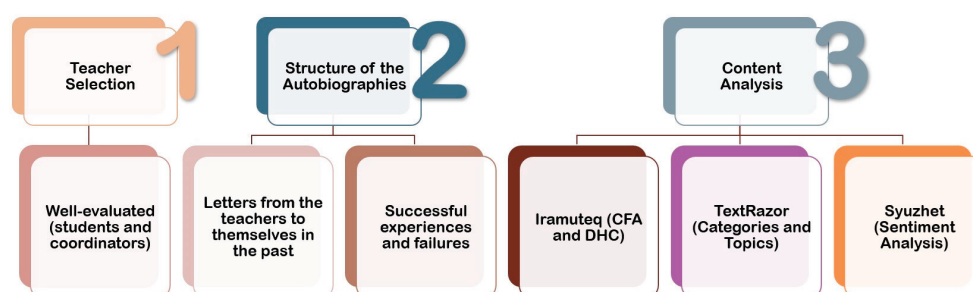


Figure 1. Summary of research methodology steps.

The content analysis was conducted using a qualitative research approach with an interpretive and non-experimental design [16] and sought to understand reality from the narratives, visions, and meanings given by the participants. The development of this research approach combines narrative research and the use of software as a data collection method for subsequent discourse analysis, category structuring, and interpretation.

Thus, the pre-analysis of the material was characterised by the reading and construction of a textual corpus in a format suitable for insertion into the software to be used in the following stages [17]. In the second stage, we explored and systematised the results by inserting the corpus into the software Iramuteq, version 0.7 alpha 2, and the application programming interface TextRazor, version 3.6.0. The Iramuteq software [18] was used to carry out basic lexicographic analyses and two multivariate analyses: a Top-Down Hierarchical Classification (CHD) and a Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA). The use of narratives in educational research demands a lot from the researcher. In this sense, Iramuteq can be a robust help to analyse these data [19,20].

In order to correlate the data and create more accurate thematic categories, we also used the TextRazor interface, a commercial tool that scored best in terms of accuracy in textual analysis compared to other similar resources [21]. This application uses a set of machine learning algorithms and, through statistical topic classification, extracts what it calls “entities”, the main topics present in the text [22].

For this paper, TextRazor was used to obtain two types of data: (1) general categories and (2) more specific topics. Topics refer to specific themes and relevant keywords extracted from the text. Categories are broader labels that classify the content of the text into broad areas. The relevance of both (categories and topics) to the processed document is measured by a score ranging from 0 to 1, with 1 representing the highest relevance. Knowing that general themes such as “education”, “knowledge”, “science”, and “technology” may appear frequently, the software developers’ guidelines recommend manually checking

the results by categories and themes to establish a cut-off point to avoid false positives or ignoring irrelevant terms. This process was carried out in the selection of the final categories in the last stage of the content analysis (inference and interpretation) and a cut-off point of 0.33 was established.

After obtaining the results of the analyses using the two software programmes described above, the data were interpreted, and the results were written up.

Sentiment analysis in R language using the Syuzhet Package

Finally, a sentiment analysis of the texts was also used to identify positive or negative connotations and the main emotions in the stories. The approach used was the one proposed by [23], which has more support in the literature and postulates eight basic human emotions: joy, anticipation, surprise, confidence, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. The Syuzhet Package [24] was used to identify the emotions shown.

The same author specifies that the Syuzhet Package is an R software tool, version 4.1.3, that uses algorithms to identify and quantify the emotions and sentiment patterns present in the analysed text. In the programme, the words are stored in a vector that is subjected to a sentiment analysis according to the chosen dictionary, in our case, that of the National Research Council of Canada (NRC—Spanish language), which determines in binary form whether they refer to positive or negative feelings, or whether they present a characteristic of another, more subtle emotion, among the eight mentioned above. After this categorisation of each word, it is possible to identify, through a bar chart, the level of each emotion in the whole data set.

As for the Syuzhet plots, they have a scale of positive, negative, or neutral emotions. These graphs have a central line representing emotions closer to neutrality so that positive scores represent emotions above it and indicate positive feelings, and values below it are negative emotions represented by negative scores.

There are three other lines in the graph. The first is called “Loess Smooth”, which in the context of sentiment analysis represents a smoothed trend line to visualise the overall trajectory of text sentiment over time. It can help to reveal patterns and trends in sentiment by reducing the impact of short-term fluctuations in the text. The second line, called the “Rolling Mean”, is a statistical technique used to analyse time series data and represents the average sentiment score over a specific period of time. This helps to identify trends in sentiment and reveals more specific changes in each of the ups and downs of the line.

The last line, called DCT, will receive the most attention in our analysis. The acronym stands for “Discrete Cosine Transform”, a mathematical technique commonly used in signal processing and data compression. In the context of the Syuzhet Package, DCT refers to a transformation applied to extract and highlight patterns that may not be readily apparent in the raw data, helping to identify recurring changes in sentiment.

3. Results

Iramuteq’s CHD analysis, obtained using the Chi-square test ($p < 0.01$), allowed us to group statistically significant words in each of the autobiographies (Figure 2). The processing of the corpus took 14 s and 541 text segments were classified, 414 of which were used; i.e., about 77% of the total corpus. It is worth noting that 75% or more is already considered a good usage [19].

After processing and clustering, the class dendrogram was obtained (Figure 2), which shows not only the word classes but also the relationship between them. In addition to the dendrogram, the figure also shows the CFA obtained by crossing the text segments of each class, which generates a graphical representation in a Cartesian plane. In the figure, the most frequent word classes are shown in the upper quadrants, and the least frequent in the lower quadrants. For words, the further they are from the centre and from other word classes, the greater the specificity; the closer they are to the centre of the graph, the greater the neutrality of the term in relation to other classes.

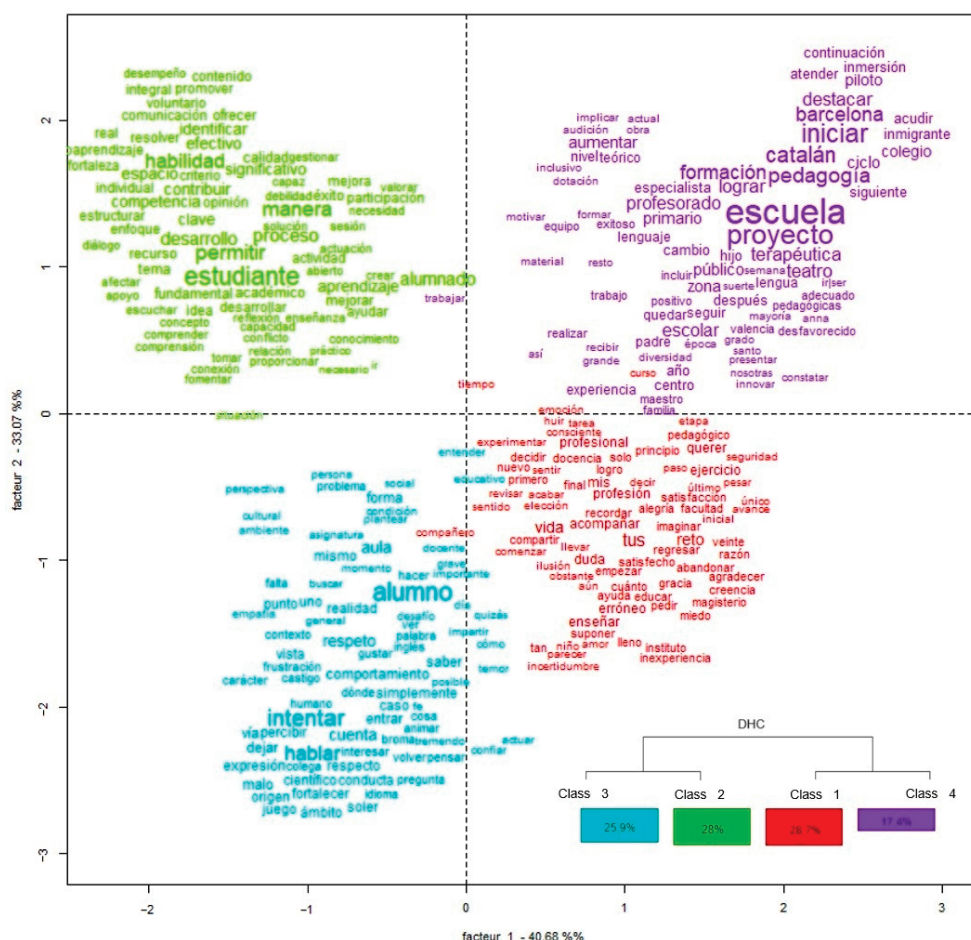


Figure 2. Dendrogram and factorial representation of the classes provided by the Iramuteq software.

Analysing each class in the graph (Figure 2 dendrogram, lower right quadrant), two subcorpora stand out as having more segments with correlated words: Class 1 with 28.7% of the segments and Class 2 with 28% of the segments.

Class 1 has more segments because it deals with aspects related to challenges, starting a teaching career, inexperience, and cherished illusions, as well as other emotions related to the beginning of teachers' professional lives, and because all the narratives begin with a letter in which they describe aspects of their personal lives that led to their professional choices—these data are reflected in the graph by the words “challenge”, “doubt”, “inexperience”, “life”, “new”, “faith”, and “fear”, which are some of the terms that characterise this group.

Class 2, on the other hand, focuses more on the learner and on the discussion of teaching and learning processes. "Development", "learning", "skill", "competence", "meaningful", "success", "understanding", and "content" are common terms that characterise this word group.

Class 3 (25.9%) is close to Class 1 but focuses on student behaviour. Terms such as “conduct”, “respect”, “social problem”, and “frustration” are common in this class.

Class 4 (17.4%) also shows some proximity to Class 1, as it deals with more teacher-related narratives, but its terms are more focused on the training of specialist teachers and the implementation of inclusive projects designed for students with disabilities, immigrant students, or students who are disadvantaged in some way. The terms “project”, “training”, “teacher”, “specialist”, “inclusive”, “therapeutic”, and “immigrant” are common in this class.

While such analyses allow us to have a general and relational view of the manuscripts, TextRazor makes it possible to have a more specific analysis of each autobiography. Ta-

ble 1 shows the most common categories found in each autobiography. Categories such as “Education”, “Teachers/Teachers”, “Students”, and “Science and Technology” were eliminated as they were the most common across the manuscripts, in order to highlight more specific categories.

Table 1. Main categories present in each autobiographical narrative obtained through TextRazor and score (Sc.) for each one.

ECH	PE	SE	BE	HE
Category/Sc.	Category/Sc.	Category/Sc.	Category/Sc.	Category/Sc.
social sciences > philosophy/0.58	social sciences > psychology/0.54	arts, culture, entertainment and media > language /0.68	arts, culture, entertainment and media > literature	arts, culture, entertainment and media > music
psychology/0.55	society > values > ethics/0.54	social sciences > psychology/0.66	culture > language	social sciences > psychology
arts, culture, entertainment and media > culture > language/0.54	philosophy/0.47	policy/0.66	social sciences > philosophy/0.56	sociology/0.55
society > values > ethics/0.40	education > curriculum/0.47	health > disease and condition > mental disorder > anxiety and stress /0.54	psychology/0.55	philosophy/0.54
scientific research /0.33	health > disease and condition > health and mental disorder > anxiety and stress /0.36	philosophy/0.54	linguistics/0.55	musical genre > classical music/0.52
human interest > ceremony > graduation/0.33	scientific research /0.34	environmental policy/0.45	conflict, war, and peace/0.34	health > disease and condition > mental health and disorder > anxiety and stress /0.47

The table shows general themes that are present in all the narratives, taking into account the structure of the autobiography—indicated at the top. The themes that characterise them more specifically can be seen at the bottom of the table.

In ECH, aspects related to language, psychology, values and ethics, and scientific research are addressed. The implementation of the Therapeutic Theatre Project, with the presence of a hearing and speech specialist, is an important part of the narrative, which is reflected in the terms found. Expanding their pedagogical knowledge to better serve their audiences is another of the elements identified in the scientific research category.

In PE, the teacher highlights the categories of values and ethics, curriculum, mental health, and stress. In the report, they state that teachers should be extremely responsible and respectful and take a very critical view of teaching practice, choosing carefully and discreetly what they use in the classroom. The teacher describes that this was the case. In addition, they also relate difficult situations they have faced during their career, which is why the categories of mental health and stress are also present in the report.

In the SE teacher’s narrative, the categories of language, psychology, politics, and mental health come to the fore. In addition to being an English teacher, the notion of language permeates their own actions as a teacher—in their account, they state that they

tried to learn some words in the languages of the families of migrant pupils and reveals that such behaviour broke down barriers and brought the teacher and students closer.

The category “politics” arises in the context of the teacher’s work in the United States, where his students were almost all immigrants and had no knowledge, for example, of the history of racial tension or racism in the country. Moreover, the teacher states that it was common in the institution to apply a very American formula, according to which the world revolved around one’s own culture. As for the categories of psychology and mental health, because they teach in a pedagogical hospital unit, the text contains more extracts related to these aspects.

The most specific categories for the BE teacher are literature, language, philosophy, psychology, and linguistics. Literature, language, and linguistics are related to their areas of training and activity. This teacher states that they have grown and developed by studying and deepening their knowledge of the birth and evolution of the Spanish language, as well as its diversity. They state that the experience has sharpened them, giving them a deep respect for the instrument of communication that unites them as a linguistic entity. In addition, the teacher speaks of various emotions, such as fear, anxiety about the future, important decisions that had to be taken, and philosophical reflections with important questions such as the following: are you teaching, educating, or sharing knowledge? What is the true essence of teaching? Is teaching a vocation or just a job? These are aspects that justify the other categories.

A category that also appears in their text is “conflict, war, and peace”. This teacher recounts an encounter with a student from Ukraine who was forced to leave her life because of the war. In describing the situation of a student torn from her roots, from her daily life, dealing with the uncertainty of not knowing whether she will return to her homeland, where she was an exemplary student, the teacher notes that all this makes them think that their role goes beyond teaching accentuation rules or discussing a literary text. They conclude that they try to make this cruel reality more bearable by helping their pupils to break through the barrier of linguistic isolation, making their psychological well-being the real priority.

Finally, in the text of the university professor, we find the categories music, psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Their first course was at the Faculty of Psychology, and in their report, they also mention literature related to sociology and philosophy. With regard to music, the professor mentions an optional course offered to all university students on the sociology of music and its bidirectional relationship with society. The basic tool used in all of this professor’s lessons was the musical audition, from which the content of the subject on the development and study of musical subcultures, often conceived through social groups, was developed.

With regard to the themes, i.e., the specific and particular aspects most frequently addressed by each author, the five most frequent themes in each narrative were selected, eliminating common items such as “education”, “science”, “teaching”, “research”, “knowledge”, and “information”, as well as the names of the levels and subjects they mentioned. After selection, the themes are presented in Table 2, together with some text segments reflecting each of the related themes.

In addition to the themes highlighted above, we also looked for references to pedagogical practices or evidence-based approaches to teaching when examining the texts. The main methods used by teachers in the reports are listed and referenced in Table 3. It is worth noting that these methods had positive outcomes for students in terms of motivation and achievement, as reported by the teachers.

Evidence-based educational practices (EBEPs) in the literature and highlighted by teachers in their autobiographies are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. The main themes present in each autobiographical narrative and the textual passages associated with them.

ECH/Score	Text Segments
Experience/1.00	By broadening our training, we undoubtedly grow professionally and acquire more “skills” to motivate our students, as well as increase our security and confidence in the exercise of our profession.
Courage/1.00	I admire your evident youthful courage and I am very glad that you never gave up your profession and were willing to grow in the school.
Inclusion (education)/1.00	All this served as a basis for the creation of the Therapeutic Theatre Project—also in our centre a few years later.
Behaviour modification/1.00	...it helped me to reflect on my initial mistakes and to use them to grow professionally. And at the same time to recognise my successes. All this helped me to feel more and more confident in my practice.
Psychological concepts/1.00	To acquire a good degree of pedagogical optimism, in order to be encouraged and to transmit this optimism to the other educational agents.
PE/Score	Text segments
Experience/1.00	Working side by side with a colleague is wonderful. You create a mutual understanding, experiences, and learning that make you fully enjoy the lessons.
Syllabus/1.00	... satisfying their thirst for knowledge and developing their ability to work in a team, design a learning plan, set goals and evaluate results.
Motivation/1.00	After more than twenty years of teaching, I wake up every day excited about my work and finish the day extremely tired, but happy for what I have experienced in the classroom. After all, life has placed me at its service, entrusting me with the precious task of enlightening, protecting, and fanning the flame that burns in every child.
Self-didacticism/1.0	Teachers work with very sensitive material and we must be extremely responsible and respectful. In this sense, I encourage you to train yourself in research, to design your own studies, and to see them through to completion.
Curiosity/1.00	As I said before, I have been lucky to have met great teachers and I have had a constant curiosity and inquisitiveness that has driven me to always look for stimulating and motivating readings.
SE/Score	Text segments
Experience/1.00	It is true that experience is the best teacher, but there are still a number of ideas that may be useful to you as you enter the world of teaching.
Empathy/1.00	Firstly, it is important to recognise that adolescents are going through a process of self-discovery and forging their identity (...) As a teacher, you need to create an environment of trust and respect where students feel safe.
Motivation/1.00	In the context of English as a subject, it is also common to encounter the challenge of motivation. Some students may see English as a difficult subject or irrelevant to their lives, which can affect their performance and engagement in class.
Curiosity/1.00	It is important to establish meaningful connections between the course content and the students’ interests in order stimulate their curiosity and enthusiasm for learning.
Ratio/1.00	Indeed, throughout his education he has always been aware that the complexity of social problems requires a multidisciplinary approach using different methods and perspectives to address them in a holistic way.

Table 2. *Cont.*

BE/Score	Text segments
Language/1.00	You rethink your objective and come to the conclusion that the only thing you can achieve is for them to acquire a basic level of the language that will break down the barrier of linguistic isolation and make their psychological well-being the real priority.
Experience/1.00	... and it is then that, with time, you understand that you need to know the reality you are facing and what the starting point is; only then does the word “teaching” make sense.
Reading/Literature 1.00	At that moment you begin to understand that the real task of a teacher is to teach in the reality of the students, and that the proposals of language and literature teaching must be linked to their real concerns, to the social evolution of the universal themes of literature: love, death, existence, technology, social networks...
Spanish language/0.97	Studying and delving into the birth and evolution of the Spanish language, as well as its diversity, has led to the growth and development of an experience that has strengthened my appreciation and respect for our tool of communication, which unites us as a linguistic entity.
Cognitive science /0.95	... and the exit from the cave of uncertainty, as Plato said, reveals the true world of knowledge, the dialectical ascent becomes true when it comes into contact with the reality that surrounds us.
HE/Score	Text segments
Music/1.00	... developed the course content around the evolution of music and the study of musical subcultures, conceived as social groups that share a preference for a particular type of music.
Equipment/1.00	By working as a team, students feel part of a group and develop a sense of belonging to the class, as group work promotes an atmosphere of support, friendship and collaboration that strengthens social bonds.
Communication, Psychology/1.00	... promoting effective communication in the classroom, facilitating the exchange of ideas, constructive discussion and debate, collaborative problem solving, and creating an atmosphere of trust in the classroom.
Primate behaviour/1.00	Complexity is inherent in society and its object of study, the human being, becomes subject–object, both the observer and the observed.
Behavioural sciences/1.00	... and create their own constructs through a subjective view of “multiple frames” that help us to understand how individuals perceive and experience their social reality.

Table 3. Evidence-based educational practices.

EBEP	Described Purpose	References
ECH—Theatre	Theatre can be an innovative strategy to achieve inclusion goals, as it provides a more welcoming and humane visual and auditory learning environment, which improves student performance.	[25,26]
PE—Personal and Social Responsibility Programme	Students learn not only mathematics or science, but also how to relate to their peers in an integrated way, how to develop self-learning strategies, how to be more autonomous, how to improve their cooperative skills, how to develop their leadership skills, or how to acquire social commitment.	[27]

Table 3. Cont.

EBEP	Described Purpose	References
SE-Contextualisation /Critical pedagogy	Working on the basis of learners' interests, taking into account their tastes, age and context, increases motivation and facilitates foreign language learning. Critical teaching can start from everyday conflictual issues and stimulate dialogue, reflection, and the critical, linguistic, and communicative development of learners.	[28,29]
BE-Contextualisation	Teaching in the reality of the students; that is, the proposals of language and literature teaching must be linked to their real concerns, to the social development of the universal themes of literature; love, death, existence, technology, and social networks, for example.	[30]
HE—Music	Music can be used effectively in sociology classes to stimulate student interest, promote active learning, and illustrate sociological concepts, ideas, and theories.	[31,32]

Sentiment Analysis

In the case of the ECE teacher's autobiography (Figure 3), we can see that the narrative contains almost equal amounts of negative and positive elements. The beginning of the narrative is characterised by negative feelings. Using the DCT curve (solid line in the graph on the left), we can see that while the central part of the narrative, described in the letter, has more positive aspects, the beginning and the sections near the end of the autobiography are marked by probably sadder or more nostalgic feelings, although the end itself shows a sudden increase, indicating that it ends on a positive note.

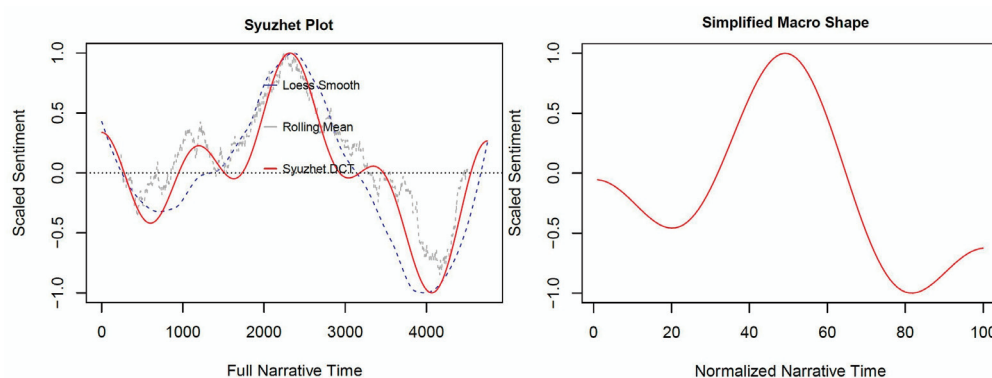


Figure 3. Syuzhet plots for the ECE teacher sentiment scale.

At the end of the text, the teacher actually presents hope and gratitude for the journey and the achievements. The normalised image in Figure 3 (right) also allows us to see that the beginning and end of the narrative contain more elements of negativity, but the end is more negative than the beginning.

In the case of the PE teacher's autobiography (Figure 4), we can observe that, despite the greater presence of oscillations, the beginning of the narrative is characterised by negative feelings, which improve and remain positive until they become negative again towards the end. Despite this, the narrative is more positive than the previous one, as can be seen from the moving average, represented by the lighter grey line in the graph, which remains over the line virtually throughout the narrative.

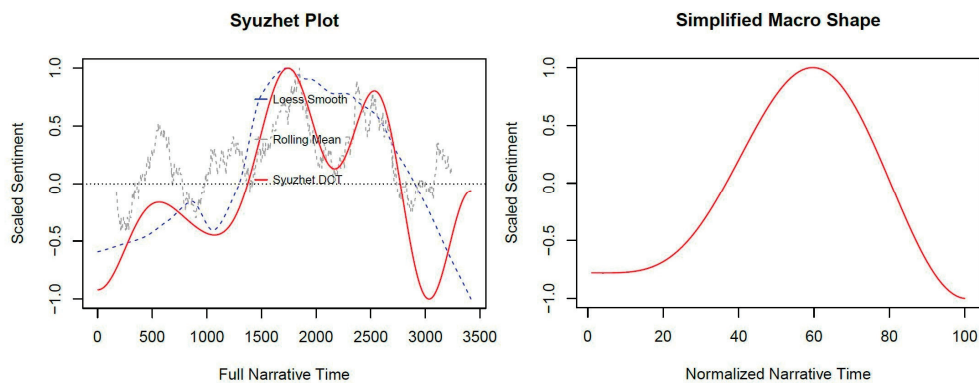


Figure 4. Syuzhet plots for the PE teacher sentiment scale.

The SE teacher's autobiographical narrative (Figure 5) shows marked fluctuations, as can be seen in the standard narrative graph. The author starts with positive feelings and then moves to negative feelings and back to positive feelings. However, from the middle of the text to the end, the teacher presents a greater number of negative feelings.

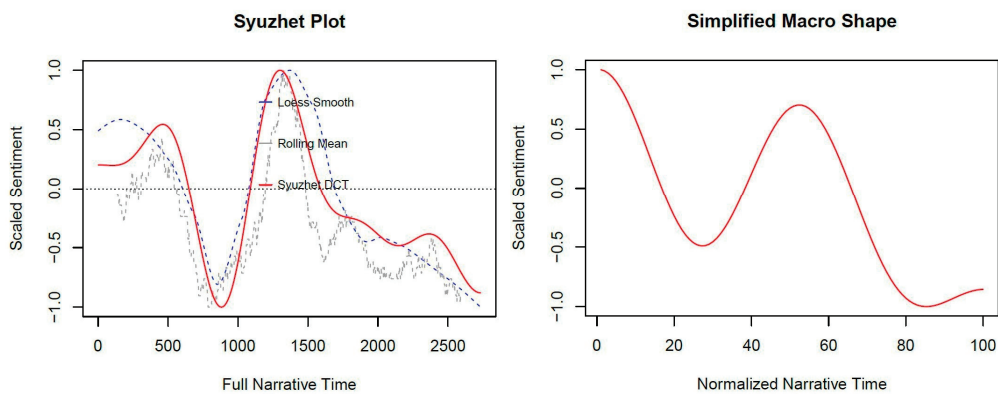


Figure 5. Syuzhet plots for the SE teacher sentiment scale.

The scale of feelings expressed by the BE teacher (Figure 6) shows a beginning marked by clearly positive feelings. However, despite having the most positive beginning of all the narratives, the teacher has the highest load of negative feelings of all the autobiographies. Looking at the dotted line (loess smooth) as well as the normalised narrative graph, we can see that even with the relatively positive peaks in the central part of the narrative, much of the text remains with markedly negative feelings. Thus, the teaching career seems to have been marked by a beginning with very high points, followed by equally intense low points.

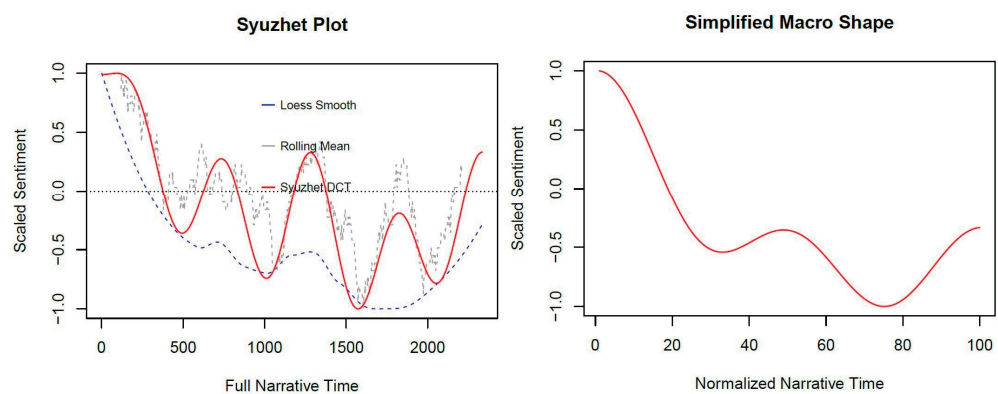


Figure 6. Syuzhet plots for the BE teacher sentiment scale.

Finally, the analysis of feelings in the HE teacher's autobiography shows a greater predominance of positive feelings (Figure 7). Only at the beginning is there a negative valley, but throughout the narrative, neutral and positive feelings are more present than in any of the other narratives, as confirmed also in the simplified analysis of the standardised narrative.

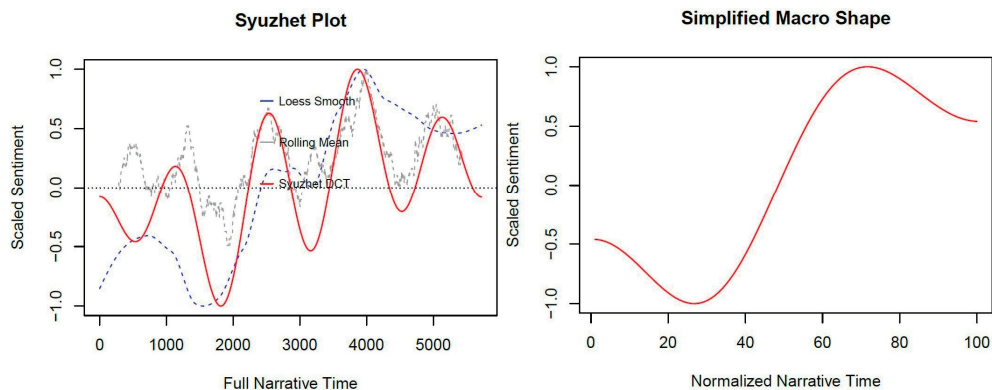


Figure 7. Syuzhet plots for the HE teacher sentiment scale.

In terms of the types of emotions found in the narratives, Figure 8 shows each of the eight emotions identified by the package [23,24]. The feelings of confidence (average = 0.35), expectation or anticipation (average = 0.19), and joy (average = 0.15) are the most present in all texts. The most uncommon feelings in all of them were disgust (average = 0.03), anger (average = 0.06), and surprise (average = 0.06).

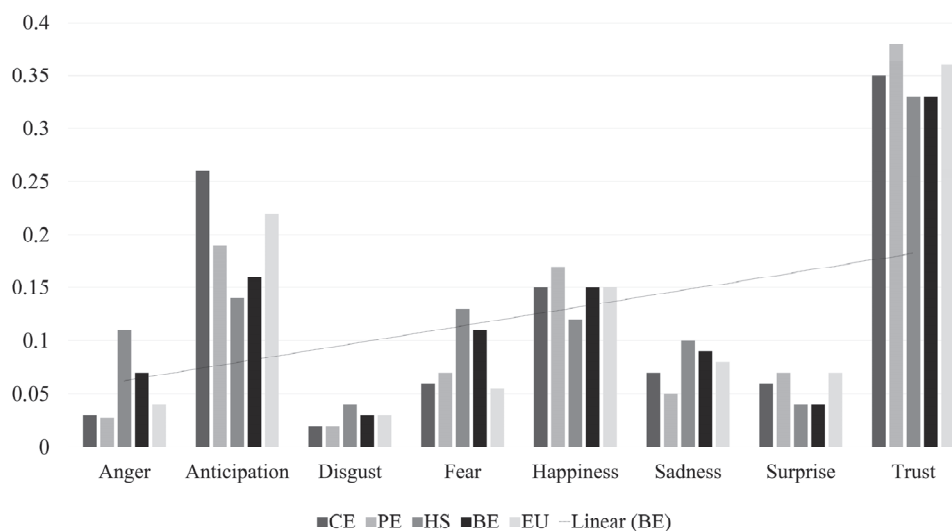


Figure 8. Levels of basic human emotions found in teachers' autobiographical narratives.

In the HE teacher's narrative, there was more anger, fear, and sadness and less joy than in the other teachers' narratives. The autobiography with the lowest proportion of negative feelings (anger, disgust, and sadness) was that of the PE teacher. This is also the story with the highest percentage of the most positive emotions (joy, surprise, and confidence).

4. Discussion

The dendrogram and the factorial representation of the classes obtained by the Iramuteq software (Figure 2) showed that the class of words most frequently found in the text segments was related to emotional aspects, challenges, doubts, fears, and beliefs, as is common in reports of this type [1,33]. The second class of most frequent terms highlights the teachers' concern to fulfil their role with quality and effectiveness, so teaching and

learning processes and terms related to success and the understanding of content are also very frequent. Recent research has indicated a relationship between these classes, showing that negative emotions and job stress have a significant correlation with poor teacher performance [34], while there is a positive and significant relationship between teacher satisfaction and better performance [35]. Therefore, in addition to considering teaching strategies, it is important to pay attention to teachers' emotions, as these can directly affect their performance in the classroom. When exploring the categories and themes present in each text (Tables 1 and 2), topical and relevant themes were identified. In particular, the ECE teacher referred to the implementation of the Therapeutic Theatre Project as an inclusion proposal applied in their educational institution. The terms "inclusion", "courage", and "behaviour modification" were common and show a strong connection with the inclusive approach applied by the teacher. They report on the challenges and benefits in terms of developing the skills and abilities of students with special educational needs and show sensitivity and a refined sense of professional ethics, particularly in helping disadvantaged students. This is the only chapter where inclusive education is one of the main themes, and it is extremely important that teachers demonstrate an active stance in this regard [36].

After all, teachers are key elements in building inclusive schools [37], which in turn are the most effective means of reducing prejudice, challenging discriminatory attitudes, and ultimately creating a more responsive society [38]. More than adapted methods and resources, learners with disabilities need a team that is trained and willing to support them [39,40].

The most prominent categories in the PE narrative are values and ethics, mental health and stress, and motivation and self-learning. His ethical behaviour and care in choosing pedagogical practices are recurrent in the narrative description. The author even encourages teachers to be researchers too, to develop and conduct their own studies based on evidence.

These aspects have been highlighted in research over the last few decades, which has shown that teacher-researchers can help to increase student achievement in their own classrooms and document effective interventions [41] and that they should be invited to engage in research, because this can develop their teaching technique and invigorate their work [42]. However, it is important not to romanticise or generalise self-learning skills, nor to ignore the fact that many teachers value research but need more time and professional development opportunities to engage productively in research and influence classroom practice [43].

They also talk about the difficult situations they have had to face in the course of their career with a great emotional burden, which, at times, has affected their motivation, energy, and even their health—this is why the categories of mental health and stress are also present in the report. As mentioned above, these feelings need to be taken into account, and more attention needs to be paid to teachers' well-being, as their satisfaction directly affects their performance in the classroom [35].

In the HE teacher's narrative, the categories of language, psychology, politics, and mental health are prominent, as are the themes of empathy, motivation and curiosity. Welcoming migrant students and critical language teaching characterise this teacher's narrative. By suggesting a proposal for welcoming migrant adolescents, the teacher also reveals their concern to promote a truly inclusive education. As [36] (p. 318) points out, "inclusive education necessarily implies pedagogical actions aimed at reflecting on the need for an education that transcends geographical, social and linguistic boundaries".

Furthermore, in describing his work with immigrant students in the United States, they agree with current pedagogical references [44–46] in recognising the relationship between decolonisation and critical thinking in the construction of a new culture, aiming to build knowledge that values students' knowledge without perpetuating the superficiality that may be characteristic of their lack of experience or maturity. By strengthening the interpretation and critique of adverse circumstances in their contexts, teachers can generate reflections in students that allow them to develop new attitudes, greater maturity in

political choices and perhaps possible solutions to, for example, local problems affecting their community.

Another point worth noting in their report is the fact that they work in an educational unit within a hospital; this aspect brings into focus categories and issues related to health, psychology, empathy, and the motivation of the students, who are going through situations that deplete their physical and mental energy. The teacher's careful attention to motivating these students permeates the narrative.

Paying attention to others and seeing the target of one's work as an object of zeal, care, and even affection are practices that have been scientifically linked to human well-being, the effects of which are not moderated by gender, age, or other characteristics [47,48]. In addition, the exercise of empathy, social connection, a sense of purpose and meaning, and a sense of contributing to the education of others also increase teachers' self-esteem and self-worth, aspects that can contribute to a sense of professional fulfilment and satisfaction [48].

As far as the BE teacher is concerned, the categories and themes are mainly related to Spanish language and psychology. However, one category that also appears in the text is related to "conflict, war, and peace". The teacher talks about a student from Ukraine who had to leave her life because of the war. The teacher's stance in this case is in line with the empathic, critical, and inclusive stance identified in the literature and used by the HE teacher [36,44,47,48].

Music and teamwork deserve attention in the HE teachers' categories and themes. The use of music in sociology teaching can facilitate the identification of concepts in the field and stimulate student interest by providing relevant examples. Media products can also enhance sociological understanding [49].

In terms of functional and evidence-based teaching practices (Table 3), in addition to the music used by the HE teacher, drama, contextualisation, and critical pedagogy feature prominently in the narratives. These methods have an extensive and established literature foundation, with applications for audiences of different ages, and show positive results in student performance and motivation [26,28,50]. Only one of the proposals mentioned has a greater local specificity (it mentions a programme implemented in Spain); however, in its description, we can also identify aspects related to critical pedagogy, active methodologies, autonomous learning, and contextualised teaching [27].

By identifying such pedagogical methods and their use in different contexts, it is possible to disseminate the practice so that other teachers become aware of it and recognise its applicability and use it in their contexts [51].

Cordingley [52] stresses that trying new teaching strategies based on evidence from other teachers or settings will always run the risk of not working in that particular context. However, seeking out and analysing different methods and resources used by other teachers has the potential to support teaching precisely because it invites teachers to become learners again [51]. The literature also suggests that the gap between research and practice in education is due to the fact that many relevant approaches are not shared and made available to educators in an easily accessible way [53]. Therefore, the presentation of functional practices, used in different contexts and coming from teachers with long experience and good evaluations, can contribute to this.

Finally, regarding the sentiment analysis, associated with the factorial representation of the classes carried out using Iramuteq, we can identify an intense emotional involvement of the teachers in their reports (class 1) as well as a greater presence of positive emotions (Figure 8). These aspects are supported by the literature on the evaluation of experienced teachers. As pointed out by [54], despite the often-intense work routine, these teachers generally report a sense of fulfilment in their profession and look for ways to overcome the adversities of teaching.

In analysing the emotional dimension of teaching [55], they also emphasise that the emotional nature of teaching is quite evident. These mentions are characterised by different types and levels of positive and negative emotions. By highlighting positive emotions, the authors reinforce feelings of enthusiasm and satisfaction, which seem to be mainly

linked to the micro-contexts of the classroom and show that teachers continue to place their students at the centre of their concern and care.

It is worth noting that there were also manifestations of negative feelings in the autobiographies, as can be seen in some of the examples in Table 2. This aspect is also supported by the literature, which indicates that over-regulation, lack of recognition and infrastructure, or unsatisfactory remuneration lead to feelings of discouragement and frustration among teachers [55].

Still, in relation to negative feelings, when analysing Figures 3–7, we can observe that the BE teacher's narrative is the only one with an inverted normal curve, i.e., it has more negative and neutral representations than positive ones. In addition to the usual insecurities and inexperience at the beginning of the teaching journey, the narrative also describes situations related to the war in Ukraine, as mentioned above, which naturally led to reflections charged with more negative feelings [56].

The HE teacher follows a similar pattern. Although in the overall analysis of the narrative, they had a less negative result than the BE teacher, there was still a greater than average manifestation of negative feelings (Figure 8). This result is attributed to their work in the hospital unit, as well as their contact with migrant and discriminated students, thus reinforcing findings in the literature that it is not the direct relationship between teacher and student that is primarily responsible for feelings of dissatisfaction in the profession [55,56].

The narrative with the least negative feelings and the most positive feelings was that of the PE teacher, as can be seen in both Figures 4 and 8. Their autobiography is full of optimism and hope and provides important lessons at the end: (1) conflict is inherent in relationships between people, learn to see it as an opportunity for growth; (2) examine your own beliefs and values, as those that limit you will hinder your relationships with others and especially with your students; (3) learn to distinguish what is yours from what is not; (4) put your heart and head into everything you do and review your principles whenever you see your goals wavering; and finally, (5) never forget that true teachers are those who never cease to be students.

5. Conclusions

The mixed methodology approach allowed us to tackle a complex and multifaceted phenomenon based on the study of autobiographical narratives. The analysis focused both on the categories and central themes of the five teachers' discourses and on the feelings that emerged from their words as they recounted life experiences, challenges, and how they coped with them.

In relation to the achievement of the proposed objectives, we have described the main themes addressed in each narrative and the relationship between the themes addressed by each teacher and analysed the emotions expressed in the autobiographies. The results show that positive emotions are more present than negative emotions throughout the teachers' journey and that positive emotions are particularly associated with direct and relational involvement with students, while negative emotions are more closely associated with external conflicts, structural issues, and difficulties when proposing implementation within the institution's team. This information is important for policy makers and for the development of care and attention measures to improve quality of life in the teaching profession.

With regard to the third objective—identifying potential challenges for teachers—the themes and categories associated with immigration, war, politics, and inclusion show that social issues have a direct impact on the work of teachers. We cannot ignore aspects such as the location of the educational centre and the impact it can have on the community (and vice versa). These aspects should inspire and guide policy design that considers the context of students and their families but is not limited to it.

The final aim was to identify the evidence-based teaching practices mentioned by teachers. Among the practices mentioned, drama, contextualisation, and music are already well-known and widely used methodological approaches. Apart from them, critical pedagogy and the personal and social responsibility programme caught our attention. In fact,

students learning should not be limited to historical and scientific content. They should also learn how to relate to their peers in a holistic way, how to become more autonomous, how to improve their cooperative and leadership skills, and how to develop a sense of social responsibility.

Finally, the analysis of the autobiographies allows us to conclude that the formation of a critical, thinking, reflective citizen, capable of respectful dialogue on scientific, contemporary, and social issues, is the kind of holistic vision that we need to take into account when thinking about curriculum and teaching practices. Such information, as revealed in the results, may be relevant in choosing strategies or designing future interventions, both for practising teachers and for future education professionals.

As for the limitations of this study, we highlight the limited number of participating teachers. However, we consider the participants to be representative of the profession, given that they have extensive experience, are well regarded both by management and by their students, and represent different educational stages and contexts.

As far as future research is concerned, it would be interesting not only to overcome the above-mentioned limitation by compiling a greater number of narratives, but also to carry out comparative analyses involving other countries or regions. It would be useful to identify peculiarities, points of convergence, and alternatives and to link the results obtained with specific policies or programmes, educational levels or, in the case of international comparisons, the particularities of each country's reality.

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Review

ZOOMED IN, ZONED OUT: Academic Self-Reports on the Challenges and Benefits of Online Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract: Online teaching in higher education has become increasingly prevalent, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. While teaching online offers many benefits, it also presents several challenges. Sharing one's lived experiences as an educator is essential to improving one's teaching skills and enhancing the learning outcomes for the students. Here, we present our personal and lived experiences as higher education teachers in the VU Block Model® First Year College at Victoria University. In our allied health science subjects, we have identified the key challenges in online teaching, such as technology and infrastructure, student engagement and interaction, adapting learning styles, assessment integrity, digital literacy, social-isolation-related mental health, and workload. The benefits included flexibility, innovative teaching tools, personalised learning and accessibility, and the continuity of teaching and learning despite the pandemic disruption. Overcoming these challenges requires careful planning, effective pedagogy, and ongoing support for both teachers and students. The benefits of online teaching can be maximised when its limitations are acknowledged and addressed appropriately via sharing teacher's personal narratives as an effective mode of communication.

Keywords: teaching narrative; online learning; higher education

1. Introduction

Teaching is an ongoing process of growth and development for fostering continuous improvement in both educators and learners. Embracing the insights gained from personal experiences and maintaining a willingness to evolve and enhance one's approach are crucial elements for becoming an effective and impactful teaching academic. As such, documentation of teaching narratives plays a crucial role in the professional development of teaching staff within higher education [1]. These narratives are personal stories or accounts of teaching experiences that educators use to reflect on their practice, learn from their successes and challenges, and ultimately improve their teaching skills.

The use of storytelling in higher education is more prominent in courses pertaining to arts, drama, or English-literature-based subjects [2–6]; however, teaching narratives as an effective learning tool for academics' development are often undervalued in clinical/allied health science subjects, which are traditionally data-driven. The developing domain of narrative pedagogy in nursing, which is an interpretive approach to teaching and learning, evolved from the lived experiences of teachers, clinicians, and students. Indeed, narrative pedagogy has gained substantial use in educational reform [5–7], as these narratives provide an alternative tool to critically think about and reflect on the teaching of nursing knowledge and practice [7–9].

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of personal narrative writing to understand the 'emotional geography' in teaching [10] and the critical role of understanding the teacher's personal experiences in fostering their professional development [11]. The considerable influence of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the emotional and mental

well-being of educators has been extensively documented, encompassing their adjustment to online teaching [12,13], as well as the subsequent effects upon their return to face-to-face instruction [14].

In response to the mandatory social isolation due to COVID-19, teachers and students had to respond rapidly and significantly to changing their teaching and learning approach, regardless of their familiarity with online education or their technological prowess [15,16]. Indeed, the key challenges and benefits of online teaching are evident in a higher education setting [17–19]; however, there is limited evidence in the literature particularly regarding teaching narratives from educators' perspectives within the context of a time-constrained block teaching mode, as we have encountered at Victoria University's First Year College.

Herein, we present our personal and lived experiences of the challenges and benefits of teaching online, according to the time-intensive VU Block Model[®] at Victoria University, Australia. In 2018, Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, introduced the VU Block Model, a distinctive approach where students focus on studying a single unit at a time within four-week blocks [20]. This educational structure involves small group classes typically limited to 35 students, omitting traditional lectures, and relying on a unit space within a Learning Management System (LMS) for support. The VU Block Model learning framework at VU emphasizes small class sizes (maximum 30 students) and frequent contact, with classes scheduled three times per week, each lasting for a duration of three hours.

2. Methodology

Self-reporting was an appropriate method because it supports the integration of professional expertise and self-reflection to guide changes and improve the quality of teaching practice [21]. The self-reporting method has a great advantage in communicating the respondents' own views directly. It gives unique access to the respondents' perceptions of themselves and their world, access that cannot be obtained by any other means. Furthermore, self-reporting methods are utilised in exceptional situations to obtain information when observational data are not readily available, such as understanding of the behaviour during unpredictable, disastrous circumstances [21]. Indeed, the unprecedented adverse impact of the global pandemic had substantial consequences on the higher education teaching and learning environment, and the need to understand the personal and professional mindsets of teaching academics is imperative to meet the demands of this changing educational landscape. The present study is a review of qualitative self-reports of teachers' experiences with learning through participating in online teaching during the COVID pandemic. Three academic teaching staff have self-reported with written transcripts and these were individually coded as a narrative block by the first author. Subsequently, common themes were derived from the three self-reported narratives.

Our unique experiences pertain to the multi-campus tertiary institution, Victoria University (VU), a pioneer education facility in the western suburbs of Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria, Australia. At a global scale, Victoria endured one of the world's longest lockdown restrictions, encompassing over 262 days during the 2020–2021 COVID pandemic period [22]. As a direct consequence of these restrictions and social isolation, it has been reported that a significant increase in clinical depression (to 44.1%) and anxiety (to 32.3%) among the adult population occurred during the lockdown implemented in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria, Australia [23]. Studies have also shown that teachers were dealing with unprecedented new measures, insecurity, and a lack of clear guidelines, which significantly increased their levels of physical and emotional stress, anxiety, and depression, and these impacts resounded at all levels of teaching, from primary school education to the tertiary higher education sector [24–26].

First year students from a range of allied health courses undertake the anatomy and physiology (A&P) units at Victoria University (VU) across multiple campuses in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, in Australia. Our teaching team narratives reflect on the units A&P 1 (HBM1001) and A&P 2 (HBM1202), which are core units during the first year of study in six bachelor courses (Nursing, Midwifery/Nursing combined degree,

Paramedicine, Health Science, Dermal Science, and Speech Pathology) offered at the western region of St Albans Campus in Victoria.

Each unit has approximately 900 students enrolled per semester. Compared with all the other universities in Victoria, Australia, the unique demographic of VU represents the highest proportion of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds and the second highest proportion of students coming from a low socioeconomic status or being the first in their family to attend university [27–29]. Indeed, the discipline and content-heavy nature of anatomy and physiology subjects were demanding for both the students (to engage with the content in a time-intensive block model) and the teachers (to cater to a culturally and linguistically diverse student cohort), even prior to the onset of the global pandemic.

With the sudden impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, these content-focused modules were rapidly converted to an online-only learning environment, without compromising the subject topics or assessment integrity. The challenges and benefits of online teaching from our experience may educate other academics in aid of their preparedness to deliver their courses online.

3. Analysis

Narrative analysis, a form of qualitative data analysis, centres on interpreting the fundamental narratives derived from the personal stories of a study group [4]. Using first-person narratives, researchers gathered data to comprehend individuals' experiences. The aim of narrative analysis is to systematise the collective experience within a group of research participants' stories, transforming individual narratives into coded and organized data. Ultimately, this process enables researchers to grasp the influence of specific events, emotions, or decisions on the individuals involved, leading to the identification of core narratives that encapsulate the human experience [30].

4. Teaching Narratives

4.1. Dr. Gayathri Rajaraman's Narrative

The COVID-19 pandemic overhauled tertiary education with the abrupt onset of lockdowns. Sudden social isolation thrust teachers into pushing boundaries in redesigning their courses, without compromising the quality and depth of the content. As we rapidly prepared to deliver units fully online with continued learning benefits for students, little did we realise the impact of the upcoming challenges that would be imposed on teachers.

As a teaching and research academic in the First Year College at Victoria University (VU), I document here a narrative of my personal and professionally lived experience of the challenges and benefits of teaching biology, anatomy, and physiology in the time-intensive block mode, online. The approach is a self-study and critical reflection on personal narrative accounts.

With just days of notice, our anatomy and physiology units catering to six health-related courses (nursing, midwifery, paramedicine, health sciences, dermal science, and speech pathology), with large cohorts of 900 students on average per semester, were rapidly transformed into an online-only remote teaching mode. This especially posed an incredible challenge in terms of the practical laboratory classes required in this unit of study (traditionally 4 h per week in science labs, delivered face to face on campus), which now had to be delivered fully online without compromising student engagement and the integrity of the skills assessment required. In collaboration with our teaching team, we developed a fully online laboratory program and integrated into our university's Learning Management System (LMS), VU Collaborate. The incredible challenges in executing this task were an immense learning experience for the teachers given the time constraints.

I undertook the task of filming all the required laboratory experiments as performed by the teaching demonstrators and edited the videos to include experimental data and results for the students' learning benefit. As students engaged with the interactive videos, they were able to successfully complete the online assessment post-laboratory worksheets upon each laboratory class being presented live online via Zoom by the lab teaching staff

using the pre-filmed videos. As such, within one week, all six laboratory classes were filmed, prepared via editing, and integrated into the VU Collaborate LMS prior to the teaching block commencing.

Cleary et al. (2003) from our university exactly reported on this phenomenon of 'Emergency Remote Teaching' (ERT) using a case study to explore the transition to online teaching in the intensive block model curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic [31]. The online survey investigated academics' experiences of factors that benefited or challenged their transition to remote teaching [31]. Indeed, in line with this study, my personal teaching experiences were greatly influenced by the changed environment.

From an online teaching perspective, the excitement of logging on to Zoom and seeing students' faces appear in the remote classroom for the first time quickly wears off, as cameras turned off veil a black screen between student and teacher. Video and audio need not be on for the student as this is not a prerequisite for attending Zoom classes. Hence, the advantage of increased student attendance online is overshadowed by the remote classroom, where the students are in their comfort zone, an ideal home environment with distractions aplenty. The teacher faces an increased challenge in actively involving students in unresponsive group discussions, as even though they may be present in the virtual setting, they appear to be mentally disengaged and unresponsive to the learning process. Online learning has been most beneficial to students who embody a trifecta of traits: high discipline, motivation, and tech-savviness. Further investigation of evidence-based research into this topic is highly warranted.

4.2. Dr. Rudi Klein's Narrative

The teaching of anatomy and physiology face to face in my opinion provides an unparalleled means of studying this content-specific practical subject; this, however, was not an option during the COVID-19 lockdown, combined with strict social distancing restrictions. The delivery of all subjects was rapidly transitioned to an online-only teaching mode. To overcome this hurdle, I employed technology in the form of Computer-Aided Learning (CAL) software programs, which are increasingly being used by other academics to supplement and support the teaching of anatomy [32].

Apart from teaching the anatomy and physiology units (HBM1001 and HBM1202), I am also the unit convener and teacher of the subjects 'Functional Anatomy of the Trunk' and 'Functional Anatomy of the Limbs', which focus on human topographical anatomy. The lab team and I did anticipate that there may be negative consequences for student learning upon transitioning these units to remote learning, particularly the adverse impact on student perception and the learning experience, as cadaver-based laboratory work cannot be equally and unequivocally replicated online. Indeed, our study on this showed that students strongly agreed that the online 2D learning experience had significant limitations when compared to the live use of cadavers in laboratories [33]. Despite this significant challenge, we had to deliver an engaging and successful unit online, with the aid of technological advances.

My e-learning approach consisted of developing specific tailor-made CAL resources for students to complete online, after intentionally sourcing suitable computer-based online programs previously shown to be helpful to students in developing their understanding of the anatomy discipline [32–34].

We found that even though we had suddenly moved to online zoom classes, students still maintained that they had a positive learning experience, and one that had extended their learning [26]. The feedback from staff about their online teaching experience was mainly positive and supported this contention, and the general consensus was that the promotion and enhancement of student learning can be achieved by increasing engagement, with a key factor being a clear relationship between online activities, the unit content, and assessment tasks.

My reflections on my teaching practice more specifically during this time within the block model, a setting that uses small Zoom classes and small groups of students (max. 35),

are unique. While it affords a more prominent teacher presentation style, and consequently less learning disruption, as all microphones other than mine are turned off unless told otherwise, it is a much less engaging medium to work in. Online discussions can be difficult at the best of times, or somewhat stilted, and lack the dynamic of face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, the online class lacks the personal cues normally present in real life, such as eye contact, the use of voice, punctuation, or the power of silence or pauses to provide thinking time and allow anticipation of what might come next. Also absent in the online classroom is the use of physical positioning to command further emphasis on a point or to lead and enhance a discussion.

I found that the lack of personal contact was not as conducive to promoting the building of relationships and trust between the students and myself, and thereby it is not as good in terms of creating the community of inquiry needed in the Zoom classroom. It is difficult, if not impossible, to scan the room to connect and provide more individualised attention to catch students who struggle or are falling behind.

4.3. Associate Professor Puspha Sinnayah's Narrative

There was a need for an immediate shift from face-to-face to online learning with the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which restrictions prevented staff and students from attending campus and exposed them to long periods of isolation, especially in Victoria, Melbourne. This environment created a void, where staff were literally isolated from their peers, losing the opportunity to share innovative teaching and learning strategies to cope with the challenges of online delivery. I am the team lead for a large teaching team of 20–25 academics, including contract and new sessional staff, many of whom were new to remote teaching and also presented with personal challenges such as having school children at home, also engaged in remote learning, and staff who lacked the space and technology to teach effectively.

In many instances, staff were scrambling to wrap their heads around the use of technology and teaching at the same time. As the lead academic, I then offered online inductions to learn about the use of Zoom technology and how we could appropriately engage our students in active learning approaches, whilst still adhering to the assessment and block model principles. This offered staff the professional learning development required to quickly adapt to their learning environment. Despite the staff's best efforts in content delivery, devising suitable strategies for coping presented a challenge for both the new staff and me, in response to their less-than-favorable institutional evaluations of teaching practice. The work of Tangalakakis et al. (2022) documented an increase in negative comments on teaching style by male students towards female staff during remote teaching [35].

Providing staff with an opportunity to address inadequate teaching evaluations motivated me to initiate a strategy. In the initial stage, I organized digitally enabled Collaborative Peer Observation Learning Circles (CPO/LCs) within the First Year College (FYC). The purpose of the CPO/LCs was to promote a community of practice, providing practical support and social connection for academics, many of whom found themselves teaching for the first time in a fully online environment. This approach is underpinned by seminal research that offers influential ideas about how to encourage collegial approaches to professional learning (PL) [36]. The use of video conferencing to engage academics in CPO/LCs allowed for the exchange of teaching practices via peer observation opportunities. This approach is important as HE prepares for more hybrid approaches to learning and teaching for students and the associated PL for staff.

Staff were anxious about the use of technology in online settings and I was concerned about their general well-being. One of the more profound outcomes that staff mentioned was that their anxiety about engaging in the online setting was minimised by being able to shadow other staff and perhaps be a mentor in some cases. It gave me a unique insight in terms of receiving feedback from my peers about my teaching but also into how the design and development of online synchronous and asynchronous activities panned out in the

classroom in real time [37]. We shared our stories at the end of a four -week block and it enabled myself and my staff to be able to implement changes in the subsequent block in a timely fashion, maximising our capacity to deliver quality education to our students.

Staff were able to share their observations with each other and reflect on what they could potentially trial in active learning settings. My leadership capacity and strengths grew and evolved during this process and this enabled further development in teaching and development contexts. I also learned to be more supportive and accessible in times of personal need on the part of my staff, especially for new and early career teaching staff.

This approach may also be valuable to HE and contribute to positive change by encouraging academics to participate in a continuous cycle of improvement by creating opportunities for them to reflect and innovate on their practice. Furthermore, students' learning is boosted as academics consider the impact of their teaching on student engagement. This approach is being used by staff teaching in the First Year College at the university presently, beyond the COVID years. Further research is also underway to explore academics' experiences of participating in CPO/LCs to understand the impact of the approach on learning and teaching.

5. Results

The objective is to gather individuals' personal narratives and code them into organized data, enabling researchers to easily comprehend the impact of a specific event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on the individuals involved. These common themes collectively reflect the shared experiences of, challenges of, and strategies employed by educators as they navigated the complexities of remote teaching during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of themes identified from teaching narratives.

Themes	Description
1. Impact of COVID-19 on Education	All narratives emphasize the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tertiary education, requiring a swift transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online modes. The pandemic-induced restrictions and lockdowns disrupted the normal course of education.
2. Challenges in Adapting to Online Teaching	The narratives consistently depict the challenges faced by educators in redesigning courses for online delivery. Common challenges include the need to maintain content quality, overcome technological barriers, and adapt practical components to fit an online format.
3. Utilisation of Technology in Teaching	The use of technology is a common theme in all narratives. Educators explored and employed various technological tools, such as Zoom, Computer-Aided Learning (CAL) software, and video conferencing, to facilitate remote learning and engage students.
4. Positive Learning Experiences Amid Challenges	Despite challenges, the narratives highlight the positive learning experiences for both students and staff in the online environment. The adoption of innovative teaching methods and technologies contributes to positive outcomes.
5. Importance of Community and Collaboration	The narratives stress the significance of fostering a sense of community and collaboration among educators. Initiatives such as Collaborative Peer Observation Learning Circles (CPO/LCs) are introduced to create a supportive environment for sharing experiences and strategies.
6. Reflection, Feedback, and Continuous Improvement	Reflection and feedback play a crucial role in all three narratives. Educators engage in continuous improvement by reflecting on their teaching practices, sharing observations, and implementing changes based on feedback from peers and students.
7. Concerns for Well-Being and Support	Well-being concerns among educators, including the anxiety related to technology use and personal challenges, are acknowledged. The narratives highlight efforts to support staff, such as providing online inductions and mentoring and addressing personal needs.
8. Call for Further Research and Sustainable Practices	All narratives conclude with a call for further research and exploration of sustainable practices beyond the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic. The importance of ongoing professional development and continuous improvement is emphasized.

6. Discussion

The impact of COVID-19 on education has been profound, forcing a swift transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online modes. This shift, prompted by pandemic-induced restrictions and lockdowns, significantly disrupted the normal course of education. Adapting to remote teaching presented educators with a myriad of challenges. Maintaining the content quality, overcoming technological barriers, and adapting practical components to an online format were common hurdles faced during this transition.

Teaching narratives can be a valuable part of academics' professional development toolkit, fostering a culture of continuous improvement in teaching practices and ultimately enhancing the educational experience for students. A supportive forum for teachers to share their narratives with colleagues, with open and constructive discussions, can help us gain different perspectives and insights into their teaching approaches. The evidence in the literature shows that engaging in narrative writing and reflecting on the challenges and benefits learned from personal and professional lived experiences can indeed guide educators from both an academic and emotional standpoint [38]. Globally, higher education teaching staff experienced unprecedented changes in their teaching practice as they rapidly converted to an online-only teaching mode [39].

The themes identified from our teaching narratives herein reflect the global perspective of the challenges faced by teaching academics in the higher education sector. Eight key themes were identified from our thematic analysis as described in Table 1, being:

1. Impact of COVID-19 on Education
2. Challenges in Adapting to Online Teaching
3. Utilisation of Technology in Teaching
4. Positive Learning Experiences Amid Challenges
5. Importance of Community and Collaboration
6. Reflection, Feedback, and Continuous Improvement
7. Concerns for Well-Being and Support
8. Call for Further Research and Sustainable Practices

A recurring theme across our narratives is the extensive utilisation of technology in teaching. Educators explored various tools, including Zoom, Computer-Aided Learning (CAL) software, and video conferencing, to facilitate remote learning and engage students in the online environment. Despite the challenges, positive learning experiences emerged for both students and staff in the online setting. The adoption of innovative teaching methods and technologies played a pivotal role in achieving positive outcomes amid the difficulties encountered.

Themes 1, 2, and 7 identified in our narratives resoundingly support that, while the VU Block Model[®] itself has clear benefits for improving the success rates for repeating students in a blended learning face-to face delivery format [40], academic staff in this intensive block mode of teaching have presented the key challenges they faced, including increased stress levels and other psychological impacts [41], even prior to the pandemic. Moving block units to an online remote learning mode requires careful planning and organisation under ordinary circumstances [42]. However, with the sudden onset of COVID-19 and social isolation restrictions, our anatomy and physiology units were rapidly transformed as academics were thrust into maintaining successful learning outcomes for students.

Our experience demonstrates the important role technology played in enabling us to move from face-to-face to online learning, particularly within the rapid turnaround time this had in the intensive block model overlay, aligning with themes 3 and 4 identified. While there are many benefits associated with this approach, such as the convenience of studying anytime and anywhere at the convenience of the learner, it is clear that online learning comes at a cost, especially for students who are less technologically competent, have limited access to computers, have no private study space at home, and have limited or disruptive access to the internet from home.

Furthermore, many existing socioeconomic inequities in our society have been laid bare and accentuated during the era of COVID-19, adding to the list of the disadvantages of

online learning [43], as reflected by themes 5 and 6 identified. Also, we found the usual peer-to-peer social engagement, in which cues such as facial expressions promote connectivity, passion, and inspiration to help the learning process, to be significantly marginalised in the online teaching environment and that the 2D learning experience was less engaging and interesting than learning face to face [33].

The distinct cohort of our students at Victoria University, being socio-economically disadvantaged and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, posed extra demands, in addition to the COVID pandemic, on academic and teaching staff in terms of bridging the gap for students with timely technology-based interventions. For teachers, the peer learning circles enabled staff to critically reflect, adapt, and improve very quickly, as our units are delivered every 4 weeks in the block model.

Fostering a sense of community and collaboration among educators was deemed crucial. Initiatives like Collaborative Peer Observation Learning Circles (CPO/LCs) were introduced to create a supportive environment for sharing experiences and strategies. Our experiences presented herein, specifically with themes 5 and 7 described in Table 1, are substantiated by the findings reported by Barker et al. (2021), who established that a lack of connection and online teaching challenges were the most difficult aspects of teaching during the pandemic, whereas support from coworkers and administrators were the most helpful [21]. Globally, a greater prevalence of anxiety symptoms amongst teachers was reported than in other professions. Specifically, teachers imposed with online teaching demands reported significantly higher levels of stress compared with those teaching in person [13,14,24–26].

Reflection, feedback, and continuous improvement were identified as pivotal elements in the narratives. Educators engaged in ongoing improvement by reflecting on their teaching practices, sharing observations, and implementing changes based on feedback from peers and students. Well-being concerns among educators, including the anxiety related to technology use and personal challenges, were acknowledged. The narratives highlighted efforts to support staff, such as providing online inductions, mentoring, and addressing personal needs.

Most recently, Cleary et al. (2023) have highlighted an institutional response to better enable teaching staff to cope and meet the demands of emergency remote teaching, as learned from our rapid transition during COVID [31]. Their thematic analysis of the data revealed a symbiotic relationship between the block model curriculum, professional learning, and academics' sense of agency as they experienced their transition. The critical lessons learnt from Victoria University, which are relevant to other higher education institutions, include increasing the diversity of effective online assessment types and fostering student and staff wellbeing by facilitating learning spaces where students and staff can connect with peers and other academics. Specifically, academics need connection with their peers and safe spaces in which to reflect on the changing circumstances [31]. In particular, it was identified that staff need to build their confidence in using new online learning technologies [31], a major challenge that was also encountered by our anatomy and physiology teaching team, as reported in our teaching narrative herein. Additionally, it was identified in an institutional case study [31] that staff's professional development, to foster an emergency-informed, safe learning environment, will effectively reduce isolation, relieve stress, and enhance a better remote learning classroom for both the student and the teacher.

In contrast to the university-wide institutional response above, the unique presentation of our teaching team narrative approach herein focuses on our specific content-heavy units in the science discipline, to inform and educate the reader on the challenges and successes from our personal lived teaching experiences of the transition to remote learning during COVID-19 and online teaching according to the time-intensive VU Block Model®. As identified in theme 8, the narratives collectively conclude with a call for further research and exploration of sustainable practices beyond the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic. Emphasis is placed on the importance of ongoing professional development

and continuous improvement in the ever-evolving landscape of online teaching in higher education.

7. Conclusions

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted higher education, prompting institutions to adapt to new challenges and opportunities in teaching, learning, and administration. Many of these changes will likely continue to shape the landscape of higher education in the years to come. Teaching narratives are an essential forum to share ongoing experiences, challenges, and benefits as the higher education sector is shaped for a new era of tertiary learning. The emotional and mental toll that is imposed on teaching academics cannot be ignored in such a major transformation. Indeed, open dialogue, sharing of knowledge and skills, along with a forum to discuss the experiences of individuals will help with professional and personal development, to better equip teachers to cope with meeting these demands.

We also highlight here in our teaching team narratives that technological advances, particularly educational technology, are not a panacea for every problem in the classroom, especially at a time when social distancing measures isolated students from family and friends in their personal setting and from teaching academics in the professional learning environment. Now, when the return-to-normal, face-to-face, on-campus transition occurs, it will be more important than ever to provide a sense of community in our teaching. It is imperative to embrace a higher awareness of the benefits of both cognitive and social engagement in the classroom, and thereby a place of belonging, to achieve successful outcomes for both the student and the teacher, through collaboration, interaction, and engagement.

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Article

Social Emotional Learning in Teacher Education: Biographical Narrative as a Method for Professional Development

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Abstract: Social emotional learning (SEL) of teachers is crucial both to teachers and their students. Thus, teachers' professional development should focus on cognitive, emotional, and social skills in order to promote teachers' identity formation. Teacher professional development is a life-long process that begins in teachers' education. The Biographical Narrative, the story about our lives, was chosen as a method with the potential to promote SEL. Eighteen preservice teachers participated in a workshop focusing on emotional and social skills as part of professional development and shared their Biographical Narrative with the group. Data from the reflections of 12 participants were collected and analyzed qualitatively. The purpose of the study was to understand preservice teachers' perceptions about their professional development, and the contribution of the Biographical Narrative to the social emotional learning of the tellers, the listeners, and the group. The findings revealed that the participants related to cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of development. The developmental process occurs throughout all stages of the method—planning, performance, and reflection. In addition, the Biographical Narrative influenced not only the tellers, but also the listeners and the group. Implications are discussed regarding teachers' professional development as preservice teachers and as teachers in their work in schools.

Keywords: teachers' professional development; preservice teachers; Biographical Narrative; SEL social emotional learning

*Past
What helps me to get through
what I have experienced,
is the ability to make use of the
past tense.
It enables me to choose
the words,
to put them in order,
it allows me to omit punctuation,
and indicates where to insert a comma
and a period.
Giora Fisher (2023)*

1. Introduction

When designing policy and programs concerning teachers' education, a main focus is the question about which tools and skills future teachers should gain during training. Many believe that teachers' education should focus on 21st century skills, including cooperation, reflectivity, and the abilities to build social relations and develop emotionally and professionally during the educational process, as well as later on throughout life circles [1]. These social and emotional skills are crucial because they equip future teachers with the ability to connect with their students, to cope with their behaviors, and to lead the class effectively. A main critique of teacher education policies over the years has focused on

teachers poorly equipped for the challenging field of education. Researchers have stressed that emotional processes have been neglected in teachers' education, even though it clearly affects preservice teachers' motivation, cognitive achievements, and decision making [2]. Thus, teachers' toolboxes must be expanded to support their students emotionally and reduce their stress [3], as well as to regulate the teachers' own emotions.

To help teachers deal with their own and their students' emotions, teachers' education must incorporate social and emotional learning as part of teacher professional development [4,5]. Social emotional learning (SEL) is the process in which humans learn to understand and regulate their emotions, set positive goals and act to achieve them, feel and express empathy, develop healthy identities, create and preserve positive relationships, and make responsible decisions [4]. SEL includes developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills [6].

One of the methods suggested in the literature for adults' professional development is the Biographical Narrative. A Biographical Narrative is the story in which we talk about our lives, a process of constructing one's personal pathways and identity by reflecting on life events [7]. As Fisher (2023) highlights in the epigraph, we can start to understand our experiences by using words in past tense, put them in order, add punctuation, and actually construct our narrative. In the current study we explore the use of the Biographical Narrative as a potential tool for facilitating SEL as part of professional development of pre-service teachers. Combining the Biographical Narrative with social experiences in teacher education could facilitate the professional identity development of future teachers [8].

1.1. Teachers' Professional Identity Development

Teachers' professional identity is a complex and multifaceted construct. From a narrative approach, a teacher's professional identity is defined as "an evolving story of who one is and who one is becoming, which aims to answer the question, 'who am I as a teacher?'"'. The answer to that is related to the teachers' life story and their perceptions about what kind of teachers they want to be [9]. Researchers agree that professional identity development is an ongoing dynamic process in which teachers reflect on how they should be, act, and understand their work [9,10]. During this process, teachers formulate meanings that construct the concept of their role as teachers. Those meanings can take the form of beliefs, values, and attitudes, and are a result of endless interactions between human beings in social contexts. Those meanings have the potential to affect teachers' emotions and actions [11]. Hanna [11] identifies six domains that represent the set of meanings for teachers' identity: (1) motivation (Why am I teaching?); (2) self-image (How do I see myself as a teacher?); (3) self-efficacy (How capable I believe I am to organize and perform my daily teaching activities?); (4) task perception (What is my task as a teacher?); (5) commitment (How committed am I to the profession?); and (6) job satisfaction (How satisfied am I with my job?). A positive teacher identity is incredibly important to maintain a healthy and sustainable teaching workforce [10].

Teachers' professional development is the process in which their professional identity is formed. It is an ongoing development of knowledge and skills throughout one's career. It is a process by which teachers become experts and can express their knowledge and skills in effective ways [10]. During this continuous process, teachers make sense of themselves through their practice vis-à-vis the outside world, changing values and behaviors through various professional experiences [7,8,12]. Professional development relates to consolidating three aspects of teachers' professional identity: cognitive, emotional, and social. These aspects are not independent but are interrelated and have reciprocal influences [8]. Thus, collaborating interventions and practices to help preservice teachers promote cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of their professional development may help them become aware, reflective, and self-regulated human beings; in other words, combining SEL in teachers' education can help them facilitate their professional development and consolidate their professional identity.

Several social and emotional skills are crucial to teachers' work and their evolving professional identity: self-awareness involves understanding feelings, goals and values; self-management is about being a learner who can self-regulate feelings and behaviors, delay gratifications, cope with stress and challenges, and control impulses in order to achieve personal goals; social-awareness relates to being a person who is able to understand others from different backgrounds, feel empathy and compassion towards them and understand social norms; relationship skills include being able to manage healthy social relations according to social norms; and responsible decision making relates to skills like being able to consider ethical codes and norms [13]. Thus, the construction of teachers' professional identity combines developing emotional and social skills through various social interactions intertwined with cognitive development [8,14].

A strong connection between the quality of teaching and teachers' emotional and social skills is noted in the literature [15]. Students' and teachers' emotions have a reciprocal influence, so that if a teacher is emotionally regulated, it is more likely that his/her students will be more self-regulated [9]. Teachers with emotional and social skills feel less burnout and are more enthusiastic [11], develop stronger relations with their students, promote their students' wellbeing [4], and contribute more to their students' academic, social, and emotional growth [5]. Thus, the opportunity for self-growth is necessary and critical for teachers and preservice teachers [3].

The question that arises is how can teachers' education programs promote SEL as part of professional development of preservice teachers? What are the methods, tools, and goals that can help preservice teachers form their professional identity as teachers? One of these methods is the Biographical Narrative, which is the focus of the current paper.

1.2. The Biographical Narrative as a Method for Professional Development

Teacher identity is influenced by a range of individual factors, including personal biographies and narratives, emotions, social contexts, and relationships with others [10]. Thus, exploring Biographical Narratives can help develop teacher identity. A Biographical Narrative [16] (also referred to as narrative pedagogy [12]; educational autobiography [7]; and life narrative reflection [17]) involves the recitation and interpretation of one's own and/or others' lives as a central process of learning and making sense of one's life course [12]. The Biographical Narrative is connected to a particular culture, historical time, and personal characteristics, and reflects what is truly meaningful to a person's life [18]. People build "life constructions" by organizing their past experiences or biographies to relate and explain their current life events. Those constructs and reflective thinking about them help people understand the current relations between themselves and the world and build self-coherence and identity [18]. Carter [19], for example, argues that choosing the teaching profession is rooted in childhood when teachers themselves experience being a student. Memories from early childhood, from school, and from personal events can reflect on the teacher's behavior. Exploring the reason for a specific event becomes relevant for a person and evokes emotions, and can help a person understand his or her behavior patterns.

González-Monteaudo [16] proposed five objectives for the Biographical Narrative (educational autobiography): (a) to develop personal self-knowledge; (b) to promote the ability to analyze and criticize one's various daily frameworks (family, school, media, religious and spiritual groups, cultural diversity, peer group and friends, leisure and free time, work); (c) to relate their personal biography, family and local contexts, and their global social and cultural environments; (d) to promote the learner's personal involvement in the learning process; and (e) to assist in the reflective review of personal difficulties, by creating resources to better manage conflicts and problems in daily life. Le fever [12] adds the important outcome of improving teachers' and preservice teachers' ability to be empathetic towards their students and to be able to listen to their students' Biographical Narratives. One can tell his/her narrative by using various techniques, such as writing personal

journals, using material testimonies such as photos, open interviews, and presentations in front of a group, and more [16].

Hallqvist and Hydén [20] emphasize a narrative “approach” to biographical learning, which stresses the need to negotiate aspects of the Biographical Narrative. This means that the narrative is not only an outcome of the learning process, but it is part of the learning process or “learning in action”. Biographical Narratives can encourage adults to make sense of their life’s decisions, gain insights into their lives, and gain closure for painful experiences.

Le Fevre [12] refers to the social potential of the life story as an opportunity for communication with others and contributing to peers’ professional development. Understanding others, among other things, is based on self-understanding [21]. When telling the story in a group of colleagues, the process of talking and listening, dialoguing, and hearing different voices can contribute to others’ professional identity [22,23]. Listening to a Biographical Narrative requires empathy—the ability to feel and understand another’s point of view [22,23]. Research shows that one of the ways to develop empathy is to listen to inspirational stories. Such stories trigger listeners to self-reflect; it forces them to imagine themselves in the tellers’ shoes, to feel what they feel, and to understand their thoughts and actions [23]. The Biographical Narrative method also has the potential to influence the group as a whole, and not only the individuals in the group. Le Fevre [12] pointed out that sharing the Biographical Narrative with the group helped to develop a sense of community in the group.

In conclusion, the Biographical Narrative method has the potential to make learning more personal and relevant, and consequently promote engagement in the learning process. It has the potential to develop spontaneous self-regulation, promoting skills such as planning, monitoring, and reflecting. It has the potential to facilitate connectedness of one’s life with the lives of other people, and to contribute to peers’ and to group cohesion.

The method of the Biographical Narrative has been used and studied in adult education, and there is evidence of its positive impact, (e.g., [9,17]). However, there are a few studies that focus on the Biographical Narrative as a pedagogical tool for professional development in teacher education. Most of the studies in teacher education focus on autobiographical writing. For example, 75 preservice teachers learned how to write an autobiographical narrative as part of a literacy methods course. The purpose of the biographical writing was to help the preservice teachers understand their future students’ motivation towards literacy tasks, by exploring their own experiences. The preservice teachers wrote about their literacy experience and shared their stories with the group for 10–15 min and held a brief discussion about it. The researcher describes positive outcomes such as the preservice teachers’ ability to acknowledge various perspectives about literacy [12]. Yazan [24] suggested using it as part of an English teachers’ education program, and recommended that preservice teachers meet once every 3 weeks to discuss their Biographical Narrative’s writing. Pritzker [25] studied a course in which the teachers were asked to write their “hidden stories” according to specific instructions and subjects, and were then asked to discuss it in pairs, groups, and a plenum. The researcher analyzed one story and described the positive effects on the teller, such as her ability to understand her behavioral patterns and perspectives that influenced her workstyle with her students.

We found that the Biographical Narrative is a method with the potential to promote development of preservice teachers’ SEL as part of their professional development. Writing and sharing a Biographical Narrative with a group was shown to have a positive effect on social and emotional skills, such as social and self-awareness, empathy, reflectivity, and more, all of which are part of teachers’ professional identity developmental process. This method has the potential to influence the storyteller, and also the listener and the group, because it presents the opportunity to reflect on different values, beliefs, and interpretations of life events, as well as promoting a sense of relatedness and community. We wish to expand knowledge about the use of the Biographical Narrative in teacher education.

1.3. Rationale and Research Questions

As we noted above, one of the goals in teachers' education is to help the preservice teacher undergo a process of forming a professional identity, including the development of emotional and social skills. The question is, what could be an effective means to that end?

After reviewing the literature on the subject, we chose the Biographical Narrative for that purpose. In the current study, we wish to fill a gap in the professional literature and to shed more light on the potential of using Biographical Narratives as a method for promoting professional development of preservice teachers, focusing on SEL. We can see that most studies in the field of teacher education have used open or structured writing techniques with a focus on individual processes. Hence, in this study we employed the method of telling one's Biographical Narrative in front of a peer group and reflecting on it, thereby broadening the use of storytelling beyond writing. Additionally, we focus not only on individual professional development, but also on potential influences on the listeners and on the group. In this study we wish to understand how preservice teachers perceive their professional development, focusing on SEL, and to explore the influence of the Biographical Narrative on this development.

The research questions are:

- How do preservice teachers describe professional development (focusing on SEL)?
- How does the Biographical Narrative promote the professional development of the teller, the listener, and the group, focusing on SEL?

2. Materials and Methods

In this study, we employed a qualitative, grounded theory approach. Grounded theory aims to generate an explanation of a process shaped by the views of a number of participants [26]. The process in focus was professional development, with the focus on SEL, of preservice teachers. By analyzing preservice teachers' reflective writing and the process of telling and listening to Biographical Narratives, we wish to learn and understand the professional development of preservice teachers and the potential influence of the Biographical Narrative practice on this developmental process (see details in "Procedure"). Understanding the shared experience of preservice teachers can help design better practices to help the identity consolidation of teachers and preservice teachers.

2.1. Participants and Context

The study was conducted in a college for teacher education in Northern Israel in its special education department. The duration of the educational program is 4 years, during which the preservice teachers undertaken theoretical studies and gain professional experience in the educational field. The Biographical Narrative method took place in the second year of the educational program. In their second year, the pedagogical instructors accompany the preservice teachers during their professional experience, teach a pedagogical theoretical course, and guide a workshop that focuses on SEL as part of professional development, for a total of 9 h per week.

In the current study both researchers have a Ph. D in special education. Both have been pedagogical instructors in the special education department of the college for 12–13 years and have 30 years' educational experience in special education.

Criteria for inclusion were preservice teachers who participated in the workshop, who told their Biographical Narrative to the group, and who completed the reflection in their diary and their final reflection. The group included 18 preservice teachers, 16 females and 2 males. One did not share his Biographical Narrative in the workshop, and hence was excluded from the study. The rest met the inclusion criteria. Twelve participants (11 females and one male, age 23–42) gave the researchers permission to use their data. The first researcher was the pedagogical instructor of the group.

The participants were Orit, Gil, May, Lital, Tal, Hagit, Ilana, Sharon, Shelly, Meirav, Ronit, and Karin (pseudonyms).

2.2. Procedure

As part of the workshop “Identity and Personal Development”, the preservice teachers met once a week for 1.5 h over two semesters. In the workshop, the pedagogical instructor used several methods, such as analyzing case studies from the field, working on personal goals, and the practice of the Biographical Narrative. The Biographical Narrative was one of the main focuses of the workshop.

The Biographical Narrative practice: The method followed three stages: plan, performance, and reflection. In the planning stage, each participant was asked to choose five pictures representing five milestones in their lives [9,16].

In the performance stage, which lasted throughout the academic year, once each week one or two participants told their Biographical Narrative to the group, for about 0.5 h each, using their photos. After the story was told, the group could ask the storyteller some questions, and then the listeners and the pedagogical instructor had the opportunity to echo thoughts and reflections to the teller. Usually, some participants gave more detailed feedback and then the rest of the listeners in turn made one brief (one word) comment to the storyteller.

The reflection stage was divided into two. Immediately after the Biographical Narrative telling, the storyteller had to write reflections in a personal journal, which the participants used throughout the year to reflect on their lives. At the end of the year, the preservice teachers were asked to write reflections for the workshop relating specifically to the Biographical Narrative as a facilitator of professional development. The listeners had the opportunity to reflect on other stories in their personal journal if they wished to.

The instructions for the final reflection at the end of the year were as follows:

Read the personal journal that you wrote throughout the year and relate to the following points:

1. Describe what “personal development” means for you.
2. What would you consider a success in the “Identity and Personal Development” workshop?
3. Do you think you have been successful in this course, has personal development occurred?

If yes, note,

What was the change? (Describe the status before and after.)

Can you recognize turning points? What were they?

What helped the personal development process?

If not,

What were the hindering factors?

What would you like to be different?

What could have helped you progress?

(Identify main themes from the journal. Notice the developmental process; what did you learn about yourself as a human being, a teacher, a group member?) Present examples from the journal that demonstrate success or non-success in the course.

4. Did the Biographical Narrative (yours or others’) contribute to your personal development and in what way?

2.3. Data Analysis

Consent of the participants was received after the course was finished and students’ evaluations were granted to prevent authority relations.

Data analysis refers to all texts available from the data collection (WhatsApp messages to the instructor, group responses to the storyteller, personal journal, final reflective writing, and instructor’s field notes). First, the researchers divided the texts into units of meaning

expressing a single idea. Most of the analysis units included one or two sentences. When a complex sentence contained more than one idea, it was divided into several units [26]. In the first stage of the analysis, open coding was conducted on three randomly selected texts in which codes were assigned to each analysis unit, line by line. Those three texts were analyzed separately by each of the researchers in order to obtain inter-judge reliability. In the next step, we categorized the codes by grouping them around phenomena revealed in the data. This included a constant comparison to check that the data supported the emerging categories. In the second stage, both researchers performed an axial coding, in which the most relevant categories and subcategories were selected and refined, and the relations between them were elaborated [26]. Then, we coded the rest of the text together. When we identified new categories and themes, comparison was drawn with previous data to check if it was a shared theme for all participants. The data were analyzed until saturation.

2.4. *Validity and Reliability*

Creswell and Poth [26] suggest some strategies for validating qualitative analysis. One of these is prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, which includes building trust with participants and learning their culture by establishing close, long-term contacts with the people under study. As we mentioned, in this study the pedagogical instructor taught a theoretical course, guided a workshop focusing on emotional and social skills, and accompanied the preservice teachers during their professional experience, including one-on-one guidance meetings every week, for a total of 9 h per week over two semesters. We believe that spending this amount of time together enabled close relations with the preservice teachers and helped create a safe environment in the workshop. In addition, the instructor with 12 years of experience with preservice teachers felt that she had a good understanding of their culture.

A second strategy for validity is triangulation, i.e., using corroborating evidence from various sources to shed light on a theme or perspective [26]. In the current study, we collected data from WhatsApp messages to the instructor, group responses to the storyteller (documented in the field notes), personal journals, final reflective writing, and other comments from the instructor's field notes.

The third strategy is peer review, i.e., an external check of the research process [26]. We asked two peers to review the research plan and the final paper (one is an expert in qualitative research in one of the universities in the country, the other is an expert on Biographical Narratives from our college) and we made changes according to their comments.

Finally, in the analysis process, in order to decrease bias, each researcher analyzed the first three texts separately, after which we held a discussion to define the categories and themes each researcher identified, to achieve full agreement [26]. Further analysis was performed in a dialogical manner by the two researchers. We created a database and documented several stages in the analysis process that can be made available to other researchers [26].

2.5. *Ethical Issues*

The formal ethics committee of the college approved the research plan according to international standard ethics codes.

At the end of the academic year after course grades were granted, we emailed all the preservice teachers participating in the workshop, asking for permission to use the data for the purpose of the research. Twelve out of the eighteen participants agreed. There was no authority relationship between the researchers and the participants at the time of data analysis. All names and personal details in the manuscript are pseudonyms, to safeguard participants' privacy.

3. Findings

All the texts were analyzed qualitatively to identify themes and categories regarding the Biographical Narratives as a method to facilitate professional development. First, we will consider the research question: How do preservice teachers describe professional development? Analyzing the participants' perceptions about professional development can help us understand if the Biographical Narratives were a useful tool for their developmental process. Then, we will consider the second question: How does the Biographical Narrative promote the professional development of the teller, the listener, and the group, focusing on SEL?

3.1. Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Their Developmental Process—Cognitive, Emotional, and Social

In their final assignment, the pedagogical guide (the first author) asked the participants to describe in writing what personal development means for them and what they consider a success in the "Identity and Personal Development" Workshop. The participants related to three main aspects of professional development: professional development as a personal change; professional development as progress towards personal goals; and professional development as the growing ability to open up and share private things with others.

3.1.1. Professional Development as a Process of Personal Change

From the findings we can learn that the participants perceived their personal change as a main component of their professional development. For example, Hagit wrote that in her developmental process she aspired "to let go... to accept myself and feel compassion for my mistakes and to reduce self-criticism". Orit wrote: "I wanted to improve things that bothered me in my everyday life-being impulsive, being a procrastinator, and my desire always to be in the spotlight". Ilana wrote: "In the personal development process we worked on some domains in our personality that are not fully developed... self-confidence, empathy, creativity, persistence, etc.". As we can see, many regarded personal change as the main developmental process, including changing negative self-perceptions, perceived negative characters, or gaining emotional skills such as increased empathy, self-confidence, and a sense of efficacy. The focus here is on emotional development.

3.1.2. Professional Development as Progress towards Personal Goals

Some of the participants regarded professional development as progress or a movement towards achieving personal goals; as Sharon claimed: "personal development for me is the ability to accomplish goals I set for myself that were challenging for me". Tal wrote: "I think that the personal development process is when we develop our personalities to achieve the goals we set for ourselves". As the workshop accompanied the professional experience in school, some of the participants regarded aspects of their teaching abilities and their academic skills.

Karin wrote:

"I think that success in this workshop was accomplishing my goals and success with my challenges... to deal with stressing situations in the professional experience, to prepare my assignments on time and not to worry about things I can't control."

May noted: "I set a goal to be a better teacher. To succeed I must work on the quality of my teaching, to improve my ability to involve the students in the lessons, to gain knowledge and to learn about new teaching methods".

The findings imply that here the participants regarded more cognitive aspects of professional development, including their teaching skills, as opposed to the emotional focus we noted above.

3.1.3. Professional Development as Growing Ability to Open Up

Finally, some of the participants talked about professional development as the ability to open up and share private things with others during the practice of the Biographical Narrative. The group was formed at the beginning of the academic year based on the placement of the preservice teachers in schools. Some of them had no prior acquaintance. Sharon wrote: “success for me was the ability to open up, expose myself to people some of whom I don’t really know”. Ronit pointed out that: “personal development for me is the ability to open up and tell my life story”. Meirav wrote: “the most important thing for me was improving my communication with the environment, my shyness was gone, and I succeeded in talking openly about my life”. Gil added: “at first it wasn’t easy for me to talk and open up to students in the group. Success for me was to open up in front of everyone”.

The findings reveal that the Biographical Narrative method influenced the participants’ perceptions about their professional development and made them focus on a specific ability—to open up and to share their story in front of the group. From the focus on this aspect, we can conclude that the Biographical Narrative practice was important to them and made them improve themselves. This is a focus on the social aspect of professional development.

After a close look at the three categories, we can identify the relation to SEL, as participants referred to cognitive, social, and emotional changes as part of their professional development [6].

3.2. The Biographical Narrative as a Method for Professional Development

Considering the second research question: How does the Biographical Narrative promote the professional development of the teller, the listener, and the group, focusing on SEL?

We will describe two main themes arising from the analysis and consider each with quotes from the data:

- The Biographical Narrative promotes the developmental process through its three stages of planning, performance, and reflection.
- The Biographical Narrative promotes the developmental process of the teller, the listener, and the group.

3.2.1. The Biographical Narrative Promotes the Developmental Process through the Three Stages of Planning, Performance and Reflection

The storytelling practice in the current study included three stages—planning, performance, and reflection. The planning stage included choosing five photos that reflect milestones in the participant’s life. Using photos as a visual object is one of the techniques in working with Biographical Narratives, as it helps the tellers to focus on remarkable events in their life [16]. The performance stage included telling the Biographical Narrative in front of the group and receiving group feedback. The reflection stage included a written reflection immediately after the storytelling and the final reflection at the end of the year.

The developmental process starts in the planning stage. The pedagogical instructor asked the participants to send five photos indicating five milestones in their lives. This part is the planning stage of the narrative, when the participants decide what to tell and how to present themselves. The instructor testified that she received a lot of messages about sending more photos than were requested. Hagit sent a message to the instructor saying: “This is a great challenge for me. After a cruel and lengthy process of screening-is it O.K. if I send six photos? I am not totally satisfied with this final choice, but one must compromise”. Ronit also struggled with choosing photos: “at first, I sent seventeen photos, some in a collage. I took the challenge to reduce it by half. I am glad I finally sent six photos; it was a big challenge”. Orit also wrote: “it was difficult for me to decide which photos to choose, I thought maybe I should add a photo of my grandmother. Finally, I sent six photos instead of five”.

Our findings reveal difficulty in choosing the photos—what to present, what to keep for themselves, and difficulty in restricting it to five photos, all of which can indicate a difficulty in organizing the narrative. Some participants sent more than five photos (up to seventeen in one case). This can indicate difficulty in focusing on noteworthy events and difficulty in organizing a coherent story.

The instructor also noted that she received messages about changing the original choice of photos after they were sent to her. This request was usually made after the first stories were told, which might imply changes in the original plan. The instructor pointed out that the first few narratives were incredibly open and sincere and included life challenges and crises. Ilana expressed her concern after two stories were told: “I don’t have any tragedies in my life”; Sharon said: “when I heard other people’s stories, I asked myself- don’t I have something sad to share?” and Lital wrote: “It makes me think all kinds of thoughts- do I need to make my story more touching? What should I focus on? What is important for me to say, what will I remove and how will I present all of myself to those people”. All referred to their need to fit their story to the model that was presented in the first narratives. Thus, the findings suggest changes in the planning stage as a consequence of listening to others’ narratives.

May summarized in her final reflection: “Searching for photos made me re-experience the events, remember and re-experience the feelings I had. Choosing the photos is an exceedingly complicated process, it makes you learn about yourself”. As we can see, May actually says that she started the developmental process, and she began learning about herself in the planning stage by choosing the photos.

Some participants considered the planning stage more explicitly and referred to this stage in their writings. Even those who did not plan exactly what to say did think about it and tried to decide how much they should open up, and then presented their considerations: Shelly wrote: “I admit I told the story spontaneously. I did not plan it and I did not plan what to say”. Tal wrote: “I did not prepare in advance what to say. I told myself that the photos would help me to direct myself to the part of my life I want to talk about”. Orit also wrote the day after her story: “I’m happy I didn’t prepare what to say, I feel I talked from my heart”.

From the intensive focus of the participants on the planning stage, we can conclude that it is a significantly important stage that contributes to the developmental process. Thus, the findings indicate that the planning process is a challenging opportunity to start the developmental process, and the difficulties reflect the cognitive and emotional complexity in organizing the narrative. May summarized it when she said during her story telling: “when I sent the photos, I did not think I would have something to tell. Now I see that every photo represents a meaningful change in my life”.

The Developmental Process in the Performance Stage Includes Insights that are Promoted by Group Responses. Immediately after telling the story, the group had the chance to respond to the teller. In their journals, the participants pointed out their insights after hearing the group responses to their story: Meirav, for example, regarded self-learning as a consequence of group responses:

“I learned a lot about myself, I feel completion with my life story and there are people that do not. Those people came to me and thanked me for telling my story, they told me that I helped them see the bright sides in their lives. It was so touching, and I told myself-thank you for sharing.”

Orit also referred to the group responses:

“The reactions from the group were very moving. Some students told me how strong I am, and I admit it was strange for me to hear because I do not see myself as strong. I learned about myself that I might be stronger than I think.”

Lital wrote about her healing process after she heard the group responses: “I always think I am not good enough and I do not know what people think of me. It was nice to let go”. May wrote: “the good words of the group at the end of my story empowered me

and strengthened my self-confidence". Karin also noted that. . . "the reactions I got after sharing my story were heartwarming. It is always nice to hear what people think about you and how they see you as a person". The findings reveal insights of the teller that are a consequence of group responses, mostly referring to changing negative self-perceptions.

Some participants focused on the atmosphere that enabled openness, acceptance, and confidence. The participants highlighted their ability to open up in front of people who are somewhat strangers, because of their accepting responses that were manifested in the group atmosphere: Hagit wrote:

"I revealed so much private and personal information about myself in front of a group of people most of whom are not my friends. Something in the energies made me feel confident and made me open up without the need to worry or apologize. I exposed my darkest and most complicated sides and did not feel for a second that I am being criticized or being judged by others. On the contrary! I felt that the group gave me the place to feel safe and talk about myself deeply."

Shelly wrote about the group reactions: "I was afraid to be judged and that they would feel pity, but I received warmth, so I'm really satisfied". Orit and May pointed out that the atmosphere was "amazing. . . supportive and sensitive".

The participants reported the atmosphere in the group as enabling, nonjudgmental, and sensitive, which promoted feelings of security, and enabled openness and self-exposure. The participants related this atmosphere of empathy and containment to the positive feelings of relief and confidence they felt after telling their stories. Thus, findings reveal developmental processes in the performance stage that are related to talking in front of a group and receiving group feedback.

The Development in the Reflective Stage is Manifested in Insights and Emotional Changes. In their reflection, the participants wrote about their professional development and insights as a consequence of telling their Biographical Narrative and listening to others' narratives. Many participants wrote reflections about internal progress and personal change such as growing self-confidence, competence, and the ability to open up and talk about private things in front of other people, which can be considered as SEL. Karin talked about building her self-confidence: "It was a relief to talk about everything openly, it helped me feel more self-confident". Shelly described her inner process after telling her story, considering progress and personal goals:

"Now that it (the story) is behind me I feel that I made peace with it, after many years I feel completion with my story. Telling the story helped me let things go. It helped me accept the fact that my life story does not define me. It gave me values, tools to deal with a variety of situations, it shaped me, but it does not define who I am today. I define myself every morning when I wake up."

In addition to insights, all participants (tellers) mentioned a variety of feelings emerging before, during, and after the story telling. Meirav wrote:

"I asked myself if I want to speak about something that is so private and personal, and I was embarrassed because it is so difficult for me. When I decided that I was going to do it I felt good, and I felt I poured my heart out."

Shelly wrote: "During the storytelling I felt someone else was telling it, not me. Suddenly I felt strange about the story. I tried to stay distant, so I would not cry but I did not expect to feel alienation". Hagit pointed out that "The storytelling was overwhelming for me. I felt full of emotion for two or three days after telling it to the group. I felt relief, free and a sense of completion with tough places inside me". Sharon wrote: "I learned that I could tell my story with a little bit of humor aside from the seriousness, that I can tell it without crying and still feel different feelings".

Findings suggest various feelings before, during, and after the Biographical Narrative was told. All the storytellers reported negative feelings before telling the story: feelings of fear, concerns, embarrassment, and insecurity. During the storytelling they described

feelings like dissociation, being overwhelmed, and emotional overflow. After the story was told, the participants reported feelings of relief, joy, and happiness. Thus, we can conclude that the story telling influenced the emotional state of the tellers, as was manifested in an emotional change from negative to positive.

Surprisingly, we did not find any indications of the emotional state of the listeners in their reflections.

3.2.2. The Biographical Narrative Promotes Developmental Process of the Teller, the Listener, and the Group

As we have seen in the previous section, the findings indicate a developmental process of the storytellers, including new insights and emotional changes. The findings also reveal that Biographical Narrative influenced not only the teller but also the listener.

Some participants pointed out personal insights after hearing others' stories: Shelly told Meirav after telling her Biographical Narrative, "I identified with a lot of parts of your story. I want to tell you thank you. For years I thought no one could understand me, that my story is unique. Now I understand that it is not the case". May wrote: "following the life stories I heard this week, I learned to identify the things that help me and give me the strength to deal with difficulties and crises in my life". Ronit mentioned "It was enormously powerful to hear how others succeed in dealing with challenges and crises, and what gave them the power to cope with challenging times". Meirav wrote: "my empathy was intensified after hearing others' stories".

From the findings we can see new insights from the listeners. Meirav concluded it by saying: "I heard other people's stories and now I can look at them differently, I learned a lot from others". Gil wrote: "telling my personal story taught me something new, such as how to look at the other and understand that no one is perfect".

From the data we can see that many participants were surprised to hear some Biographical Narratives because they built a perception of the tellers relying only on what they saw. Many expressed the gap between what you see on the outside and what was revealed in the narrative and their ability to see people in diverse ways. Thus, the Biographical Narratives helped them understand they are not unique in their struggles; that others have similar challenges, and sometimes even greater challenges; that what you see is not always what is inside; and that in order to understand others, you must explore their life narratives. Those insights could imply development of empathy. As we noted earlier, Meirav said it explicitly: "My empathy was intensified".

From the findings we can also see participants considered the Biographical Narrative not only as an opportunity for their own professional development, but also as an opportunity to help others' professional development. For example, Shelly wrote: "I thought that if I had a plan I would probably forget, and it would not flow. It would not be authentic, and the others would not be able to learn from it". Gil wrote: "my personal story is not only mine, but also the group's". Shelly and Gil pointed out that their story could benefit others. We consider that as professional development, as they understood that their actions can influence others in beneficial ways.

Some participants referred to the influence of the Biographical Narrative not only on them as individuals, but also on group cohesion. For example, May wrote: "I think that revealing your personal story is important to the cohesion of the group and to our familiarity".

Some participants referred to the practice of the Biographical Narrative as an opportunity for deep understanding and connections to the point that new friendships emerged following the story telling. Meirav said:

"It gave me more strength to get to know more group members that I didn't assume we could connect with, and it's amazing to see how many opportunities it opened up. At first, I thought it was unnecessary, but then I found out how deep and connecting this is and now I think it is a wonderful idea."

Tal summarized it: “I feel that the personal stories connect and unite the group and create new friendships”.

The findings reveal that participants felt that group cohesion is strengthened because of the Biographical Narrative practice. They also mentioned new friendships that were a result of similarities in life events or of their ability to see the person through different eyes. This implies a social influence of the Biographical Narrative on all three participating parties—the teller, the listener, and the group.

4. Discussion

In our study we analyzed data from various sources (messages to the instructor, group responses to the storyteller, personal journals, and final reflective writings), all reflecting the thoughts, feelings, and insights of the participants in the workshop that included the Biographical Narrative method. We will consider the potential of this method as a tool for promoting professional development in the teachers’ education focusing on SEL. We will relate the three perceptions about professional development that the participants referred to in their writing: professional development as a process of personal change; professional development as progress towards personal goals; and professional development as the ability to open up and share private things with others. We will discuss the way they are manifested in the following themes.

4.1. The Biographical Narrative Promotes Developmental Process through the Three Stages of Planning, Performance, and Reflection

Some researchers focused not only on the narrative itself, but also on the process of storytelling, and stressed that the act of storytelling is a learning process in itself [27]. We can see from the findings that development occurs in all three stages of the process—planning, performance, and reflection. We can also see that each stage enhanced different unique processes.

In the planning stage, our findings reveal difficulty in choosing the photos. Photos have symbolic and emotional meaning and the necessity to choose photos is cognitively and emotionally complicated [9]. Hence, the difficulty in choosing photos can imply the involvement of emotional considerations in the planning stage. Hallqvist [27] claims that Biographical Learning has the potential to organize and reconstruct life events and to change the person’s references about himself and the world. We can assume that most of the participants have not had the chance to tell their story as a whole and in an organized way, and that the photos and planning promoted this organization.

The findings suggest changes in the planning stage as a consequence of listening to others’ stories. We can assume that the participants who asked to replace their photos felt more patience and empathy towards the first tellers [16], they felt that the group could deal with complex content and concluded that other group members could be more empathetic towards significant events in their stories, and they thus changed their photos to represent a new narrative. Changing the plan can also be explained by social desirability [28]. Social desirability is the tendency to present oneself in a way that is perceived to be socially acceptable, not necessarily reflecting reality [29]. As we saw from the quotes, some participants referred to this issue in their writing, pondering whether they have difficulties or tragedies to share. After hearing the first few stories, those participants may have thought that it would be better to present life hardships because they felt that this would stimulate interest and empathy from the group.

In the performance stage, the findings reveal the teller’s insights that arise as a consequence of group responses; most referred to changing negative self-perceptions. Insights from the storytelling itself are a potential outcome of reflective processes that can also be achieved in biographical writing. However, insights that are a consequence of group responses are only available in the format that was performed in the current workshop, where the participants were asked to tell their Biographical Narrative in front of the group, and where the group had the opportunity to respond. The strong reciprocal relations be-

tween emotions and a person's perceptions of others makes the reaction of others relevant to emotional shaping and coping [23]. The tellers' insights are related to the interpretations that were given to the events that were told. The group responses enable exposure to a variety of different interpretations, and hence promote new insights specifically referring to self-perceptions. This is compatible with the idea that the Biographical Narrative is a social practice; that is, reflective learning processes do not only take place "inside" the person, but also depend on communication and interaction with others [27].

In the performance stage, the participants also reported the atmosphere in the group that enabled self-exposure. Creating a positive climate in a group that practices telling Biographical Narratives is the role of the instructor, encouraging secure space [9,16]. The support of instructors and colleagues in this developmental process is significant and its quality can influence the development of the preservice teachers [8,14]. Thus, the pedagogical instructor in college must consciously and systematically promote preservice teachers' development—cognitive, emotional, and social [3,7]. In the current study, the instructor accompanied the group in two more courses, for a total of 9 h per week, for two semesters, including one-on-one meetings. We believe that this can facilitate close relations and the trust that enables this exposure. The instructor actively promoted group cohesion by introducing social activities during the courses [3,30]. The instructor accompanied the participant in the process of planning, performing, and reflecting, in their role as tellers and as listeners in group settings and in individual meetings. The instructor was inspired to be a model of sensitive and empathetic listening to create trust with the group. Thus, we can draw conclusions regarding the importance of telling the Biographical Narrative to an audience and receiving responses as a crucial part of the method to promote insights and change.

In the reflection stage, the findings reveal storytellers' insights and an emotional change that took place throughout the practice of the Biographical Narrative. Biographical Learning is defined as "learning about one's life and learning from one's life". As we see here, the participants indeed mentioned new learning and insights about themselves, which is in accordance with previous findings [9].

Research in the educational field indicates the crucial role of emotion in professional development of teachers [9]. We can see a transformation from negative to positive feelings. This can imply that the process of storytelling elicits emotional changes. The rationale of introducing a workshop of professional development to the educational program relied on the idea that dealing with preservice teachers' emotions is crucial to their professional development. According to Steiner: "emotional education consists of three skills: the skill to understand emotions, the skill to express them in a fruitful way, and the skill to listen to everybody and to feel empathy in relation to their emotions" (as quoted in González-Monteaudo [16]). Hence, one of our goals in introducing the practice of the Biographical Narrative was to increase preservice teachers' ability to express feelings, listen to others, and increase empathy and sensitivity in order to help them become sensitive teachers, to be able to listen to their students' narratives, and to deepen understanding of their behaviors and mental state. Many people find it hard to talk about their feelings. The Biographical Narrative enables feelings to be revealed and explored [9]. The positive feelings that the participants in this study reported after telling their story may imply that the participants experienced a sense of competence about their past events [25]. During the storytelling, the teller can relive traumatic memories and promote processing of difficult events. Biographical Narratives have the potential to sensitize people to each other's feelings, increasing empathy and tolerance [23]. The participants' insights and feeling transformations are consistent with previous research findings about the Biographical Narrative as a trigger for self-reflection and developmental change [9,17].

From the findings, we can see that each stage promotes distinct and unique aspects of development, including insights, changing self-perceptions, emotional change, and social skills. Hence, we believe that each stage is necessary to promote diverse aspects of development and change.

4.2. *The Biographical Narrative Promotes a Developmental Process of the Teller, the Listener, and the Group*

The findings reveal that not only did the tellers report new insights, but the listeners also gained new learning from the process. The insights of the listeners can indicate a professional development process influenced by listening to others' stories. As Ronit wrote:

"The stories were an inspiration for me, I learned how each person dealt with life challenges, what gave them their strength to cope with their hardship and overcome it. I "adopted" tools that I learned from others after listening to their stories."

This finding accords with previous research (e.g., [9]).

The findings reveal that the participants felt that group cohesion was strengthened because of the storytelling practice. They also mentioned new friendships that resulted from similarities in life events or from their ability to see the person through different eyes. Pritzker [25] pointed out that a person's identity develops through their interaction with the environment and within the different contexts of individual lives. Relatedness and positive social relations can promote motivation to learn, and the findings imply that the workshop did achieve this goal [31].

Preservice teachers often feel lonely and indicate that relations with peers can relieve those feelings. One of the contexts in which preservice teachers can build social relations is workshops like that presented in this paper, where the instructor enables emotional dialogues and personal discussions [3].

The findings imply not only a professional developmental process of the teller and the listener, but also that the Biographical Narrative triggered changes in the group. Therefore, we can see that the Biographical Narrative presents an opportunity to facilitate social relations and group support. The current study enlightens the contribution of the method to the group and to social relations, indicating social change or development.

4.3. *How Does the Biographical Narrative Method Promote Professional Development?*

When we consider the potential of the Biographical Narrative practice as a facilitator of SEL as part of professional development, we should first look at what the participants considered to be a professional development process. In the section about the participants' perceptions of the concept of professional development, we identified three themes reflecting cognitive, emotional, and social skills (respectively) as part of professional development: professional development as a movement forward toward achieving personal goals; professional development as a process of change; and professional development as the ability to open up to others.

From the findings, we can conclude that two aspects are manifested in the developmental process that took place referring to the Biographical Narrative as a trigger for development: first, the participant regarded professional development as a personal change reflecting their emotional learning as part of professional development. This is apparent in new insights of both the tellers and the listeners and also in an emotional change in the tellers. The participants articulated insights about their lives and changed negative self-perceptions. As concluded from the findings, all stages of the Biographical Narrative method present an opportunity for development—planning, performance, and reflection. Additionally, the participants regarded professional development as the growing ability to open up in front of the group. This reflects development of the social aspect of professional development. This was apparent from the findings, as the participants stressed achieving these goals throughout the practice. The Biographical Narrative enabled self-awareness and self-regulation, awareness of emotions, and development of intersocial relations, thus facilitating the development of SEL skills [13].

We can see from the findings that the third aspect defining professional development as moving towards achieving personal goals was not revealed from the findings, namely the cognitive component of professional development, and this is usually addressed in theoretical courses and in professional experience in the field. We can conclude that the

workshop focuses on SEL as part of professional development and that teacher education programs should use other pedagogical tools to achieve cognitive skills.

To summarize, we want to quote Lital's final paragraph in her reflection:

"when I first heard the idea of telling the personal story to the group, I was against it, because I didn't understand why I should tell my life story to people I don't really know or that I know but am not really connected to them. It took me some time to understand, but as time passed and I heard some stories, I felt how it brings us together as a group, how I succeed looking at people differently, understand them more than I did before. It made us connect to each other. At some point, I couldn't wait for my turn, to share my story... today I can say that sharing my personal story with a group is not only important but necessary. It's a great idea and it raised our group to great heights."

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research broadens the understanding of the influence of the Biographical Narrative method on preservice teachers' SEL. The use of the Biographical Narrative as a tool for preservice teachers' professional development has rarely been described in the literature. Additionally, this study stresses not only the potential of the Biographical Narrative method for self-development of the teller, but also for peer development and for group cohesion and social relations. As we have elaborated above, the findings imply an influence on the group and on the individuals in the group as a consequence of listening to others' Biographical Narratives. The influences of the Biographical Narrative on the group are a new focus of our research.

When observing the findings, some implications should be considered in designing and performing the Biographical Narrative method. We believe that all stages of the practice as we introduced it here are important to professional development, beginning with the planning stage up through the written reflection, as each stage promotes the opportunity to facilitate distinct and unique developmental processes. We found the photos to be a beneficial tool for the planning stage, as we saw that it helps participants organize their narratives and start a developmental process. The findings reveal that the group responses after the story are important in helping the teller and the listeners consolidate insights and contribute to group cohesion. Thus, we recommend including the practice of the Biographical Narrative in the toolbox of the pedagogical instructor in teacher education.

We wish to emphasize the importance of the instructor in accompanying the personal and group processes. Preservice teachers' wellbeing is influenced by social support, guidance, and advice, as well as acknowledgment from peers and teacher educators [30]. We recommend that the instructor design opportunities for group cohesion and for being a model for empathetic listening to create a safe environment for personal exposure and reflection.

We recommend that the Biographical Narrative method be applied to diverse contexts. As professional development is a lifelong task, we point to the potential of using this practice in teachers' workshops in schools. As our findings indicate, this method can contribute to teachers' growing empathy, containment, and responses to their students. We believe that teachers that experience telling their Biographical Narrative will likely be empathetic listeners to their students' stories. In the current study, we found that telling one's Biographical Narrative facilitates a change towards more positive feeling; hence, it has the potential to contribute to teachers' positive feelings, therefore increasing their job satisfaction. In the current study, the Biographical Narrative increased group cohesion; therefore, it can potentially facilitate staff cohesion and a positive atmosphere in the school. Teachers that fulfill their relatedness needs are more supportive and related to their students [12,18,30]. We also recommend using the Biographical Narrative method with the pedagogical instructors in teacher education, with a similar potential effect to that of teachers in schools. This can expand the pedagogical instructors' understanding of the experience of telling a personal story to a group of colleagues.

We also recommend using this method with the students themselves in schools. As we have seen from the current study, the Biographical Narrative method can facilitate SEL. It can help children develop skills such as planning, monitoring, and reflecting. It can help them see various perspectives and build their confidence in the group.

This method may also be helpful in adult education in various disciplines, especially in disciplines concerned with listening to people (nurses, social workers, etc.). Telling one's Biographical Narrative and listening to others' stories can promote empathy, motivation, social skills, and the ability to accept various points of view, among other things. These could benefit people whose practices rely on social skills and the need for empathetic interactions with others, such as nurses and social workers [32,33].

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative study included only one group from the special education department, including 18 participants, of which 12 gave their consent to use their data. We recommend broadening the study to more participants, different instructors, other departments, other colleges, and other cultures. Further research using quantitative measures may also add to understandings of the phenomena.

The pedagogical instructor was one of the researchers and we acknowledge some possible potential for influence from the researcher knowing the research aims during the workshop. The researcher was aware that this could be a possible limitation and tried to minimize her participation in the storytelling process to avoid bias.

Future research could elaborate the practice to include other variations such as adding group discussions and analysis of the narratives, and checking the benefit of such variations.

Hallqvist [27] claims that Biographical Learning can result in people taking a different stance about themselves and the world, and possibly also taking new actions. We suggest further research dealing with the potential of the Biographical Narrative to facilitate not only insight and perceptual development, but also action.

Finally, we recommend studying the influence of the practice of storytelling on teachers' professional development, as we believe that professional development is a lifelong mission. We recommend studying the personal story's potential to promote teachers' ability to be more empathetic to their students' life stories, and its potential to promote staff cohesion in schools.

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Article

Towards a ‘Community for Practice’—A Narrative Analysis of the Evolution of Higher Education Scholars

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Abstract: In higher education (HE), collaborative activities that revolve around a core idea, practice, or knowledge base, such as learning circles, communities of practice or inquiry, peer observation, and peer-assisted teaching, are known to support professional learning. This paper explores the experiences of eight HE scholars from Australia and New Zealand, across four years, as they recognized a new means of collaborative professional development that transcends known approaches and extends beyond an immediate focal point. The group originally formed to support the development of HE fellowship applications, but evolved to what they now consider a community for practice (CfP), where the purpose of collaboration has changed to meet the unique learning needs of each member. During their four years of collaboration, meeting discussions were recorded, and individual and community narrative reflections about participation in the group were created. A thematic analysis of these collective data sources revealed the group’s evolution, and the authors draw on their experiences to tell their story with an aim to enhance professional learning in HE. The study highlights that individuals’ distinct and varied needs can be developed and supported through scholarly, collegial engagements such as a CfP, which does not necessarily require an immediate point of practice.

Keywords: higher education; collaborative; community; reflection; teaching practice; professional development; professional learning; collegial engagement; narrative analysis

1. Introduction

Professional learning and development for higher education (HE) teachers, researchers, and practitioners (which we refer to, collectively, as scholars) is often considered in terms of continuous capability or skill development, expertise or pedagogical upskilling, and knowledge acquisition through continuing education, training, mentoring, coaching, professional communities, or collaborative teams [1–4]. At its core, this learning and development of HE scholars focuses on enhancing academic practice, scholarship, and teacher performance to deliver high-quality education for students [5–9]. When approached through a lens of collaboration or in a collectivist manner, this professional development can support HE scholars to learn and share information among colleagues, co-construct knowledge, support and receive support from others (both instrumental—skill-based or task-focused, or socio-emotional—general guidance and support), and engage in team-based activities [3,10–13].

This paper focuses on our experiences, as of a group of eight HE scholars in Australia and New Zealand, as we recognized a new means of collaborative professional development. We discuss how we found a rhythm and structure to support one another in our discrete aspirations, establishing our individual academic identities, advancing our own teaching activities, while embracing collegial engagement and development as a *Community for Practice* (CfP). The paper begins by providing background to contextualize the study, followed by situating our work within the relevant literature on collaborative learning in HE. A description of the theoretical framework and methodology are then elaborated before key findings are presented and discussed. Our discussion focuses on the collegial approach used for professional development that has cemented the very essence of our community—a place where we open ourselves up to looking at any new challenges and supporting one another to achieve personal and collective academic development. We highlight how reciprocated trust and respect for members' challenges and ambitions, an established process of individual and community reflection, and a focus on individual and collective emergent needs supports a rich and diverse series of practice-based outcomes. We conclude by returning to the gap in the literature, by highlighting how this means of engagement extends beyond the traditional collaborative professional learning and development to support the varied needs of the group's members, while maintaining the collegial professional development of the group.

1.1. Background and Context

As the group of scholars referred to throughout this paper, we are members of a community for collaborative professional development approach called TATAL (Talking About Teaching and Learning), which uses a CoP approach for articulating teaching philosophies and achieving HE fellowships [14]. Through this paper, we use narrative inquiry to explore our experiences as our group has evolved across four years. We commenced our collaboration using this format following a call for expressions of interest in a full day workshop prior to a HE research and development conference in 2019. An open invitation was offered to any attendees who wanted to continue meeting online to progress HE fellowship applications—this was the beginning of the 'TATAL 2019' group. While not all attendees chose to continue, and some members have since ceased their engagement, the eight remaining HE scholars, about whose evolution this paper focuses, attend semi-structured, monthly online meetings.

It is the evolution of this group, to what we now recognize as a CfP, that we discuss through this paper. Leveraging findings from our thematic analysis, we highlight the current focus of the group to support holistic academic development for the nascent demands and objectives of all members, beyond an immediate point of practice, inquiry, or subject matter. That is, the group has evolved from the early focus of developing HE fellowship applications to now using monthly meetings to support the unique needs of each member to develop and shape their individual academic identity.

1.2. Collaborative Professional Learning—A Review of the Literature

Before exploring the development of our group, we situate our study within the broader literature on collaborative professional learning. Researchers have considered formal and informal approaches to academic development initiatives to develop academic identity, build professional networks, promote reciprocal learning, and foster community development beyond individual teacher effectiveness [15–18]. Further, collaborative professional learning in HE has been found to have a positive effect within a faculty, and acts to support creativity, motivation, and knowledge sharing. Moving beyond the individual focus, a collaborative approach enables participants to leverage the experiences of others to learn about managing vulnerability, overcoming errors, various teaching and learning (T&L) practices, and navigating the complexities and uncertainties of HE [9,19,20]. Indeed, collaborative learning for academic development in HE has been recognized as a means to

work through problems, collectively reflect on common issues, and individual challenges, promote innovation, build capacity, and socialize among those with shared values [9,21–24].

Such collaborative learning approaches include learning circles or faculty learning communities [25–28]; communities of practice (CoP) or inquiry [22,29,30]; small, significant networks [16,31–33]; peer observation and mentoring [21,23,34,35]; and peer-assisted teaching [36,37]. The benefits of the collegial nature of such approaches include the ability of communities to evolve, collaboration and generation of ideas with colleagues, and encouragement for critical reflection through supportive relationships [9,28,38]. Often, these approaches are built on a collective desire for enhancing a specific aspect of the HE profession. Researchers have also found that professional learning communities often function well or revolve around disciplines, experience or stage of career, emphasis on teaching within a role, or approaches to teaching and learning [39–43]. That is, the professional learning community is brought together and evolves because of common ground; it is based on a shared question, activity, skill development, or focus of investigation [2,29,44,45]. Even when the community is focused on reflection, there is a commonality of this reflection on specific teaching practice [10,11,46]. As such, there is limited focus on collegial professional learning or development that fosters individual aspirations that might differ from the group.

The conversations and common ground that bind the above approaches provide a useful approach for academic development when a specific set of skills, areas of knowledge or expertise, or practices are the focus. However, we suggest there is room for more discussion of collaborative learning and development that situates the people at the center, and where they might focus on individual and varied practices, while still benefitting from the collegiality of the group. Though some literature exists to focus on professional learning with the community rather than the practice at the center [47], there remains a need for more research to explore this type of community development. It is this gap in the literature to which our paper contributes. The narrative of our group’s evolution offers a collaborative approach to professional development that transcends known approaches. Our discussion focuses on our engagement as a group of eight HE scholars from varying disciplines and institutions, and explores the story of our evolution toward what we suggest as an additional approach for collegial development.

2. Methodological Framework and Research Design

We apply a methodological frame of reflective practice as a means for HE professional development [48–51]. Using this frame, we were able to critically examine our practice, consider alternate perspectives, and become aware of how we were developing as HE scholars [52,53]. We reflect using cyclical models to examine and evaluate our own experiences, actions, and reactions in order to improve our professional practice [54,55]. That is, we engage in conscious, systematic review and analysis to consider and evaluate our actions and decisions, extract meaningful lessons from our experiences, and apply insights to establish new goals and objectives while giving due consideration to our development based on reflective insights [56].

Having established and enhanced our abilities to engage in reflective practice through TATAL, we embraced this as a purposeful strategy for collegial development toward our T&L activities [57]. Further, we leveraged the community environment of TATAL to engage in collaborative reflective practice, which has been shown more effective than individual reflection alone, and as a means to promote empathy and wellbeing through shared experiences [58,59]. Using this frame allowed us to engage in narrative inquiry as a means to explore and reflect on our experiences, discussions, and written reflections in order to learn, grow, and tell the story of our individual and community development into a CfP [60–62]. Underpinned by the TATAL structure, and through the research design below, our narrative inquiry of our collaborative reflective practice has offered a means to consider and articulate what our community has become.

Narrative inquiry was ideally suited to our research design, as our data sources included the spoken and written lived experiences of the eight individuals that comprise our TATAL group, across four years [63,64]. A rhetorical approach to narrative analysis [65] was used to consider a total of 35 documents, with all eight members of the group privy to all shared individual and collaborative reflections and monthly meeting recordings. The written documents comprised the basis of the analysis, with the recordings supporting interpretation and nuance as required. At intervals of two and four years of engagement after the initial 2019 TATAL meeting, individual and community reflections and recordings of meetings were used to conduct an inductive, iterative narrative analysis. Approaching our experiences in this manner, using analysis and reflection of our experiences enabled us to engage in a process of discovery, wherein the themes and ideas emerged as we came to understand our group's evolution.

These two points in time (2021 and 2023) represent instances when our group sought to focus conversations and written work toward reflections on engagement with one another through TATAL. In 2021, we were acknowledging the disruption of COVID-19 to our work in HE, and reflecting on how individually and as a community we were navigating challenges. At this time, we had come to realize our monthly meetings were no longer simply focused on HE fellowship applications, and we agreed to record reflections. In doing so, we recognize the disruption of COVID-19 as a trigger for the evolution of the group [66]. As the group evolved through reflecting on challenges and the impact of COVID-19, the design of our TATAL engagement and the outcomes of iterative reflection resulted in an evolution of our data analysis from 2021 to 2023. Later, in 2023, we continued to reflect on our collective recognition of COVID-19 as a pivotal point for our group's development, and dedicated focused time reflecting again on the evolution of our group. That is, while we were engaged in ongoing reflective practice through the very nature of our monthly TATAL meetings, it was when we delved into the complexities of the stories and how they were changing alongside the challenges of the pandemic that we were able to recognize what was being revealed during our evolution toward a CfP.

The data collection and analysis used for our narrative inquiry are detailed below; however, we briefly outline the overarching approach here. While all members of 2019 TATAL engaged in co-creation of the coherent, overarching story [67,68], early coding and thematic analysis using NVivo software was undertaken by individuals (M.-A.S., J.P., N.B.R.), before returning to the full group to refine emergent themes and make sense of the chronological accounts of the evolution of the group [65]. We used the approach of story analyst (those undertaking the coding of themes) and storyteller (those crafting the narrative) roles [69] to develop the overall narrative. This supported the iterative approach described below, to ensure the elements of each reflection were interpreted objectively by separate members of the group before shifting to create the broader group narrative [70,71].

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study are the ongoing members of the TATAL 2019 group, comprising eight HE scholars employed across five Australian universities and two New Zealand universities. All members are female, and all have an association with teaching in HE as part of their role. However, the years of service working in HE, the functions and emphasis on teaching within roles (e.g., support, teaching, consulting, or research) and the disciplines represented vary, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of ongoing TATAL 2019 members.

Country	Years Worked in HE	Discipline	Role
New Zealand	9	Biomedical Science/ Pathology	Professional Teaching Fellow
New Zealand	12	Business	Senior Lecturer—Teaching and Research Academic
New Zealand	21	Biomedical Science/ Anatomy	Professional Teaching Fellow
Australia	21	Arts	Lecturer/Teaching Specialist—Academic Support
Australia	23	Physiology/ Biomedical Science	Lecturer—Teaching and Research Academic
Australia	24	Business	Academic Head—Teaching and Research
Australia	24	Health	Learning and Teaching Consultant
Australia	25	Physiology/ Biomedical Science	Senior Lecturer—Teaching and Research Academic

2.2. Data Collection

Across the four years of engagement, the group held over 40 meetings, taking place almost every month since the initial TATAL workshop in July 2019. All meetings were held online, except the initial TATAL workshop and breakfast, held in person, and seven members reconnecting at one conference held in July 2023. These online meetings were all recorded, with recordings made available in a shared online folder.

The 2023 written reflections focused on the development and achievements over the past four years that each individual attributed to their engagement with 2019 TATAL. They also included reflections on why members each continued engaging with the group, and articulation of how each member perceived the evolution of the group to a CfP. These reflections were written individually, not discussed with the group, and anonymized before analysis. The individual who collated and anonymized the reflections was not one of the members undertaking initial coding.

2.3. Data Analysis

The analysis at the two-year interval (in 2021) involved five iterations of thematic coding using NVivo software (version 12). The thematic coding included sections of text being selected and tagged to nodes within the software, each time being considered a single frequency of occurrence [72]. Each iteration comprised two individuals (M.-A.S., J.P.) separately coding themes, before working together to present an agreed analysis to the full group for further discussion. After each group discussion, the two individuals returned to refine their coding separately, then with each other, before returning to the full group. For the data reported at the two-year interval, only main themes are included, along with frequency of coding. The reported themes are the final agreed themes coded in NVivo.

At the four-year interval (in 2023), there were six iterations of analysis. Each of these followed the process wherein two individuals (J.P., N.B.R.) separately coded themes from written reflections in NVivo (version 12), before working together to present their combined and agreed analysis to the individual acting in the role of the storyteller (J.S.). After each discussion between the story analysts and storyteller, the analysts returned to repeat the process of coding individually, then combining refined themes, and returning to present the amended themes to the storyteller. For the data reported at the four-year interval, the final agreed main themes, first level sub-themes, and second level sub-themes are reported, along with their frequency of coding in NVivo. Analysis was completed using both thematic coding, as above, and the sentiment functionality in NVivo, which allowed the analysts to tag data as positive or negative [72]. Once the themes were agreed and the story was crafted into a draft narrative, the full group was presented with the themes and narrative to ensure ideas had been represented objectively and nuances had been captured.

Whilst the focus for the main narrative and discussion of this article are based primarily on data from reflections created at the four-year interval, to consider the group's evolution to date, we recognize the chronological nature of the data, and also report on the analysis at the two-year interval [64,73].

Rigor and credibility of data analysis and interpretation were achieved through applying techniques for verifying qualitative accounts and embracing reflexivity to acknowledge the nature of this research, where members of the group were also those coding, analyzing, and crafting the story [74]. Specifically, we ensured inclusion of multiple investigators, peer debriefing and member checking at each iteration [75], and leveraged our prolonged engagement, which was available for review as recordings [76–78].

These techniques supported our analysis by ensuring we were well oriented to the context of the group, enabled analytical probing to uncover any assumptions or biases, test emergent narratives, and fostered dialogue that resulted in a narrative that tells the story of the group's evolution, as objectively as possible. This approach ensured the interpretation of the data, and the story that emerged was founded on a collaborative effort that captured implicit meanings and hidden information, and ensured the synthesis of multiple perspectives [65].

3. Key Findings

As described in the Section 2, coding of reflections was undertaken at two intervals: after two and four years of engagement as 2019 TATAL. This section first presents the themes coded after two years before the more substantial results of the narrative analysis undertaken after four years. The codes from the two years reveal both continuity and evolution in the focus of the CfP. While TATAL remained the central theme throughout, it has evolved into a multi-faceted and layered framework. In the tables below, where frequency of references in lower-level sub-themes does not equal a sum as shown in the higher-level theme, references were coded directly to the higher-level theme only.

3.1. Results of Narrative Analysis after Two Years (in 2021)

The coding of written reflections and meeting notes after two years of engagement as 2019 TATAL supported the conception of articulating our group as a CfP [79]. Although 'CfP' was not an articulated theme, when the main themes were studied as a narrative, they led us to consider that our group was more than a CoP focused on developing teaching philosophies and achieving HE fellowships. These main themes and their frequencies are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Main themes and frequencies from analysis after two years of engagement.

Main Theme	Frequency of References
Teaching and learning	222
Wellbeing	186
Students	114
TATAL	83
COVID-19	57
Caring	45
Collegiality	43
University models	34
Workloads	34
Time	30
Work–life balance	27
Interactions with staff	20
Working from home	21

Acknowledging that many of the reflections used for the first round of coding were completed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was reasonable that many of these themes centered around the impact of COVID-19. At the time of coding, many

institutions were still operating within government-mandated restrictions in response to the ongoing waves of the pandemic. The analysis undertaken at this time supported the early recognition that our collaborative development occurring as members of 2019 TATAL focused more on the changes in HE in response to COVID-19 and the wellbeing and holistic development of members, rather than solely on achieving HE fellowships, which was our group's initial focus [79]. What was evident through this exercise was that our engagement shifted to include a focus on T&L practices, offering support for others, and attending to each member's personal and professional development. We acknowledged our group's activities were expanding beyond focusing on the singular HE fellowship development.

Specifically, exploration of these themes highlighted the evolution of our group from a CoP that was thriving as a nurturing, supportive, and trusting environment, to a CfP that benefitted the various needs of all members [79]. Although 'evolution' was not apparent as a theme, when exploring the themes at the two-year interval, we recognized that our engagement with the TATAL process as a CoP, through a shared disorienting dilemma of COVID-19, had resulted in a transformation to a group engaging beyond a single domain (i.e., one focused on a single professional development area, such as T&L practice or HE fellowships). This story of the evolution of the group is evidenced further in the results below, and expanded on in the Section 4. The characteristics of what 2019 TATAL members began to identify as a CfP, which were evidenced at the two-year mark, became more defined and extended in the data from the reflections at four years.

3.2. Results of Narrative Analysis after Four Years (in 2023)

The main narrative analysis that supports the development of this story comes from the coding of all members' individual reflections after four years of engagement. The inductive and iterative manual coding resulted in four main themes, each with sub-themes, as shown in Table 3. These themes provide a frame or storyline that support the story of the evolution of the group and the characteristics of a CfP. To clarify, the group considered TATAL an example of a CoP, and so the themes of CoP and TATAL acknowledged the differences between the general concept of a CoP and TATAL. Further, there was a recognition of the changes or evolution of the group and an articulation of the group as a CfP, both of which were evident as themes. This storyline is represented in Table 3, with the main themes listed to show the development of the group, while the subthemes are listed in descending order based on frequencies of coding.

Table 3. Main and sub-themes identified through coding, listed with reference frequencies.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency of References
Community of Practice	Practice-focused	11
	Professional development	8
	CoP environment	6
TATAL	Enactment of TATAL	259
	Focus of TATAL	8
	TATAL environment	
Evolution of the Group	COVID-19 as a tipping point	12
	Transformation	5
	Where to from here?	4
	Development of relationships	3
	Beyond TATAL	2
	Time	1
TATAL 2019 (as a CfP)	The TATAL 2019 environment	113
	Nurturing environment	100
	Affect	69
	Tangible aspects and outputs	50
	Community	29
	Individual	15
	Professional development	8
	Teaching and learning practice	4

3.2.1. Main Theme: Community of Practice

Presenting the themes as part of the chronological narrative, the story begins with the main theme: Community of Practice. Within this main theme, manual coding resulted in 26 references across five participants, with three sub-themes and their associated lower-level sub-themes shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchy of sub-themes under the main theme of Community of Practice.

Main Theme: Community of Practice		
First Level Sub-Theme	Second Level Sub-Themes	Frequency of References
Practice-focused	HE work environment	6
	Growing the practice	2
	Improvement in practice	1
	Just T&L practice	1
Professional development	Learning	5
	Self-improvement	2
	Professional development	1
CoP environment	Shared interests in T&L	6
	Safe environment, not necessarily	3
	Open, non-confidential	1
	Can be recreated	1

Members recognized their early engagement with TATAL as participating in a CoP. While this was not as prevalent as other main themes (Table 3), the group did acknowledge that the focus of collaborative engagement was still underpinned by the original aim—that of focusing on T&L practice, professional development, and nurturing a CoP-type environment. It is from this basis that the evolution of the group builds.

3.2.2. Main Theme: TATAL

The next main theme, TATAL, also had three main sub-themes, across six participants and with 46 references. Table 5 provides the coding and references of the main and lower-level sub-themes that were coded against this theme. Continuing the narrative of the evolution, this theme highlights how the TATAL approach, built on being a CoP, is extended. Table 5 shows ‘how’ the group engages as a TATAL CoP: through the enactment of TATAL, the focus of TATAL, and the environment of TATAL.

Table 5. Hierarchy of sub-themes under the main theme of TATAL.

Main Theme: TATAL		
First Level Sub-Theme	Second Level Sub-Themes	Frequency of References
Enactment of TATAL	Questions of clarification	7
	Sharing insights	7
	Monthly meetings	4
	Replicable	2
	TATAL workshop	2
	Facilitators	1
	Reflective practice	1
	TATAL breakfast	1
Focus of TATAL	Professional development	5
	HERDSA fellowship ¹	3
	Teaching philosophy	1
TATAL environment	Trust	3
	Safe environment	3
	Curated information	1
	Highlight of the month	1

¹ HERDSA fellowships are HE fellowships awarded by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.

Recognizing TATAL as a type of T&L CoP is evident here (Table 5), as the enactment and focus of TATAL encompass the HE fellowship. Each year, there is an annual introduction of members to new TATAL groups through a workshop and breakfast, and a recommended approach for reflective practice through monthly meetings based on questions of clarification and shared insights. These elements of TATAL were evident in the coding. The evolution of our group to a level beyond TATAL ideologies is evident when considering the TATAL environment alongside the CoP environment. Here, the shift in terminology is apparent through the recognition and prominence of safety and trust being of great importance to TATAL to its members, acknowledged as a highlight of the month. However, it is still notable that the TATAL approach underpinned the collaboration the group continued to engage in. As highlighted by one member's comment, we used the TATAL model to ask each other questions of clarification, and our confidence grew that our [individual] practice was worthy.

3.2.3. Main Theme: Evolution of the Group

The final main theme before reaching the CfP was that of Evolution of the Group. Coding continued to support the narrative, and in this case, the theme elaborated on some of the unique features of the group's activities and interactions that were emerging and evolving. While the six sub-themes were coded from seven participants, only the most referenced sub-theme, COVID-19 as a tipping point, had lower-level themes, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Sub-themes under COVID-19 as a tipping point, within the theme of Evolution of the Group.

Main Theme: Evolution of the Group		
First Level Sub-Theme	Second Level Sub-Themes	Frequency of References
COVID-19 as a tipping point	COVID-19	5
	Challenges	3
	Time for change	2
	Change and uncertainty	1
	Reality check	1

Aligned with the coding from the reflections after two years, when we considered the shift in focus of the group after four years, the group still recognized the disorienting dilemma that was COVID-19 being critical to the story of our evolution. As one member noted, the TATAL 2019 community became a place of refuge where we could escape for a short while the disruption and challenges that had fallen upon our personal lives and higher education bubbled around us.

3.2.4. Main Theme: TATAL 2019

Finally, in reaching the current state of the group in the narrative, which is its evolution, the main theme with the most references in Table 3, TATAL 2019 (which the researchers agreed, described a CfP), also provides the most sub-themes. This main theme was recognized across all participants, and the hierarchical coding provides the basis on which we tell the story of the 2019 TATAL as a CfP, with sub-themes expanded upon in the Section 4. To make sense of the TATAL 2019 (as a CfP) theme, we provide the top ten second-level sub-themes (and their frequencies) and the four first-level sub-themes that had 50 or more references (Table 3): the TATAL 2019 environment (113), nurturing environment (100), affect (69), and tangible aspects and outputs (50).

For the TATAL 2019 environment sub-theme, thematic coding resulted in second level sub-themes including Community for Practice (13), celebrating achievements (12), heterogeneity (11), personal development (11), beyond teaching and learning practice (10), collaboration (9), rhythm of meetings (8), reflective practice (7), commitment (6), and belonging (5).

For the nurturing environment sub-theme, thematic coding resulted in second level sub-themes that included building confidence (11), supporting each other (10), empowering people (5), respect (5), sharing (5), care for each other (4), empathy (4), encouragement (4), friendships (4), and genuineness (4). As one member highlighted, 'TATAL as a CFP (...) is providing nutrition to my identity growth (...) the fact that my peers are from different institutes and disciplines provides perspectives of cultures and practices on the same situation, which has been helpful'.

The narrative analysis for the affect sub-theme was undertaken using the sentiment functionality, as described in the Section 2. During early thematic coding, it was evident that there were positive and negative sentiments in the comments being made. As such, it was decided to explore this aspect of the narratives using the sentiment tool. The results show that all the participants had positive sentiments in their narratives (56 references), and all but one participant had negative sentiments (13 references). The coverage of positive sentiments ranged from 25 to 52% of individual reflections, with an average of 39% coverage. The coverage of negative sentiments, for those who had negative sentiments identified, ranged from 2 to 21%, with an average across all members of 8% coverage. The positive sentiments, combined with the nurturing environment, were evident in member reflections, such as the following: '[this group] had become a place where everyone helped each other to work through the problems, frustrations, anxieties, and concerns, and the warm, encouraging and inspiring atmosphere fostered by the TATAL group is infectious.'

While examples of tangible and instrumental aspects that have resulted from engagement with 2019 TATAL are shown in the list below, when coded as part of narrative analysis, the top ten lower-level sub-themes were sharing of work, thoughts, ideas, and practice (9); publications (9); fellowships in progress (4); fellowships achieved (3); joint conference workshops (3); research (3); joint publication (2); monthly meetings (2); peer-reviewed book chapters (2); and scholarship of T&L (SoTL) (2).

When considering how engagement as 2019 TATAL has impacted members' individual academic identities and growth, several tangible or instrumental and socio-emotional examples were offered. Members have highlighted the following: 'I appreciate the practical tips of academic integrity, classroom management, LMS development, and the use of tools such as H5P (...) [this is] immensely useful for me as a new HE teacher, and [our group is] a safe place where I can talk about my teaching practice without being judged. I can share my ideas for a new teaching activity or assessment and be encouraged and inspired to build and develop it.' As one member suggested, the reason for the sharing of information is different; it is about supporting each person in the group so that they have the confidence, tools and people genuinely interested in their success helping them to try new things, develop new skills, or do whatever it is they want to do.

While not an exhaustive list, the following shows a sample of growth in practice and personal development through tangible or instrumental and socio-emotional outcomes:

- Shared practical tips and solutions for dealing with curriculum, assessment, learning management systems (LMS), and classroom management;
- Support for implementing new technologies in courses or trialing new ideas;
- Ability to gauge issues across the sector through shared stories and access to various international teaching and research approaches;
- Support for individual reflection and through community reflection on areas for improvement in personal teaching practice;
- Improved confidence and capabilities for HE teaching and SoTL research, including enhanced collaborative research capabilities;
- Enhanced ability to engage in critical reflective practice through practicing offering and receiving constructive and considerate feedback;
- Four co-authored, double-blind peer-reviewed book chapters published;
- Co-authored journal article under review, plus this article;
- Four HE fellowships completed and three in progress for group members, with ongoing support at individual institutions for colleagues preparing fellowship portfolios;

- Collaborating to deliver a conference roundtable session, facilitate ongoing CoP groups, and leading a curriculum development project;
- Individual conference presentations and roundtables delivered;
- Various teaching and leadership in teaching awards achieved.

The above sub-themes, lower-level sub-themes, and examples of various outcomes as a result of engagement with 2019 TATAL evidence the support members have experienced in nurturing their individual and varied aspirations. The range of these outcomes, and the personal and professional development of 2019 TATAL members beyond enhancing their teaching philosophies or working toward HE fellowships, further endorses the evolution of our group as a CfP. This support for various aspirations, and the evolution over four years, was summarized by one member as follows:

I think the community has been built over time because we've leveraged our ability to ask questions and genuinely listen (rather than being ready with an answer or response); we've all been given the space and all uphold trust and respect for others, so we truly care for the challenges and their aspirations, which are more often than not, much different to our own.

4. Discussion

Returning to the purpose of this paper, which is telling the story of the evolution of a CfP where collegial development supports individual and varied ambitions of HE scholars without a common practice as a focal point, we leverage the themes presented in the results to guide our narrative. While the analysis of these reflections after four years provides the substantive narrative, we acknowledge the recognition of the evolution of the group that was apparent upon the analysis after two years. The story begins with a group of HE scholars who came together in 2019 to focus on T&L and HE fellowships. This first round of narrative analysis highlighted the impact of COVID-19 as a recognized tipping point, highlighting a shift or catalyst of our group's evolution [66]. After two years of engagement, the themes were coded evidence of the shift in focus from TATAL itself to a much broader focus that includes wellbeing, caring, and a focus on our varied T&L practice. As shown in Table 2, COVID-19 was mentioned as a main theme, which supports the recognition of its importance at this time of change. When the group was reflecting and sharing concerns, challenges, and aspirations, the focus was much broader than the original core focus of teaching philosophies and fellowships. We take this early acknowledgement and extend it in the remainder of the discussion, focusing on the written reflections after four years of engagement.

This discussion is not just about eight individual narratives, but rather the collective narrative, and how the themes themselves tell the story of what it means for the 2019 TATAL group to be a CfP. Through the narrative analysis, the act of determining the main and sub-themes allowed the data to evidence the evolution of the group. That is, the iterative, inductive, and rhetorical narrative analysis approach itself is what led to the development of the bigger story: the evolution of this group and how ongoing engagement as a CfP supports individual and collective professional development in HE.

Diversity is a key feature of our group: we are from different institutions and disciplines, hold different roles with varying levels of experience working in HE, and come from different social-cultural environments. Yet, despite studies having shown that HE scholars with such disparity approach T&L differently or draw focus toward similarities for collegial professional development [41,42,80], we have nurtured our community for development that embraces these differences. Rather than trying to force a common theme that might not suit the differences in our membership, we welcome the different aspirations of members and work to support these (whether they continue on the path of initial focus on HE fellowships or whether their current goals differ from others).

These salient themes of T&L show what constitutes the support for the unique and varied learning needs and priorities of HE scholars. As shown in the sub-themes in Table 3, all of those features describe who we are. Taking any of the themes and sub-themes away

would not do justice to the CfP that we are. The research here has shown that each of those themes are pieces of a puzzle that come together to create the CfP.

This collaborative reflective practice highlights that having a CoP was foundational. Beyond that element, being part of TATAL is a fundamental aspect of the CoP we belong to, and serves as the catalyst of interest in T&L. The TATAL way of doing things enabled the creation of a unique CoP that is able to endure and transcend into a community that embraces professional development and allows for personal nurturing, i.e., a CfP. In addition, there is the collective experiences as evidenced in the theme ‘Evolution of the Group’ and its extant sub-themes that were a critical part of the journey into becoming a CfP. Without that process that accounted for such aspects as ‘time’ and ‘development of relationships’ it is reasonable to say that the metamorphosis into the CfP would not have happened. Then there is the CfP itself and how it is described by the theme of ‘TATAL 2019’ and its sub-themes.

The research here shows that each and every one of the aspects as described by the themes and sub-themes is important to who we are as a CfP, and that a CfP cannot exist on its own without those other elements. Those other elements are foundational to the development of the CfP. They describe what factors are important, such as an interest in T&L and being part of TATAL, and they also capture a process that gives permission for the development of a CfP. It is through the process described, i.e., the design of our monthly meetings, our deliberate written reflections, and our focus on engaging in collaborative reflection, that we have been able to uncover these component parts that we are now seeing as elements required for our CfP. Through these practices, a process has emerged that shows how a CfP can come into being.

As recognized in the themes, the TATAL approach leverages a CoP wherein HE scholars first refine their teaching philosophies, with a recommendation for subsequent monthly meetings to support members to work toward HE fellowships. There was a clear focus for a community seeking to use collaborative reflective practice for enhancing practice [22,46,81]. However, it is the idiosyncrasies of the TATAL approach (Table 5), or the enactment and environment as highlighted sub-themes, that resulted in separate CoP and TATAL themes. In various meetings, members have discussed how their engagement with other CoPs remains different to even early engagement with TATAL. As one member reflected on what signing up to the initial TATAL workshop meant for them, they highlighted the following: ‘that day was to be the beginning of a deeply fulfilling time that continues to this day’.

Indeed, TATAL is a means for collaborative professional development in HE. It is a learning community [82], with a common interest, domain, and shared commitment of collective reflective inquiry for advancing T&L practice, which are underpinning elements of CoPs [81,83,84]. The TATAL approach sets up a collaborative environment in which members engage in community reflective practice to obtain different perspectives on their individual writing and reflections [14,85].

To further understand the collaborative approach to TATAL, we return to the sub-themes in Table 5. While this approach has been implemented annually since 2008 [14], and is indeed, replicable, acknowledging the themes from the group’s reflections affords deeper insights into how this group experiences TATAL. Of note, the process or enactment of TATAL, which begins yearly at the workshop, followed by a breakfast, sets the scene for the purpose of the group. With monthly meetings facilitated by experienced ‘TATALers’ and the use of questions of clarification to explore written reflections, the community provides a space for professional development built on reflective practice. The group also acknowledged, compared to CoPs more generally, that the TATAL environment is safe, and trust is a key element. However, the group still considered that at its core, the TATAL approach has an initial purpose that focuses on the HERDSA fellowship and the development of teaching philosophies. Despite the recognition of our group’s evolution, we acknowledge the origins of the TATAL approach as an extension of a CoP.

To understand how the group evolved from its initial purpose, to the current recognized CfP, we explore the evolution of the group theme. Notably, of the sub-themes that

resulted from narrative analysis for this main theme, the only one with lower-level sub themes was COVID-19 as a tipping point. In reflecting on how and why 2019 TATAL did not simply continue the path of supporting everyone toward HERDSA fellowships, we cannot ignore our shared experience of COVID-19. As suggested earlier, though this was an extended time period, the impact of the pandemic on HE institutions and individuals necessitated transformation. Other communities and groups that are focused on collaborative professional development might not have experienced challenges relating to the pandemic at the same point in their collective development. As such, we explore how this event, and the resulting challenges for the following years, impacted our development. COVID-19 as a theme is apparent because it was a major event during our evolution, but it is also fundamental to building the relationships among the group.

Our group formed in July 2019, so when the pandemic impacted HE institutions in Australia and New Zealand in early 2020, the focus of meetings shifted from sharing and progressing fellowship applications to the practical challenges of T&L in a global pandemic. At this point, we were well-placed for online teaching and meetings, based on our monthly online engagement and the shared experiences of group members with longstanding online teaching practice. The meetings also took on elements of caring for the wellbeing of everyone as we navigated challenges and uncertainties in our personal and professional lives.

Notably, during the meetings at the height of the pandemic, we leveraged our practiced approach of sharing, listening, and asking questions of clarification to explore what others were experiencing in more depth. For example, when members shared about practical challenges of emergency remote teaching and learning [86,87], or what might have seemed superficial personal challenges, members were able to leverage their ability to ask questions of clarification to delve deeper into the issues. This was the beginning of our realization that we could use our established approach and genuine concern for one another to support individual needs alongside the development of fellowship applications. COVID-19 was, indeed, a tipping point. There was a recognized need for change, and the structure of TATAL would be leveraged to advance the group into new territory—that of supporting individual challenges and aspirations—while maintaining the collaborative focus of the group.

Further, with each collaborative monthly session, trust among the group has grown. The community, as a CfP, has been built over time. As a CfP rather than a CoP, the focus shifted to individuals and their unique practice, rather than continuing to support one another toward a common goal [47]. We were no longer just growing together, but collaboratively supporting individual growth as needs emerged across the group. Recognizing the time required for the evolution of the group, we suggest this contributes to some of the subthemes under the TATAL 2019 (as a CfP) theme. That is, the TATAL 2019 environment and the nurturing environment themes both had elements that highlight the commitment of the group to individuals and the group as a collective. These are not characteristics of a community that happen overnight; it has taken four years to reach this point. Nor are they characteristics that are evident in the literature relating to CoP or TATAL; however, we now embrace this environment to support individual and collegial development in what we recognize as a CfP.

This transformation to a CfP is the narrative that describes how the group has evolved from a CoP guided by the TATAL approach to a community where the focus is on the individual as well as the practice. Collegial development is a result of keeping our focus on talking about T&L ('TATALing'), leveraging our community reflection and a collaborative approach to explore how we can advance our practice, while basing specific topics around unique individual needs, or placing the individual at the center [47]. As others have suggested, the collegial nature of communities, engagement in critical reflection, and supportive relationships can foster the evolution of a group that has come together for professional development [9,28,38]. We see this in the results of the TATAL 2019 (as a CfP) theme, in both the sub-themes and specific tangible outputs.

The sub-themes highlight the need for a collaborative approach and emphasis on individual needs. Both heterogeneity of the group and personal development are crucial to the community—we need both diverse members and a focus on each member. Collaboration and celebrating individual achievements contribute to the success of the group, while care, respect, empathy, friendships, support, belonging, and genuineness truly encompass the feelings members have because of their engagement. This is not simply a CoP focused on T&L practice, rather a CfP that has the individual and the community both at the center of its *raison d'être*.

The heterogeneity that comprises all TATALs is amplified as we shift to considering our group as a CfP. No longer are we developing in a collaborative manner with HE scholars at various levels, in different disciplines, and across several institutions, but we are hearing their challenges, exploring their pursuits, and gaining insights into their T&L practices as we support everyone's individual aspirations.

Leveraging the rhythm and structure of the meetings and our practice of asking questions of clarification, while focusing on one piece of writing, reflection, or shared practice, collegial development comes from collectively focusing on supporting one individual at a time. We see the evidence of this in tangible and instrumental outputs as well as socioemotional support. Not only has the group collaborated to deliver joint publications, conference papers, and workshops, but individuals have achieved personal goals and realized improvement in their T&L practice. As a CfP, we collaboratively support each member in overcoming their challenges (e.g., professional frustrations arising from institutional decisions or mandates, or resourcing constraints), chasing their ambitions (such as preparing HE fellowships or award applications), embracing their opportunities (including gaining confidence to publish or experiment with teaching practice and technologies that have proven successful in other contexts), and enhancing their practice (e.g., becoming more familiar with the theoretical underpinnings of SoTL). The common interest is a desire and ability to advance a variety of aspirations to establish individual academic identities and growth.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of the HE environment, whether they revolve around curriculum development and delivery, student engagement and experiences, university models, academic integrity, introducing new technologies, or navigating a new world of artificial intelligence, we face these challenges and opportunities together. As individuals, we might realize and experience our environments differently. Indeed, we represent various disciplines, institutions, and even countries, but our CfP means we have collaborative support to explore challenges together. We conclude our discussion by leveraging the voice of one of our members, who summarized this well in a reflection:

[In] our CfP (. . .) the reason for the sharing of information is different—it is about supporting each person in the group so that they have the confidence, tools and people genuinely interested in their success helping them to try new things, develop new skills, or do whatever it is they want to do.

5. Conclusions

Sharing this story has allowed us to explore our experiences as we came to understand our engagement as a CfP—a place where individual aspirations are embraced and supported. The collaboration is evident as we come together monthly to support whatever goals individual members have at any given time. Collectively, we navigate the complexities of HE. The very essence of this community means we open ourselves up to looking at a variety of challenges, opportunities, and ambitions everyone brings, in a way that leverages community support and collaborative reflection for advancing our practice. We recognize shared issues and opportunities, place them in our own context, and leverage our community to overcome them. It is a space where people can talk about challenges, seek and offer support, and advance both individually and collectively.

The narrative analysis presented here showed that of the main themes, the Community of Practice was foundational. Through our interests in T&L, we joined a CoP that had a

focus on HE fellowships and teaching philosophies. We quickly realized the uniqueness of that CoP, and through our engagement as a TATAL group, we came to understand the value of the TATAL environment and its focus and enactment of key aspects of a CoP. Through the convergence of factors, namely external triggers such as COVID-19 and the responses within the HE environment, we recognized a change in the focus of the meetings and strengthening of relationships. Meeting times were filled with discussions on topical issues and concerns about each other. The TATAL CoP afforded an environment that allowed for just-in-time advice on T&L practices, with practical and actionable advice. Equally, it became a place for frustrations to be voiced, emotional support to be extended, and genuine care devoid of any political or self-focused agenda to be shown. It was an uplifting environment where our concerns were allayed, action plans devised, collegiate support proffered, and a new phase of our existence as a CfP emerged.

Our collective reflective practice and collaborative narrative inquiry have revealed the aspects that are most important to the development of a CfP. The CfP is a result of the unique evolution of those foundational aspects. The sub-themes add clarification to each main theme that allowed us to understand and learn what constitutes the phenomenon of the CfP. We are mindful that we are in our infancy as a CfP, and so we acknowledge uncertainty as to how it will evolve from here. However, it is a unique place we find ourselves in; the data presented tell the story of a unique community centered on the practice of T&L, which we have told through our narrative, to bring value to our understanding of the potential in a CfP.

We have used and suggest the term ‘Community for Practice’. As members of the 2019 TATAL, we consider that the meeting of our group is beyond revolving around a core idea, practice, or knowledge base. The reason for our continued engagement with the community is the people and their individual practice; the central tenet of our community is collectively supporting each individual’s academic growth. Through our narrative analysis and discussion, we have presented and explored the key elements that contribute to the CfP. These include acknowledgement of COVID-19 as a trigger event that was a catalyst for change; the time taken to build relationships, trust, and develop a rhythm and ability to engage in community reflective practice; a structured approach to focusing on specific writing or practice; and care for advancing the emergent needs of everyone. We continue to engage as we have described above, because we genuinely want to support each members’ achievement of their personal aspirations, and we know in return, we will have the full support of the community as we pursue our goals and overcome our challenges. The focus of our ongoing collaboration to embrace and uphold individual goals draws our story to a conclusion, through one final member quote:

TATAL is a community for practice in that we are always moving forward together. Beyond talking and sharing information, we help each individual’s reflective practice by asking questions and sharing insights on individual pieces and collaboratively discussing what this could mean, or how this is approached in other contexts. We debate possible approaches to issues currently being experienced and we create things collectively.

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Article

Finding a Way: What Crisis Reveals about Teachers' Emotional Wellbeing and Its Importance for Education

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Abstract: In crisis, teachers are often positioned as frontline workers serving the community's needs. The emotional work of teaching is widely recognised, an acknowledgement that teachers mediate emotionally loaded relational dynamics. A fast-growing body of research investigates strategies and interventions to emotionally support children and young people in times of crisis. Less explored is teachers' emotional wellbeing during times of crisis. This research aims to better understand teachers' needs to support their wellbeing in times of crisis. It utilises a narrative approach, threading together thematically analysed Twitter posts from teachers and teacher representative bodies engaged in discussion of their profession across the USA. Our findings show that teachers experienced a range of emotions around the pandemic when their daily work pivoted to accommodate government-mandated responses. Teaching is, of its nature, an emotionally taxing role, and this is heightened in crisis. Our research highlights the importance of teachers finding a way toward self-care that is nested within an institutional culture of collective care.

Keywords: emotion; affect; teachers; teaching culture; crisis; narrative; education; policy

1. Introduction

Our planet and its people are facing “crisis after crisis”. On the immediate surface, there are climate change-related weather events, economic destabilisation, international conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic (see [1]). On a deeper level, public narratives of sequential crises dominate public discourse and policy, stimulating emotional responses that influence how people relate to one another. Notably, these include many discussions about perceived crises in education.

Educational institutions are broadly implicated in such crises. They are often positioned in instrumental ways, such as keeping order, caring for students, and providing hope for the future. There is a fast-growing body of research exploring the need for strategies and interventions to support children and young people both during and after crisis (see [2]). In response to COVID-19, education providers have been political instruments in managing the virus outbreak, with teachers and institutions expected to work in support of federal and state public health strategies (see [3,4]). Less explored is teacher emotional work [5]. Emotional work can be defined as the effort teachers must make to comport themselves around a legitimate or permitted range of emotions. How the emotional toll of a rolling crisis might affect teachers' sense of agency in their work, influencing their capacity to support students, requires necessary attention (see [6–9]).

The evidence this article explores shows that teachers feel a sense of ubiquitous crisis around their work. This is a shared feeling, but not an explicit term of the profession's reflections on its practice. This ubiquitous but not explicit feeling delegates responsibility for teacher emotional wellbeing to the individual teachers themselves, rather than placing that responsibility at other levels (such as the jurisdiction that governs a given education

system, the employer's duty of care, or the peer care that characterises a community of practice). Given other literature around the importance of emotional wellbeing for enabling education and educational success, the feeling of crisis is itself a major challenge for education and providers of education.

This article opens with a discussion of the 'rolling crisis', exploring how this widely shared affective formulation informs the expectations of teachers. It then reviews the theory and literature around the emotional dimensions of teaching work and teacher identities, paying particular attention to Hochschild's [10] argument that emotional rules govern professional work. The debates about the emotion and affect theory are vast and varying; for the purposes of this paper it is important to note that, while emotion is experienced on an individual level—physically, biologically, neurologically, and behaviourally—it is also experienced within cultural, structural, and situational contexts. We use the term 'emotion' or 'emotionality' as an all-encompassing term that includes the multiple dimensions of emotion framed through a psychosocial (psychoanalytic and sociological) lens; for example, we draw on Turner [11], Freud [12], Winnicott [13,14], and Hochschild [10]. This concept of emotionality overarches frameworks such as emotional intelligence, competence, regulation, and resilience, which are distinct bodies of work that intersect in various ways. Teacher responses to emotional rules are accountable through the stories teachers tell—are permitted to tell—about their work and their professional identities, so this article explains a methodology for reading social media posts (tweets) that enables an exploration of these stories. The stories were initially categorised in two ways: (1) as Sacred Stories telling what is expected of teachers; and (2) as Cover Stories detailing what teachers report they do, think, and feel, usually aligned with expectations. Guided by the Sacred Stories and Cover Stories that teachers tell, this article's findings identify a category of Uncover Stories—what teachers do, think, and feel—which present clear evidence of emotionally overloaded tensions that teachers are responsible for managing.

2. The Rolling Crisis and Expectations of Teachers

On 30 January 2020, responding to widespread outbreaks of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the World Health Organization [15] declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Shortly after this, there were warnings of the detrimental impacts that such an emergency might entail, for example, food and resource shortages, which would influence people's livelihoods and vital infrastructure such as health and education systems [16]. The pandemic's educational impacts became very apparent over the next three months.

Schatzki [17] (p. 18) defines crises as occurring in people's 'ongoing moment-to-moment lives'. They distinguish large-scale crises, such as political, economic, and international crises that manifest as recessions, conflict, supply chain breakdowns, climate change, and pandemics, from the more localised crises in ongoing life. It is a distinction that we refer to as macro- and micro-crises in this paper. Micro-crises are attached to the people who experience them and demand a response, whether that be an action, thought, or emotion. Macro- and micro-crises interact. For example, a teacher might face a micro-crisis where his/her internet crashes and the online marking he/she is working on is lost. Such an event is a crisis because, as Schatzki [17] (p. 19) states, it is 'unexpected, unpredictable and undesired', but the event is localised to the teacher experiencing the crisis. On the other hand, a teacher may experience a loss of data due to failing infrastructure—loss of electricity or broader internet connectivity—brought about by a COVID-19-related human resourcing crisis.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure 'inclusive, equitable and quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all'. UNICEF [18] reports this that Goal 4 has been significantly compromised due to COVID-19 public health responses across the globe. The framework for action that underpins Goal 4 is the UNESCO [19] (p. 30) Incheon declaration, which expects that teachers will be 'well-qualified, trained, adequately remunerated and motivated, using appropriate ped-

agogical approaches'. There is also an expectation that teachers should be supported by 'appropriate information and communication technology (ICT), as well as the creation of safe, healthy, gender-responsive, inclusive and adequately resourced environments that facilitate learning'. So, while teachers are thought to be the most significant influencers in regard to equity, access, and quality education, there is recognition that the broader environment has the capacity to support or constrain teachers in their work. Cannon, Davis, and Long [20] remark that teachers are often positioned in the frontline of recovery from crises, which has implications for education practices and requires adequate planning to avoid further potential damage. For instance, Willse [21] describes the 'scramble to adopt technologies for emergency remote teaching' amid nationwide school closures in the United States of America (USA).

While the aim of 'quality teaching' has currency, it is impeded by a 'scramble' to meet demand that may limit agency. For instance, Pinto [22] explores how policy layers create disjunctures between what is mandated and the realities of the workplace for school leaders in Canada. Similarly, Willse [21] analysed 337 publicly available documents in the USA from 50 state education agencies, finding far-ranging recommendations for emergency remote teaching in response to COVID-19 that left many teachers feeling overworked and under resourced. Even before the pandemic, in the USA, Bartell et al. [23] (p. 304) flagged 'the recent flux of viral teacher resignation letters [that] are acts of teacher agency, speaking against neoliberal practices and policies that constrain the work of teaching to the detriment of students and teachers'. In Australia, Acton and Glasgow [24] review teacher wellbeing, where wellbeing is seen as being under threat in a political environment of performativity and competitiveness. Each article highlights the tensions inherent in what is expected of teachers. For instance, UNESCO [19] anticipates safe and inclusive environments. According to Willse [21], these are under threat due to the exposed inequities in the educational system in the USA, particularly with regard to technology. Moreover, UNESCO [19] supposes that teachers are well-qualified and remunerated, but Pinto [22] notes that de-skilling teacher professionals and cost cutting measures are required for school leaders to be deemed as 'performing'.

In such an environment, teachers' agency becomes compromised [23]. As Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson [25] suggest, agency requires consciousness of the motivations, values, and beliefs that lead to action. Both Bartell et al. [23] and Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson [25] indicate that, in recent years, teacher autonomy has been reduced by tight political and administrative controls, responding to imperatives other than crisis management. Building on such work, Hopman [26,27] shows a connection between teacher agency—a capacity to consciously act in practice—and emotional consciousness. Much of a person's emotional life is carefully mediated by unspoken and often unknown emotional rules, and becoming conscious of how emotional rules might influence action enhances agency. Since a crisis demands action in often swift and unknown ways, as well as intense and impulsive emotional responses, agency may be limited.

3. Emotionality and Teaching Performance

Thompson and Jones [28] (p. 91) discuss how 'teachers trade in their empathy, creativity, professionalism and innovation for scripted curriculum...'. Teachers are constantly striving to be 'good enough' but typically fall short due to the expectations outlined in the previous section. Their article recounts the emotional experience of a teacher fighting against 'the pit deep in my stomach filling with frustration, disgust and sadness' at the expectation to measure and compare student progress in a way that dehumanises both teachers and students. The authors highlight how teachers often have to ignore feeling—and, thus, having empathy—for and with their students. While Thompson and Jones [28] recount specific 'trauma', Acton and Glasgow [24] consider the literature on teacher wellbeing and seek to determine what enables teacher flourishing—as distinct from how to survive the traumas. They are more explicit in the consideration of the range of individual, relational and contextual factors that might influence emotionality. For example, individual

factors such as emotional intelligence influence teacher wellbeing. On a relational level, emotionality is hinted at by the authors, highlighting the importance of teachers feeling ‘connected’ and maintaining a sense of ‘belonging’. Contextually, it is noted that external factors influence how teachers manage emotions. In contrast to Thompson and Jones [28], Acton and Glasgow [24] (p. 102) note that teacher wellbeing is constructed collaboratively, resulting in a sense of ‘personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness’. Wellbeing is supported or constrained ‘by contextual factors which enable teachers to realise their purpose and goals in teaching, provide realistic and manageable work demands that allow for autonomy, and which value, respect and celebrate teachers’ professional expertise and work practice’ [24] (p. 102).

Since Acton and Glasgow’s [24] review of the literature, teacher wellbeing and emotionality has been in greater focus. Factoring in studies from 1985 to 2019, Chen [29] developed a Teacher Emotion Model, which considers the ever-changing relationship between various elements of emotionality. Chen [29] terms this an integrated perspective and considers four seminal systematic reviews, beginning with Sutton and Wheatley’s [30], followed by Fried, Mansfield, and Dobozy’s [31]; Uitto, Jokikokko, and Estola’s [32]; and Šarić’s [33] reviews.

Building on the earlier work, Chen’s [29] model attempts to define teacher emotion as unique from general emotion and posits ‘antecedents’, ‘teacher emotions’, and ‘consequences’ as three interrelated aspects of the model. The antecedents of teacher emotions include personal knowledge, values, and skills; personality; and professional beliefs and contextual antecedents such as sociocultural, policy, organisational, and stakeholder factors. Furthermore, a teacher’s ‘emotional capacity’ for emotional labour strategies, emotional intelligence, and emotion regulation are the antecedents of an emotional experience but also form the nature of teacher emotion. The model also outlines how teachers themselves, along with their students and even pedagogical practice, bear the consequences of teachers’ emotions. Chen [29] sets out to offer a fine-grained perspective of the interrelationship of the nature of teacher emotion and its antecedents and consequences. However, the granularity of the model does not necessarily make teacher emotion clearer. Chen also argues that a definition of ‘teacher emotion’ is yet to be clarified, whilst also detailing how the nature of emotion is dependent on such a wide range of factors. Some of these are yet to be named, so it is hardly surprising that a consensus definition for ‘teacher emotion’ is yet to be agreed. The nature of teacher emotion is mediated by teacher emotional rules, which are discussed further in the subsequent section and are derived from the notion of emotional labour (see [2,34]). Teacher emotional rules are born from a collective and, in turn, give rise to the collective; hence, the definition of teacher emotion is dependent on and unique to the collective from which it originates. Chen [29], like Frenzel, Daniels, and Burić [5]; Šarić [33]; and Turner [11], notes the slipperiness in trying to define and research emotion.

Further studies have emerged since Chen’s [29] systematic review (see [4–6,8,9,35–37]). Such studies hark from Australia, Chile, Croatia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the USA, demonstrating similar concerns internationally. Some studies specifically feature higher-education teachers (see [6,8]), while most consider primary or secondary teachers (teachers of students ranging in age from four to eighteen years of age). Some studies specifically consider teacher emotion related to COVID-19 responses and the shift to online teaching (see [4,6,8,9,20]).

Soncini, Politi, and Matteucci [9] employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the implications of the COVID-19 lockdown and online teaching on emotional exhaustion among primary and secondary teachers in Italy. The findings were mostly in alignment with an earlier study based in the United Kingdom by Kim and Asbury [4] where twenty-four primary or secondary teachers were interviewed, sharing ‘key scenes’ from the first five to six weeks of lockdown. Kim and Asbury’s [4] research considered stressors and coping strategies. It did not set out to investigate emotional themes; however, themes of emotion emerged. They describe worry for vulnerable students surfacing, as well

as dealing with uncertainty—where teachers described feeling ‘panic’, like the ‘rug had been pulled from under you’. Furthermore, teachers noted the sadness and distress of ended or disrupted relationships with students where trust and investment in each other is necessary. Soncini, Politi, and Matteucci’s [9] research led to two distinctions, where teachers expressed concern over increased workload, as well as fear of contracting COVID-19. The distinction could be due to focussing on ‘worries, fears and concerns’ experienced by the teachers, as Soncini, Politi, and Matteucci state (p. 499), but it possibly also has something to do with the political environment in which the teachers are located. Similarly, Karousiou, Hajisoteriou, and Panayiotis [37] articulate how intercultural education policy enactment depends on how teachers feel about the agenda. Tensions between the two can lead to teachers becoming ‘creative mediators’ of the policy agenda when they find themselves constricted.

Kim and Asbury [4] flag earlier research indicating that workload and behaviour management are typical stressors for teachers, while their research indicates that, during the pandemic, uncertainty and concern for students were major stressors. Similarly, pre-pandemic, Hopman’s [27] research also indicated that, while workload was a concern of teachers, the more significant stressor was navigating relationships with students, parents, and peers. Uncertainty surfaced in Hopman’s [27] research as well, but, of course, not in reference to the pandemic; rather, it was the uncertainty over whether a teacher has made the ‘right’ call and being uncertain about what action to take. Emotional conflict due to uncertainty appears to also be tied up with agency in Kim and Asbury’s [4] work, where teachers who can ‘find a way forward’—that is, to take action—find that stress, or what we might call emotional conflict, is reduced. However, Kim and Asbury also noted [4] (p. 1075) that ‘some [teachers], particularly those in senior leadership positions, remained stressed about a lack of clarity around the government’s short-to-medium-term plans’. A lack of clarity from the government during the COVID-19 response was also cited as an issue in Willse’s [21] study. Similar findings explicitly reporting on the emotional toll of the COVID-19 response on teachers are presented by Auger and Formentin’s [6]; and Cannon, Davis, and Long’s [20] studies. It is also reflected by Burstein [38], reporting on a survey of 5000 American teachers who frequently felt anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad. Auger and Formentin’s [6] findings emphasised teachers grappling with a discrepancy between the action they felt was needed and a different sense of what was expected. Finding a way forward is most desirable for our teachers and education systems; however, what happens when the action deemed necessary to move forward is constrained?

4. Teacher Emotional Rules

Emotion and cognition are inseparable [11]. Thinking exists within a context of emotion, and emotion exists within a context of thinking. It is the interaction between the individual and the social experience of emotion where Hochschild’s [10] notion of emotional rules was born. Hochschild’s theory indicates that emotional rules are socially created. When an individual experiences emotion in any given situation, it is filtered through such rules, determining whether emotion is felt, displayed, hidden, or faked. Hochschild’s theory has been applied in a school teaching context where Hopman [26,27] outlined a set of teacher emotional rules apparent in the lived experience of a small group of teachers. For instance, one of the most pervasive rules that is evident in teachers’ stories of their practice is that the feeling of defeat is inherent in teaching but must not be shown. So, the emotional rule compels teachers to hide their fatigue in the never-ending struggle that is teaching. Such impulse is an example of emotional work in teaching. Energy goes into playing by the rules.

Emotional rules are a necessary element of healthy human functioning. The earlier work of Winnicott [13,14] and Freud [12] informed Hochschild [10] where Winnicott’s notion of the true self (who we might be without inhibition) and the false self (who we are expected to be) are in constant negotiation with one another. For example, a teacher who has lived in an environment where expression is freely accepted, heard, and valued may

feel and display defeat in the workplace by stating, through tears, ‘I have had enough’. The responses that the teacher receives from such an expression will determine whether that teacher is likely to express defeat similarly again or not. Our sense of reality constantly evolves as we make our way through our world [27].

5. Context and Methods

5.1. Narrative

A narrative approach was utilised to conduct the research for this article, where Clandinin and Connelly [39], Bruner [40], and Clandinin [41] describe narratives as dynamic and cyclic. Stories are nested within stories—each with a past, present, and future—depending on how the story is told, retold, and received. Furthermore, narratives shift depending on who tells them or who receives them. Crites [42] proposes a framework of Sacred Stories, Cover Stories, and Secret Stories, which depict the transformative potential of all testimony. Within this framework, the Sacred Story entails a dominant narrative—what story do we as a collective tell about crises, the emotion involved, and the ways in which teachers should act in such times? Such documentation as policies, media stories, and universally accepted expectations of schools and teachers inform such a narrative. Hopman [26,27] distils the normative Sacred Story for teaching as follows:

‘As a teacher I should love teaching. I must remain calm—neutral—at all times. Most importantly, anger and fear should not be displayed though discontentment may be expressed as frustration, sadness and worry, though these expressions should be limited as to not deviate into disloyalty toward my school or organisation. I do not feel discontented with students or parents because being in a classroom brings me happiness at all times. I do feel sadness at times, but this is when I see student suffering.’

‘Expressions of love towards students should be minimised, though I should be completely self-sacrificing for my students. Their emotions are more important than mine and their education is more important than my wellbeing. Of course, all of this would require me to be a robot, which I am not, so I will ultimately feel defeated, but I might never be aware of the degree in which I feel defeat, so I will never show it and keep keeping on.’

By contrast, Secret Stories are those personal narratives of teachers that will either conflict with, coincide with, or diverge from the Sacred Story. Also in tension are the Cover Stories—the stories that teachers share to construct or project a professional persona. Twitter posts such as the ones that we explore in this article are expressions of the Cover Stories that teachers choose to expose to the social media world. Our findings add to this framework a fourth dimension, which we call Uncover Stories. These narratives reveal what other institutional and professional pressures work to conceal—which teachers experience as *truths that must be out* about teaching. The next section sets out our research approach in detail.

5.2. Methodology

The data represented in this article stem from nine individual authors of Twitter posts in the USA, without full knowledge of where each author is precisely located. There are, no doubt, circumstances and pandemic responses unique to each location, since the USA is a large nation with many states. The data reported here represent the experience of nine teachers; these data cannot represent all teachers’ experiences. Furthermore, the tweets are public expressions and cannot be assumed to be equal to private expressions. These tweets are only part of the story.

Notwithstanding those caveats, our narrative explorations are suitable because they are expressly aligned with the theory of emotional rules. Cover Stories are typically told to align with the relevant Sacred Stories, meaning that emotional expressions are filtered through rules of display or feeling to uphold societal expectations of what should or

should not be expressed. Frenzel, Daniels, and Burić [5] (p. 258) note a heavy reliance on self-reporting assessments of emotion and the potential for such reports to be influenced by ‘stereotypically taboo emotions’ and self-deception. Frenzel, Daniels, and Burić [5] recommend utilising other data, such as physiological responses, like heart rates or facial expressions. This study did not rely on such physiological responses but rather captured teachers’ emotional expressions in situ through Twitter posts. The teachers were not prompted to respond; rather, they responded to their world because they wished to.

Alongside the narrative approach sits a multi-case study proposed by Stake [43]. Stake highlights the importance of examining the ‘case’ as a system of experiences that inform the consequent ‘functioning’ and ‘activities’. The cases that we intend to explore—the experience of individual teachers, the experiences of educational organisations, and Sacred and Cover Stories—are embedded within an educational, political, cultural, and historical context which influences each case and how the cases live together.

Figure 1 gives a visual impression of the multi-case approach wherein each case appears separate, and yet they are interconnected—Sacred and Cover Stories are clustered and individual teachers and educational organisations are interdependent. Thus, even though T4 to T9 appear as Cover Stories, some of their expressions are expressed as the Sacred Story. For example, some of the individual teachers’ expressions come from a place of ‘this is what I should say’ (Cover Story), whereas other expressions are ‘this is what I really say, think and feel’, which may well align with the Sacred Story. In this study, the differentiation between the two cannot be determined, but we can determine whether the expressions align with the Sacred Story—if they do not, they fall into an alternate Cover Story category, ‘this is what I will say’. A multi-case approach recognises that the researchers produce a ‘portrayal of the case’, which, in itself, is dynamic. Hence, such a multi-case approach can benefit from lines of narrative inquiry.

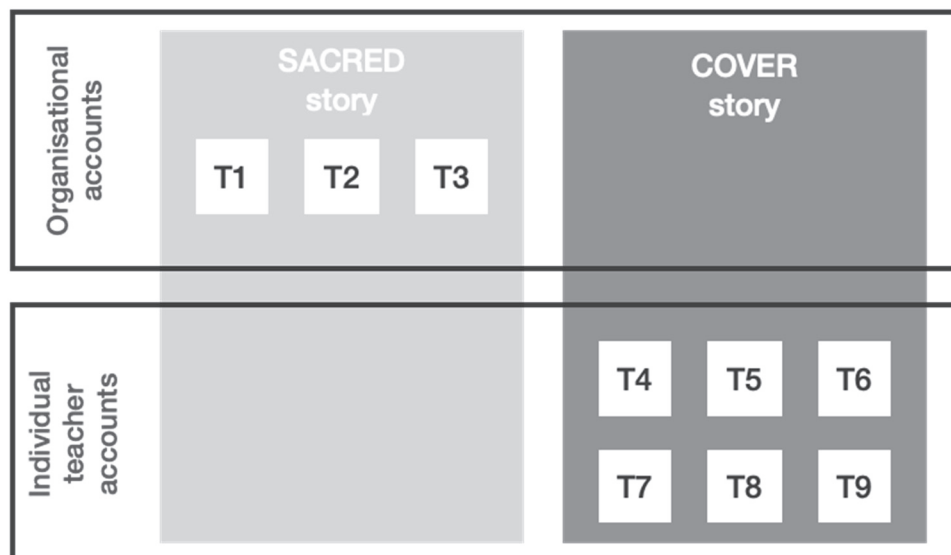


Figure 1. Multi-case methodology (T# indicates a Twitter account).

Our study’s narrative approach draws on the work of Clandinin and Connelly [39], who describe the process of inquiring into ‘field texts’ to determine ‘resonant threads’. In this case, the ‘field texts’ are a selection of Twitter posts collected between March and September 2020 (inclusive). Twitter has been rebranded as X; however, the data were collected from the ‘Twitterverse’ and are therefore referred to as tweets in this paper. The tweets were selected against three other criteria: (1) location, (2) belonging to that of a teacher or an educational organisation, and (3) related to the COVID-19 crisis. We specifically sought tweets from the USA. The locations of the tweets were determined by the authors either providing their location in their profile or by the authors situating

themselves in relation to political events, weather events (for example, a specific hurricane), road trip destinations (for example, Yellowstone National Park), national holidays (for example, Thanksgiving), or an affiliated school.

We sought tweets from two categories of authors: (1) individual teacher accounts and (2) organisational accounts representing bodies within the teaching profession. Individual teacher accounts were determined by the author referring to himself/herself as a teacher, or if ‘teacher’ was in his/her Twitter handle. There was no differentiation between elementary-, middle-, and high-school teachers, nor college and higher-education teachers—although, college and university teachers are typically known as ‘professors’ in the USA. The individual teacher accounts were also confirmed by the Twitter posts referring to general teaching practice with groups of students, or teaching in classrooms or elementary, middle, or high schools. Six individual teacher Twitter accounts were selected as field texts, all meeting the above criteria.

Three organisational Twitter accounts with national reach across the USA were selected as field texts: the Department of Education (DoE), the National Education Association (NEA), and PBS Teachers. While the Department of Education (DoE) provides a framework of governance, the NEA offers union representation of the teaching workforce, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) claims to be America’s largest classroom [44], and PBS Teachers provides instructional resources and innovations for classrooms, as well as a ‘Teachers Lounge’. PBS Teachers promotes ‘fresh ideas and inspiration from educators’, therefore acting as an arbiter of what ideas are ‘fresh’ and ‘inspirational’.

Once the Twitter accounts were identified, specific Twitter posts within the allocated timeframe related to the COVID-19 crisis were collected. A COVID-19 crisis-related tweet should refer to education, learning, teaching, curriculum, school, classroom, students, or teachers and one or more of the following (or any synonyms): COVID, the pandemic, quarantine, remote learning, technology, health and wellbeing. Emotion is a complex phenomenon that can only be understood in terms of its parts within the whole, and so a process of teasing out the parts and pulling them back together through narrative is essential. Specific emotion was not sought. The purpose of reflexive thematic analysis is to critically analyse the perceived meaning; in this case, the researchers critique their own understanding of emotional fragments and expressions and consequent interpretation.

The ‘resonant threads’ emerge through a reflexive thematic analysis, which was proposed by Braun and Clark [45] and further modelled by Byrne [46]. Reflexive thematic analysis recognises the researcher’s active role in knowledge production and takes a more inductive approach to analysis, where the resonant themes emerge rather than being sought. Such a form of analysis pairs well with a narrative approach in that the resonant threads of a narrative also emerge, and, likewise, the researcher is recognised as an active part of the narrative construction. Our approach differs somewhat from a typical narrative inquiry approach, in which the narrative remains intact and is holistically considered. We used NVivo software [47] to code and draw out the elements of emotion that we seek to understand.

The study gained ethics approval from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Deep consideration was given to the process of consent. Twitter [48] recognises the value of its content to support research endeavours; however, in alignment with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research [49], publicly available digital content cannot be assumed researchable without regard for the author, especially when it is the opinion or representation of an individual. The authors of individual accounts were alerted to the research study and alerted that their tweets were deidentified and paraphrased so that if they were fed into a search engine (Google) or a Twitter search, the Tweet would not be attributed to an account holder. Anonymous individual Twitter accounts were named @Twitter1, @Twitter2, and so on.

In total, 248 Twitter posts were selected and imported to NVivo. The first-round coding considered emotional expressions as they presented themselves. For instance, the following tweet was initially coded as ‘tired’ and ‘worry’.

‘I am tired of wearing masks. I am tired of not being able to go on field trips. I am tired of worrying that someone has COVID. I am just tired.’ @Twitter1 October 2020.

There are many more emotions than English words to describe them considering that everyone feels and expresses emotion uniquely in a given moment [11]. What feels and looks like anger for one person is experienced differently by another—we all emote in different ways. Yet some emotion words are only subtly different from one another, and if you were to interchange them in a sentence, the ideational value would not necessarily change. If the word ‘tired’ is replaced with ‘overwhelmed’ or ‘in defeat’, its referent meaning remains essentially consistent. The author is conveying a struggle that he/she feels that he/she is losing or can no longer battle against. ‘Defeat’ is a strange word for an emotion, as discussed more thoroughly in Hopman [26,27]. It captures a shifting struggle whose onset involves a challenge that might threaten defeat, but which might also spur one on to meet the challenge. Deeper into the challenge, one might experience a feeling of just managing the struggle or, even deeper still, a feeling that the balance has tipped into feeling defeated. The above quote is located somewhere on the ‘feeling defeated’ end of the struggle. Note that such emotional expressions can be categorised as explicit or implicit. For example, ‘tired’ and ‘worry’ are explicit expressions of emotion, while there is also an implied expression of ‘scepticism’—a feeling that, despite wearing masks, there is doubt about how effective they can really be in a classroom because ‘I am tired of worrying that someone has COVID’.

The second-round coding allowed for synonymous emotion words or phrases to be clustered together and to determine the catalyst for the emotional expression. The range of emotions and how often they were referenced (in parentheses) are as follows: frustration (55), defeat (45), scepticism (41), worry (39), sadness (27), hope (14), anger (11), fear (11), courage (11), confusion (10), happiness (8), humour (7), contentment (6), and love (4). The above quote and the majority of the individual teacher Twitter posts were general in nature and related to the disruption of teaching practices caused by the COVID-19 crisis, for example, changing policy, physical spaces, curriculum, schedules, and class lists. Across both the individual teacher and organisational Twitter posts, other significant catalysts were professional learning needs (82 references); and issues related to student support, such as grappling with how to support anxious or scared students (53 references) and dealing with issues of equity or inequity (20 references).

Despite seeking synonymous emotional language, it is worth noting that a distinction was sometimes significant. For example, while hope and courage are clearly related, we coded them under separate categories. Mentions of hope are usually in reference to the external world, i.e., hope in others or fate, whereas courage is framed as an aspiration for the internal world—hope in oneself, such as ‘I hope I can manage this’.

Earlier work has explored emotion in classrooms by comparing and contrasting the Sacred Story with Cover and Secret Stories in Melbourne, Australia (see [26,27]). There were some notable differences between the two contexts, both before and after the pandemic’s onset. In this earlier work, defeat and contentment were the most referenced emotions, and there was a conspicuous sense of balance between the two. Most mentions of defeat also conveyed an element of contentment, indicating a more manageable struggle through which defeat might pose a threat but the teacher can still find satisfaction in his/her work. Another difference is the recent addition and high incidence of scepticism. Also, hope, courage, confusion, and humour are additions to the current research. A third round of coding allowed for the previously coded emotional expressions to be recoded as either being in alignment or conflict with the teacher emotional rules established in the earlier work. The following sections discuss the findings.

6. Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are merged to address narrative fragmentation. As noted earlier, narratives are nested based on Clandinin’s [41] work. There is a story lived, a story

told, a story heard, a story retold, a story relived—and perhaps others. When narratives are analysed, particularly through a thematic analysis, they are often fragmented, and the ‘whole’ is diminished. This article forms part of a larger narrative. It is a version of a story retold. Since the Twitter posts are fragments of a whole, the importance of reinforcing the complex interplay between fragments of emotion and narrative is significant to this text. To avoid further fragmentation and maintain a sense of a whole, the findings and discussion are merged.

6.1. *Sacred Stories*

The current data collected through Twitter posts mostly reinforce the earlier Sacred Story, and the similarities and differences are now discussed. The DoE, NEA, and PBS Teachers’ Twitter feeds were analysed during the data collection period, which narrates the story of teaching as a profession in the USA. From the three organisation Twitter accounts, 117 posts were analysed. Out of the 117 posts, 47 contained references to emotion; they were mostly implicit references, but some were explicit. Implicit references to emotion were taken as, for example, ‘Teaching during a pandemic is challenging! How are you coping?’ which indicates an implicit sense of threatening defeat.

It is recognised that a teacher’s ‘job has never been easy’ (DoE) and is framed by ‘challenges’, ‘setbacks’, and ‘victory’. Tweets mentioned that teachers would undoubtedly find ‘coping’ difficult amidst such struggle and being ‘overworked’, but they did not attribute an explicit emotion to the experience. Non-specific emotion was explicitly discussed in other instances. For example, it was referenced in general terms when teachers were asked, ‘how do you feel about being away from your students?’ Discussion of ‘resources to support your mental health’ was a similarly general trope.

Some specific emotions were mentioned in reference to teaching and teachers. One such emotion, ‘care’, was mentioned in a Tweet with the phrasing ‘Self-Care Saturday’ querying how teachers might be taking care of themselves on the weekend. Grief and stress were also explicitly noted as likely emotions that teachers might be feeling. These three emotions were referenced only once each in two separate tweets out of the 47 tweets referencing emotion. There is a tone throughout the tweets that teachers likely feel emotions in general and that teachers are met by challenges which put them in a position of needing care, though the specificity and explicitness of such a message is lacking compared to other messaging related to emotion. For instance, the remainder of the posts were either expressing the emotion of the organisation or noting emotional states students might find themselves in.

On an organisational level, the NEA announces being proud of itself for ‘demanding that basic health and safety standards are met’, also intimating the courage required for teachers to keep toiling. They also express hope for the future balanced with scepticism of governments to make sound decisions. The Department of Education expressed emotion through three love heart emojis in three separate posts expressing thanks to teachers and stating, ‘we are in this together’. So, the message that the organisational tweets send is that students obviously have feelings about the current state of affairs—notably the COVID-19 pandemic—and the organisations themselves also possess feelings about the situation.

Out of the 47 references related to emotion, 14 were focussed on the emotional wellbeing or state of students rather than teachers. In these posts, explicit emotion was mostly named, for instance, ‘scared’, ‘anxious’, ‘afraid’, ‘confused, grumpy, happy’, ‘hope’, ‘excited’, and ‘comfortable’. All 14 references were pitched to teachers, asking how they might support students to manage or foster such emotions. The following quotes are an example.

When talking to our youngest learners, who may be scared or anxious about coronavirus, remember that having hard conversations should be E.A.S.Y.:

‘Eye level’

‘Age-appropriate language’

‘Soft voice’

‘Yield to allow children to share thoughts or ask questions.’ (PBS Teachers, March 2020)

‘Confused, grumpy or happy? Every feeling is okay! Now is a stressful time for many—let your little ones know that it’s okay to experience emotions.’ (PBS Teachers, May 2020)

The analysis of the tweets from the three organisations is mostly in alignment with the Sacred Story in earlier work, as discussed above: contentment and happiness should reward teaching. Teachers should love their work. This story is reinforced positively by such statements as ‘we want to be back with our students’ (NEA). It is reinforced negatively by assumptions that teachers experience grief when they cannot work in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers’ emotional neutrality is reinforced by a lack of recognition that teachers might actually feel things—only two out of the 117 organisational tweets we analysed make an explicit reference to teachers possessing feelings. The two tweets are featured below.

‘This new school year has brought new challenges and opportunities for all of us to overcome and adapt. It’s also come with a lot of different emotions. No matter what you are feeling right now—you are not alone. This #BackToSchool season, we are all in this together.’ ♥ (DoE, September 2020)

‘Today at 7 p.m. ET: Join us for a webinar on grief and self-care during. Psychologist Thomas Demaria will suggest strategies to facilitate mourning as well as promote self-care, wellness, and resiliency.’ (NEA, October 2020)

We have also noted a muting of the limited emotion that gets expressed. The NEA conveyed the most emotional content out of the three organisations we observed, but even it observed the emotional rule that anger and fear should not be displayed (Sacred Story). While there are undertones of anger—though not enough to confirm as an emotional expression—fear is mentioned only once, i.e., in reference to how students might be feeling (PBS quotes above).

6.1.1. Frustration, Worry, Sadness, and Anger Are Evoked by Student Interactions

As stated earlier, the Sacred Story limits expressions of anger, although grief and sadness are acknowledged in the tweets. Worry is also expressed but more implicitly; for example, ‘basic health and safety standards [need to be] met to ensure a safe return to in-person instruction for students, educators, and their families’. The major difference is that, while these emotions are acknowledged in the current Sacred Story, they are not necessarily evoked by student interactions. Yes, teachers are expected to feel sadness over not being able to interact with their students, but, for the most part, the emotional response is evoked by disagreement between the organisations that underpin the Sacred Story—in particular, those with administrative and political power. An addition to the Sacred Story of teachers in crisis is that discontentment—a combination of frustration, worry, sadness, and anger—may be expressed toward political and administrative leaders. Furthermore, sadness is not just evoked by witnessing student suffering but also from being separated from students.

6.1.2. Hope and Courage

Hope and courage were collectively referenced 25 times. Interestingly, only 4 of the references of hope or courage are from individual teacher tweets, and the other 21 are from the organisational Twitter posts singing the praises of courageous teachers—mostly from the NEA—or expressing a hopeful future with more funding and a range of initiatives—mostly from the DoE. The following quotes exemplify a message of hope from the organisational accounts. The DoE September tweet above is also an example. While the PBS quote is explicit in its reference to hope, the DoE and the NEA quotes imply hope through language, such as ‘a great set of resources to start with’ or ‘adapt and overcome’. The quotes signal a way forward.

‘Do you sometimes find yourself at a loss for words when explaining COVID-19 to your kids or students? Wisdom from Mister Rogers—“Look for the helpers”—is giving many of us hope right now.’ (PBS, May 2020)

‘If you need some help figuring out how to support students who may be experiencing trauma or unmet basic needs due to the pandemic, this is a great set of resources to start with. Social-Emotional Learning During COVID-19.’ (NEA, September 2020)

Another addition to the Sacred Story of teachers in crisis, distinct from the earlier work, is a heightened emphasis on dampening emotions that might prevent the conjuring of hope or courage to ensure that teachers can pivot in crisis, upskill, and continue teaching without misstep.

6.1.3. The Teacher Emotion Narrative in Relation to the Macro Crisis

The Sacred Story that can be derived from an analysis of the emotional rules is also the narrative of the macro-crisis—the broader implications of the pandemic within the USA’s system of education. This narrative is scripted by the most powerful voices in the system; it reflects both intentions and expectations. Largely, the Sacred Story permeating the USA throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was congruent with the Sacred Story observed in the (pre-pandemic) earlier work, but with two exceptions: (1) frustration, worry, sadness, and anger are often evoked by the disagreement between governing bodies and the pandemic itself; and (2) hope and courage must be mustered. While the intention and expectation of the Sacred Story is clear, a further complication is that the reality of enacting the Sacred Story is undermined when such powerful voices remain silent or do not facilitate action, much as Willse [21] suggests. Hence, teacher agency is compromised, along with the ability to conjure up hope and courage.

6.2. Cover Stories

Cover Stories are the stories that are shared openly and usually serve to publicise personal alignment with the Sacred Story. In the earlier work, the Cover Stories did align with the Sacred Story; however, in the current study, there are notable differences between the Sacred and the Cover Stories. The following rules feature a shift when teachers are faced with a crisis.

Frustration, worry, sadness, and anger are evoked by student interactions.

‘I was sad to learn our district will not be returning for the year. I did not know that saying goodbye at break would be saying goodbye for the year. I miss their questions, their light bulb moments, our jokes, and more. This is just sad.’ (@Twitter2, April 2020)

‘Day one virtual training. I spent 15 min getting the one not at all tech savvy teacher up to speed at the expense of all the other teachers who are trying to learn the next thing. Isn’t this exactly what the classroom is like? Too much time spent on that one student?’ (@Twitter3, August 2020)

The data demonstrate that there were 12 references where the above rule was honoured, for example, the two tweets above, where Twitter2 expressed explicit sadness and Twitter3 implied frustration, both in relation to working with students. However, there were 78 references in conflict with the rule where frustration, worry, sadness, and anger were evoked by people or things other than students. The above Twitter3 quote is an example of also being in conflict with the rule because the teachers being trained were, in this instance, the main source of frustration.

Out of the 78 tweets in conflict with this rule, 49 contained an element of frustration, 23 contained an element of worry, 15 contained an element of sadness, and 6 contained an element of anger. These statistics are mostly in alignment with previous research, where frustration was the most typical emotion expressed, followed by worry. A difference is that sadness and, to a lesser degree, anger were expressed more openly, whereas, in previous

research, these emotions were typically hidden, especially from students and families, which, in this case, are the public. The data show that sadness and anger are more readily expressed.

‘Social distanced meetings, masks, and temperature checks. Looking forward to it!!!! (#sarcasm)’ (@Twitter4, July 2020)

‘To parents, If I provide before or after school support, don’t moan at me for “not fitting your child’s schedule”. Your child not attending remote classes or doing their work doesn’t fit my life—I’m not moaning to you...’ (@Twitter2, September 2020)

These quotes show an expression of implied anger. Stating ‘I am angry’ or ‘I am mad’ is rare, unlike the earlier quote, which states, ‘This is just sad’. So, explicitly discussing anger is still unlikely, but it was expressed by affectation, through language such as ‘shitty’ or the addition of five exclamation marks. Typically, multiple emotions are clustered, as in the following tweet:

‘When I got into teaching, I knew the job was underappreciated, but I didn’t know that I would constantly be referred to as a “lazy babysitter” during a global pandemic while I spend my own money buying cleaning supplies to try to keep my students safe.’ (@Twitter5, August 2020)

This quote is an example of the sadness—disappointment or letdown—of feeling underappreciated, the frustration of the predicament, and the worry for safety. The tweets recurrently showed the following:

1. Frustration and anger over the uncertainty of the future and decisions being made about teachers’ work without teacher input.
2. Worry over teacher, student, and broader community safety and over how teaching will be made possible in a lockdown world.
3. Sadness about the loss of the typical teaching environment and an undermining of teacher safety and professionalism.

6.2.1. Teachers Should Not Feel or Display Fear

In the earlier research, fear was not mentioned explicitly. Occasionally, it was implied through statements like ‘I back-pedalled as he approached’. Implicit fear was again evident throughout this study, such as in this tweet:

‘I am faced with some tricky decisions this year. Do I close the classroom door to keep my students safe from an active shooter or do I open it to improve air circulation?’ (@Twitter6, August 2020)

A hesitation for teachers to express fear, while facing the threats outlined above, was still evident in the tweets—only eleven explicit expressions of fear were evident. A noticeable difference is that words like ‘terrified’ and ‘scared’ were used explicitly in four of those tweets, as in this example:

‘I can be scared for everyone’s health and still miss the classroom. I miss the interactions, collaboration, laughter, teaching, lightbulb moments, and more.’ (@Twitter2, July 2020)

6.2.2. Teachers Should Not Display Sadness to Students

While sadness in the earlier research was discussed in small groups, and crying was evident or mentioned in a one-to-one interview, it was understood that teachers should not cry in front of their students, as it is a sign of weakness. The current research has found five instances of teachers expressing crying in a public arena—Twitter. Take the following tweet as an example.

‘Yesterday two students who hadn’t seen one another in several months ran together to hug. It brought tears to my eyes...’ (@Twitter4, May 2020)

6.2.3. Contentment Is Evoked by the Act of Teaching, by Students and Other Teachers; Happiness Is Evoked by the Act of Teaching and by Students

In ordinary times, teachers might talk about how satisfying it is to see young minds flourish. While there are certainly challenges in teaching, the Sacred Story emphasises that the reward outweighs feelings of defeat. In the earlier work, teachers discussed contentment almost as much as they did an overarching feeling of defeat. A difference in the exploration of teacher emotional rules in a context of crisis is that the mentions of contentment are limited with six references only, and there is a high conflict with the abovementioned emotional rule—24 references in conflict and 8 references in alignment. An example of a tweet in conflict with the rule is the following:

‘Had my first poor night’s sleep of the year due to teacher stress dreams. Is it actually mid-August?’ (@Twitter3, August 2020)

In this quote, the entire act of teaching is stressful. The reference to mid-August reminds us that the author harks from the northern hemisphere, where the large summer school break takes place in the middle of the calendar year. In a later tweet, the same author mentions ‘going back tomorrow’, so the stressful dreams were occurring in anticipation of the academic year ahead.

Contentment and struggle work hand in hand. Dealing with struggle is a typical aspect of daily life. When the struggles outweigh the contentment, then a person might be left with the threat of defeat or a feeling of defeat.

6.2.4. Defeat Is Inherent in Teaching but Must Not Be Shown

Teachers often conjure up courage and positivity to face the typical struggles of the day, which is why ‘defeat must not be shown’. Displaying defeat is not conducive to convincing oneself or others that everything will resolve satisfactorily. Teachers have a well-known responsibility to remain calm and manage difficult situations—micro crises if you like—by performing in accordance with the unspoken but negotiated rules. Particularly noticeable about the rules for teachers working through an ongoing crisis is that what would not normally be shown, may sometimes be. We have found 40 ‘references in conflict’, such as the following tweet:

‘I wouldn’t trade my work and I love being back. Having said that. . . in the last two weeks I’ve cried about eight times. Teaching in 2020 is definitely a curve ball.’ (@Twitter2, September 2020)

The above quote is an example of the relationship between contentment and defeat—they can coexist where the reward of teaching compels a person to continue to do so, but, at the same time, he/she feels threatened by a sense of defeat. At what point would this teacher not ‘love being back’ at work? At that point, the tweet implies that the feeling of defeat would be overwhelming.

6.2.5. Scepticism Is Permissible

An emotion that was referenced significantly is scepticism; only frustration and defeat were referenced more frequently. It was referenced 41 times and is perhaps a sign of the uncertainty that teachers and society live with in crisis, since a crisis is unexpected and unpredictable. The next tweet exemplifies a widespread scepticism about teachers returning to their workplaces when other professionals are not:

‘Government buildings are closed due to the pandemic; however, politicians say teachers should go back to school.’ (@Twitter2, July 2020)

6.2.6. The Teacher Emotion Narrative in Relation to the Micro Crisis Reveals an Uncover Story

A Cover Story is typically a story shared openly and usually aligns with the Sacred Story, providing cover for the Secret Story that might misalign with the Sacred Story. In this study, the Cover Story was derived from the micro-crises that teachers faced in their

day-to-day lives. The micro-crises were deeply embedded in the macro-crisis; for example, the crisis of walking through a classroom door on a given day yet feeling fearful to do so. While there was some alignment between the Sacred Story and Cover Story, there was also significant discrepancy. An example of alignment is both the Sacred and the Cover Stories recognised that frustration, sadness, worry, and anger can be evoked not only by students but also by colleagues, administrators, governing bodies, and events. Such a broad connection to the emotionality of teaching was less evident in earlier work and may be related to the circumstance of crisis. An example of the departure between the Sacred Story and the Cover Story is that teachers (manifestly and publicly) feel things. Thus, the more prolific expression of emotion is also discrepant from the earlier work in this field, which appears to be in response to the crises (micro and macro) that the teachers have found themselves in. This indicates there is another story to consider, an Uncover Story: the need to reveal, which is felt in opposition to earlier assumptions about a need to conceal. We do not claim that this is a new phenomenon, but that the pandemic has created conditions in which it is increasingly urgent and, hence, newly visible to research.

In crisis, an Uncover Story potentially provides solace. It valorises an element of activism that seeks to shift the status quo because the struggle of teaching is untenable. Recall the credibility-stretching idealism of the Sacred Story in a crisis: it tells a story of strength and positive action, actively avoiding the reality of the challenge and the threat of defeat to focus on motives of hope and courage. By contrast, the Uncover Story is grounded in a congruence with the emotional experiences of teachers. We may characterise it along these lines:

‘When teaching, I get frustrated, worry, sad and angry, but I do not only feel these things in relation to students. I do feel a lot of sadness about not being able to enjoy my students’ company while in lockdown—I miss our interactions. I also feel sad for students who are further disadvantaged due to inequities in the education system (for example, I am constantly reminded that students can only access online classrooms if they have adequate technology).’

‘I also feel sad for my teacher colleagues because they probably feel like I feel. Those of us who have family commitments find ourselves barely able to look after our own loved ones, terrified that this lethal virus could intervene to make that task impossible any day. Meanwhile our job is to teach and protect the children of so many other families.’

‘I grieve for the events that I looked forward to like field trips, sport days, music concerts and presentations. All these are cancelled now. I cry often. What I feel mostly is frustrated and worried. I am worried for the safety and wellbeing of my students, me and my family, and the state of the education system.’

‘Despite my best efforts, will my students learn what is expected? There is a load of professional learning out there, but it is not always appropriate, accessible, or timely—not to mention not having time to undertake the professional learning in the first place. Are we expecting too much? What is most frustrating is that teachers are not factored into the conversation, and I am sceptical about the choices made on my behalf by people who are not in classrooms living with the day-to-day challenges.’

‘Feelings of anger and fear are growing so that contentment in my work is becoming unreachable, and they are getting harder and harder to face each day. A sense of hope and courage is dissipating, and I am feeling the growing threat of defeat. How long can I keep going?’

Such a narrative aligns with Auger and Formentin’s [6]; Cannon, Davis, and Long’s [20]; Kim and Asbury’s [4]; Nyanjom and Naylor’s [8]; and Soncini, Politi, and Matteucci’s [9] research in the sense that the difference between what a teacher feels is needed and what is expected is a site of tension. However, the experiences represented in the data show little

‘creative mediation’ or ‘finding a way forward’. This is not to say that these behaviours are not occurring, just that, in a crisis, the most urgent feelings on the surface worthy of sharing via Twitter are the feelings of defeat. It is perhaps a call for help.

6.3. Secret Stories

While we cannot ascertain the Secret Stories nested within the Cover and Sacred Story without interviewing the authors of the tweets, what we can establish is that there is an alternate Cover Story, an Uncover Story that does not align as neatly with the Sacred Story and which the Secret Stories may seep from. The individual teacher Twitter posts were sprinkled with deeply personal content such as crying and being ‘terrified’, despite the Sacred Story pedalling a narrative of hope and courage. A teacher admitted to ‘day drinking’, as ‘the school year is rough in the world of distance learning’. Another consideration concerning the seepage of the possible Secret Story is that, while emotions are expressed explicitly, many more are implied—they lurk behind the veneer and are visible just enough. So, aspects of the Secret Story became less secret.

7. Final Remarks

One of the major issues with the discrepancy between the Sacred Story and the crisis story is this: above the emotional strain of surviving a crisis on a personal level and beyond the responsibility of caring for children and youth is the emotional strain of not emoting, in alignment with the Sacred Story. What happens when teachers cannot abide by the emotional rules? What happens when they cannot conjure up the necessary emotion to fall in line with the Sacred Story? Wang, Hall, and Taxer [34]; Burić, Kim, and Hodis [36]; and Auger and Formentin [6] all recognise the harm in surface acting emotion. This study suggests that teachers question their capacity to survive and a feeling of defeat looms. In such times, the expectation that teachers remain neutral—emotionless—is perhaps even more problematic than in regular times where teachers employ detrimental surface acting strategies, as, in crisis, some emotions are more urgently felt.

Given the intense scepticism of teachers in this study, teachers appear to feel disregarded. Cannon, Davis, and Long’s [20] call for greater consideration of teachers’ voices when developing disaster management plans in schools would go some way in reducing that scepticism. However, listening needs to go beyond affording teachers input into a disaster management plan. Since the disparity between the Sacred Story and the alternate Uncover Story feeds into the emotional strain, the Sacred Story needs to shift. The organisations that dictate policy and represent teachers publicly need to consider the reality of the job and reflect that to society. Teachers are people, and, like all people, they feel and react in crisis. Under heightened emotional strain, it is well documented that cognitive functioning is compromised, so when teachers are working as frontline workers in extreme conditions, how can it be logical to expect the same or greater output as in ordinary times of the teaching workforce?

We hope that the present study offers a contribution to current practice with regard to the factors that influence teachers’ emotions in the workplace. Beyond extending or improving knowledge of the topic, our research draws attention to the interventions of educational institutions, regulators, professional bodies, teacher-educating bodies such as universities, and other relevant agencies. It reinforces their need to provide support to teachers, including professional development support for the cultivation of explicit emotional consciousness across the teaching profession. Aiming for emotional neutrality prevents teachers from finding a way forward. While teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment that is favourable to the integral development of students, governing and administrative bodies are responsible for enabling teachers to do so.

Furthermore, the knowledge obtained in such a relationship between teachers and educational agencies will be useful in the design of programs and strategies that boost the development of teachers’ emotional consciousness, so that they can effectively sense their way through the constant challenges in the workplace, serving as a significant tool

that helps them to process emotions and face challenges that disrupt the balance of the profession. Emotionally speaking, finding a way through crisis sits somewhere between feeling defeated and conjuring up false hope. Teachers need strategies to collectively find a fruitful middle ground. We hope that this will make an explicit and effective contribution to improving the teacher–workplace experience, responding to the challenges of 21st-century education with increasingly self-aware and emotionally reflective approaches. In a word, we serve students better by enabling teachers better.

We acknowledge that a deeper exploration of context matters to the comprehension of emotional rules. This research contains a small sample of teachers' experiences. Further research interrogating specific collectives and their various layers of polity is needed for a more fine-grained understanding. This article gives a broad overview. A further limitation is that tweets are comments made publicly, and there was not an opportunity to follow up with authors through an interview. Therefore, more private thoughts and feelings are not captured. Further research would be required to tease out the Secret Stories or to have a clearer understanding of relevant teacher-related emotional rules in the USA. Also, further research is necessary to better understand the potential framework of emotional support that might be best suited to any given location, particularly since emotion is not easily pinned down, and emotional work has a collective dimension that is dependent on the specific people within the collective. We very much look forward to discussions and collaborations with researchers who are interested in advancing this agenda.

The Sacred Story is a collective story in which the most powerful voices have the greatest influence over the flow of narrative. There is recognition in the Sacred Story that care is required, and it is framed as self-care. There are risks with the reliance on self-care as mitigation of emotional conflict for teachers in crisis. Self-care places the responsibility for care on the self—back on the teacher. Cannon, Davis, and Long [20] propose a self-care model but also recognise the limitation of resources and excess teacher workload amid a crisis. So, as well as navigating what is already recognised as an emotionally taxing role, i.e., teaching, teachers need to manage the crisis, care for students and families, care for their families and colleagues, and for themselves in an environment of limited resources. There needs to be an approach toward self-care that is nested within collective care. Collective care ensures that the forces of power influencing the Sacred Story also ensure that resources to engage in self-care are available so that the Sacred Story is possible. It is not enough to recognise the considerable work teachers undertake amid circumstances and expect them to place their needs second to their students—which Cannon, Davis, and Long [20] confirm that teachers are doing since the pandemic's onset. In addition to extra time and funds to ensure that increased workload is managed, a specific structure of emotional support is necessary (see Hopman [27] for a potential support structure).

Even before the breadth and depth of COVID-19 were well understood, Clark et al. [1] (p. 605) noted that 'climate change, ecological degradation, migrating populations, conflict, pervasive inequalities, and predatory commercial practices threaten the health and future of children in every country'. Society faces an uncertain future where recent global experiences of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters are expected to continue to roll into the future. If teachers are going to be positioned as crisis frontline workers going forward, then they need to be considered vital resources themselves, and future policy must invest in their wellbeing to ensure the wellbeing of generations to come, particularly in times of crisis.

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Article

Photographs of Play: Narratives of Teaching

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Abstract: Research affirms positive results between children's play and academic success. While play is heavily featured within the early childhood curriculum, limited studies have explored how play is actually implemented within early years settings. The aim of this study was to enhance children's play and learning by using photographs to explore play-related pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers in Australia over time. Using visual narrative inquiry, three families participated (mother and child) and shared school photos of the mother in an early childhood context and the current child in an early childhood context. The photos were analysed with a visual analysis approach to understand play and teaching across the two time periods. Key findings revealed what has changed and what has become part of the foundation of play in Australian early childhood education. Findings are important to expand the current understanding of play and the historical perspectives of play.

Keywords: narrative understandings; play; photographs; Australia; intergenerational; visual analysis

1. Introduction

Across the world, early childhood education has become an important institution to support young children's learning and development during the crucial stages of development formation. In Australia, early childhood education and care can be described as the period before formal schooling. In Australia, there has been significant investment and focus on early childhood programs to support young children's learning and development. Children aged birth to 5 years may be placed into long day care, kindergarten or family day care under the directions of a qualified educator. In 2009, the Belonging, Being and Becoming, Early Years learning Framework for Australia [1] was introduced, providing an overview of the high expectations for children in early year settings across Australia. Recently, a revised version of the Early Years Learning Framework (known as Belonging, Being and Becoming, Early Years learning Framework for Australia 2.0) was released to support young children in early year settings [2]. Within this document there are five learning outcomes to support children's learning and development:

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity;

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world;

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing;

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners;

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators.

Play is considered an important element of young children's learning and development. In the Framework, play is mentioned 133 times. The role of the educator is to plan and support play opportunities for young children, including a range of types of play and the concept of play-based learning and intentionality. Accordingly, play-based learning [2], (p. 8):

Allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness;
 Offers opportunities for multimodal play;
 Enhances thinking skills and lifelong learning dispositions such as curiosity, persistence and creativity;
 Enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning and to transfer learning from one experience to another;
 Assists children to develop and build relationships and friendships;
 Develops knowledge acquisition and concepts in authentic contexts;
 Builds a sense of identity;
 Strengthens self-regulation, and physical and mental wellbeing.

While play is heavily featured within the Australian Framework document, limited studies have explored how play is actually implemented at the “ground level” of service delivery within Australian early year settings. Thus, while early childhood teachers are expected to implement play opportunities for young children, we have few studies of what this actually looks like. Furthermore, it is unclear if teaching practices have changed over time in relation to play and play-based learning. Given the stronger focus on the importance of early childhood education for young children’s learning, it is important to understand the relationship of play and teaching.

The aim of this study is to understand play and teaching of young children across two periods within Australia, engaging with an innovative method of visual narrative inquiry to explore early childhood education. The research question is:

- What can we learn about play and the teaching of young children across two generations in Australia through the implementation of visual narrative inquiry?

In this paper, we take an innovative approach to exploring this phenomenon through the use of photo visual analysis on children in early childhood settings. We are particularly interested in the pedagogical practices of play. Pedagogical practice is described as “the instructional techniques and strategies that allow learning to take place. It refers to the interactive process between teacher/practitioner and learner and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment, and the actions of the family and community)” (p.10) [3]. We report on an analysis of photos taken across two generations of three families’ involvement in early year services. This includes kindergarten, family day care and preschool. The incorporation of two generations of a family shows how play may have changed or been replicated within early year settings across teaching practices of planning and documenting. Across the photos, we can reflect on the notion of play as well as identify key trends and gaps that emerge across the visual analysis of the photos, including pedagogical practices. The focus of this study also shows what the role of the educator may be in supporting play-based learning with young children and if this has changed over time.

2. Literature Review

Literature Review on the Historical Notion of Play in Education and Early Childhood: A Global and Australian Perspective

2.1. Global Perspectives on Play in Education

Sutton-Smith [4] provides a comprehensive exploration of the “Rhetoric’s of Play”, emphasising the diverse cultural and historical narratives that shape our understanding of play. This work underscores the need to recognise play as a culturally embedded phenomenon, influencing educational practices worldwide.

The framework proposed in “Learning Through Play at School” [5] offers a global perspective on integrating play into educational policies and practices. This approach acknowledges the role of play in fostering wholistic child development within formal educational settings.

2.2. Importance of Play in Early Childhood: A Worldwide View

The significance of play in early childhood is underscored by various sources. The blog post on the “Importance of Play in Early Childhood” [6] echoes global sentiments, emphasising play as a crucial avenue for cognitive, social, and emotional development in young children.

Griswold’s [7] work on “Play in Early Childhood” delves into the historical evolution of play theories and their application in early childhood education globally. Griswold’s exploration provides insights into how perceptions of play have shaped early childhood pedagogies across different cultures.

2.3. Australian Perspectives on Play in Education and Early Childhood

Holmes [8], in her literature review on “Childhood, Play, and School” in Australia, offers an in-depth analysis of historical and contemporary perspectives on play within the Australian education context. The review highlights the evolving nature of play pedagogies and their impact on early childhood education.

In “Developing Literacy through Play” [9], the authors focus on the Australian context, examining the intersection of play and literacy development. This study emphasises the role of play in fostering early literacy skills within Australian early childhood education.

2.4. Definition of Play in the Education and Early Childhood Context

In the context of education and early childhood, play can be defined as a spontaneous, self-directed, and purposeful activity that engages children in exploration, experimentation, and interaction with their environment. It is a process through which children make sense of the world, develop social and cognitive skills, and express their creativity. Play in education involves a dynamic interplay between imagination and reality, providing a foundation for learning, problem solving, and the development of essential life skills. This definition recognises play as a central and intentional aspect of pedagogy, acknowledging its inherent value in fostering wholistic child development within educational frameworks.

2.5. Play-Based Learning in Australia

Pyle’s [10] paper on “A Continuum of Play-Based Learning” explores the role of teachers in play-based pedagogy in the Australian context. This research addresses concerns about the fear of “hijacking play” and provides insights into effective strategies for integrating play into learning experiences.

In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a somewhat recent development, established in 2009, and the Australian Government sanctioned the EYLF to provide ongoing professional support and services for early year educators. The Framework has continued to be updated, with the most recent being the 2022 version, in which it is stated that early childhood “Educators are intentional in all aspects of the curriculum and act deliberately, thoughtfully and purposefully to support children’s learning through play” [2].

2.6. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Play

The EYLF 2.0 [2] outlines a comprehensive framework for early childhood education in Australia. In “A Continuum of Play-Based Learning”, Pyle [10] discusses the framework’s role in shaping play-based pedagogy and the teacher’s role in facilitating meaningful play experiences.

While the notion of play is identified as imperative to the development of social, emotional, intellectual and physical skills, gaps emerge around what this looks like in teacher practice, especially with young children in the early childhood education context. Thus, entitling the notion of play into the current educational context, where the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [11] identifies educational purpose as a way to scaffold learners to be active and informed citizens for participation in society.

Exploring a historical notion of play from the past five decades, specifically 1970–2020, requires a multitude of lenses that also note the changes that have occurred within society such as, but not limited to, access to social connection through technology, changes within the context of the family and home environments, and continued improvements in pedagogical practices informed by theory.

In Section 3 of this paper, the notion of “play in Early Childhood” is explored through the lens of a camera and a comparison of photographic artefacts across two generations (three decades) for three families. The findings demonstrate the affordances and constraints for educators on incorporating and recording play and various play-based theoretical influences over time.

2.7. Noteworthy Australian Studies and Authors

Several Australian scholars have contributed significantly to the discourse on play in education. Duncan and Tarulli [12], Morris [13], Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards [14], Siraj-Blatchford [15], and Fler [15] have explored various facets of play, shaping the landscape of early childhood education in Australia. Table 1 summarises these works and identifies the influences of the theory underpinning play within early childhood education. Table 1 highlights the main influences on play and pedagogy throughout the past five decades for early childhood education. This includes a focus on the importance of embeddedness within the learning context.

Table 1. Summary of ‘Learning through Play’.

Decade	Play Theory/Pedagogical Focus
1970–1980	Focus on Arts and Craft Play with connections to developing Mathematical Thinking [13]
1980–1990	A Vygotskian Influence of Social Cultural Play—learning occurs through social interaction and through engagement with the world, rules, expectations and observation of social roles [12]
1990–2000	Focus on structured play environments [10,16]
2000–2010	Focus on Conceptual Play—imaginary play, based on multimodal literacies [17]
2010–2020	Focus is on the relationships between educators and students and how educators “play a role” in the students lives [14,15]

In conclusion, the literature reviewed is reflective of a global understanding of the need for play in early childhood education. The historical evolution of play pedagogies is evident in the works of various scholars, influencing policy and practice within the Australian Early Years Learning Framework. The diverse perspectives presented contribute to a nuanced understanding of the historical notion of play in the Australian educational context and provides a scope that justifies the development of play pedagogies across early childhood education. Yet, there is little evidence, within the literature, identifying the enactment of play methodology and record-keeping of evidence for the authentic reporting of play based learning.

3. Family and School Photographs

A photograph’s production, reading and description represents multiple viewpoints. This field of research provides important insights into the current and past, and is associated with intimate situations for families and children. Finding and reading photographs and recognizing yourself in them are “acts of identity as familiarity” (p. 2) [18]. Photographs are given meaning sometimes through narratives which at times, are autobiographical. Hirsch [18] writes that, “photographs are as essentially constructed as any other representational form, that every part of the image can be manipulated and even fabricated, especially with even more sophisticated technologies” (p. 6).

The social function of photography is reflected in the ideology of the modern family. The family photo shows both the cohesive structure of the family and is a tool for sym-

bolising its togetherness. It documents family rituals and is a part of family rituals. The photograph gives the illusion of presenting the real. It provides a record of events and “has an effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics” (p. 7) [18]. Photographs contain the flow of a family’s everyday life into a collection of snapshots, immortalising family myths and stories while looking like it is just capturing segments of family history. The photo moderates tensions associated with family life by recording an illusion of cohesion and stability that can be impossible to uphold [18].

Family photos most usually show families in a restrained way: often happy and relaxed. Family photos are not known for their innovativeness, with the poses, framing and happenings being predictable. As Rose [19] writes, “this has led family photographs to be criticised for perpetuating an idyllic image of the nuclear family, cementing only dominant visions of its classed, gendered and racialised identity” (p. 11).

Conventions around photographs are implicated with how photos are used. Bourdieu [20] examined the conventions ruling what is achieved with photographs, including the family snapshot. He wrote about how the activities represented in family snapshots are rule-bound:

While everything would lead one to expect that this activity [photography], which has no traditions and makes no demands, would be delivered over to the anarchy of individual improvisation, it appears that there is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice (p. 7).

So, as Rose [19] suggests, family photographs are a specific type of image which have particular purposes. A range of things are achieved with photos, in various places, and it is through exploring the practices and construction of the family photograph that an appreciation for it can be realised.

School photographs were an aspect of the early development of photography. Widespread globally, they are a way to memorialise schooling and traditionally have not attracted very much critical attention. They follow uniform and serialised conventions and are eschewed by historical sources. The meaning of school photographs appears obvious, but mainly, their unchanging facades are opaque. School photographs have many of the same qualities of familial and institutional photographs that infer social roles [21].

Families can be viewed as “fractured and subject to conflicting historical and ideological scripts” (p. 13) [18]. Photographs offer a means through which to examine cultural memory composed of remnants to be collated and compiled in a range of ways to relate various stories from diverse perspectives [18]. Spence and Holland [22] contend that:

Family photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully “ours”, nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a “real” one (pp. 13–14).

As with Hirsch [18], we reveal the juncture of private and public history through an examination of the idea of “family”, “childhood” and “early childhood education” as represented in family photographs. Reading snapshots and photo albums, we aim to illuminate the cultural and constructed nature of what seems to be transparent and natural. We critically analyse the auto/biographical to provide narratives about the family photographs.

In this paper, we combine school photos that have become family photos to explore pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers in Australia over time. We draw upon photos from two generations to explore what is important about the photos and the associated meanings that can be given to them.

Our study is limited in that we have only drawn upon one method (photos). This study may have benefitted from extra methods, including interviews to probe answers further from participants and also the engagement of other family members about the experience (apart from the mother and child, participants could have been expanded to include other family members).

4. Methodology

Visual Analysis

For the purpose of this paper, we collected photographs from three families (mother and child). As researchers, we explored and made meaning from the photographs both visually and narratively. The photographs were used to frame conversations about play in early childhood contexts.

To analyse the family photographs, we draw on Kuhn's [23] set of protocols as a guide for analysis rather than as a prescriptive analytic tool. Kuhn [23] separates out various contexts that give photographs meaning. In our collaborative discussions about the photographs, as researchers, we contemplated the human subject(s) of the photograph/s to convey the feelings embedded in the photograph/s, even taking into account inanimate objects. For example, the early childhood education equipment and materials that the children were playing with and on such as puzzles, construction sets and climbing frames were central to the unpacking of the photographs in our collaborative discussion. Then, we considered the photograph/s context of production, asking questions about where, when, how, by whom and why. This included a discussion about the setting, the time period, who took the photos and why they were taken. We talked about the technologies used to produce the photograph, the aesthetics of the image and its conformity to photographic conventions of the times. The professional staged approach versus the amateur, everyday nature of the photographs was important to this aspect of the conversation. Finally, the context of reception and the audience for the photograph was considered by questions such as "Who or what was the photograph made for? Who has it now, and where is it kept? Who saw it then, and who sees it now?" (p. 7). Our interest in the photographs was that they were made so families could remember the early years of their children. We talked about how families from different generations had stored the photographs across time. Although the photographs have only been viewed by family and friends, as researchers, we were given permission from the participants to make the photographs available for public viewing.

The associations emerging from the use of these protocols can be reflective, interpretive or analytical in design. The collaborative discussion underpinned by Kuhn's [23] visual methodological approach helped and prompted us, as researchers, to move beyond the personal to consider the cultural and historical contexts that give the photographs broader meanings [23]. After our collaborative discussion, as researchers, we then individually unpacked and analysed the photographs representing our own family group (Authors 1 and 3) and the family group interviewed (Author 2).

The stepping off point for the paper was data drawn from a study on "intergenerational family practices: play and language" conducted in Australia during 2021–2022 with six family groups. The research team conducted intergenerational group interviews, filmed family play activities and collected video-clips and photos of young children's play. Ethics approval was granted from a University Human Ethics Committee to conduct this research [Project ID: 21968], including the use of visual materials which identify the participants in this paper.

Two of the six families from the larger study chose to share photos across two generations of photographs taken in early childhood education contexts (Family 1 and Family 2). The mother from Family 1 drew Author 2's attention to the similarity in the professional early childhood education photographs representing two different generations in her family. This observation prompted a discussion between Author 1 and Author 2. Author 3 was then asked to share three "mirror" photos of play and experience in early childhood education settings from her family photo collection. See Table 2 for an overview of the participants in this paper.

Table 2. Mother and child descriptions.

Family	Mother	Attended ECE	Child	Attended ECE
1	Ange	1980s	Louis	2010s
2	Susie (Author 1)	1980s	Emilie	2020s
3	Natalie (Author 3)	1980s	Noah	2020s

Each family's photographs represent time gaps between the photos which show similarities in play activities across time. From these cross-generational kindergarten photographs, rich and meaningful insights are captured of intergenerational family practices, creating spaces to interpret and analyse early childhood education practices across time in dynamic and complex ways.

5. Findings and Discussion

This paper now reports on the individual findings and discussion of the three families (mother and child) across two generations. Photos from each family are shared and described before this paper considers what this means for the narrative of teaching in early childhood education. We begin with the first family, Ange and Louis.

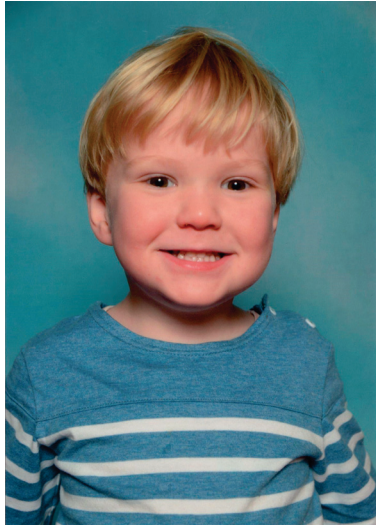
5.1. Family 1

Ange is in her late 30s and her son Louis is eight years of age. When they were interviewed in November 2021 as part of an intergenerational family practices project, Ange shared mother-and-son professionally taken kindergarten photograph albums. Ange talked about how similar the photographs and activities were in both photo albums, even though the photographs were captured 35 years apart. Ange explains:

I picked up, the other day, Louis' kinder[garten] book from last year and was looking at all the photos. Then I was looking at some photos today as I found my kinder[garten] book. Louis and I were just looking at them before. He commented how they were similar. I turned the first page, and Louis' like, 'Look, Mummy, you're reading a book and I'm reading a book'. We both were doing that. And then I turned to the next page and I was doing a puzzle and he was doing a puzzle. So we were talking about how we did the same things, and then we were both climbing here in our class photos. We were talking about how when Louis was little he did similar things to when I was little.

The first photos show Ange and her son Louis developing their fine motor skills as they use the small muscles of their hands to fit together puzzle and construction set pieces. The mother and son are also developing their cognitive abilities as they think, reason and understand while putting together the pieces of the puzzle and the construction set. In the photo on the left, Ange is intently focused on joining puzzle pieces, showing the complex process that this physical and intellectual work involves. In contrast, Louis' gaze is on the camera as he holds the linked construction pieces. The focus of this photo is on the child and his happy and content persona rather than on the construction process. This type of fine motor and cognitive skill development is a precursor to children scribbling, writing and drawing [24]. The two photos show how child development and learning through play was, and still is, integral to a preschool program.

In the second set of photos both children gaze at the camera whilst playing in an outdoor environment. Ange is dressed in a pretty blue dress, while Louis is in a warmer dark blue outdoor jacket. Although capturing slightly different outdoor activities, the photos are very similar in some ways. Ange grasps a net climbing frame with both hands, while Louise grasps an outdoor play frame with his left hand. Both children are doing an outdoor activity, which requires physical coordination and a degree of independence. Hence, these professionally taken photographs show Louis engaged in physical activity similar to what his mother engaged in as a child.

	1980s	Late 2010s
Playing with puzzles and construction sets		
Outside climbing activities		
Portraits		

The third set of photos are individual child portraits depicting happy smiley children. Ange's photo in black and white tones contrasts Louis' coloured portrait. The photos, as Rose [19] writes, "were about picturing happy moments and feeling happy" (p. 27). The photos were not only about the children's happiness but also about making the viewer feel happy. The likeness between the mother and son across two generations is as much in the depiction of their smiling faces as their physical traits. Although the photos are of individual children, as Ange talked about in her interview, they were a prompt for a conversation between a mother and her son. This mother and child talked about their similar experiences of early childhood education.

5.2. Family 2

The second family consists of a mother (Susie), who attended the free preschool service in Queensland during the 1980s, and her daughter (Emilie), who attended kindergarten (paid by family) in the early 2020s. In both time periods, the child had access to a qualified early childhood teacher and a teaching assistant to support their learning. The biggest difference between the photos was the time period of exposure (dosage). The mother experienced the early childhood service for part days, while the daughter, in the early 2020s, experienced the early childhood service from 8.45 a.m. until 5 p.m. (once the kindergarten program had finished, the child entered after-school care).

In the first comparison of photos, the opportunities for collage and making things appeared similar across both time periods. In both photos, the child had access to a range of materials to create the collage and could also engage with scissors, staplers and other tools to assist. As such, the teacher had designed a workstation for the children to play with different materials and be creative in their own designs. This allowed the child to also practice important skills that would be useful in schooling (such as fine motor skills and learning colours). Based on the two photos, it appears that the ability to create is still an important characteristic of learning and play within early childhood education, and that the teacher continues to allow for open-ended activities for the child to explore.

The second photos of exploring how things grow show the importance of connecting to the natural environment and how this continues to be an important focus within early childhood education. In both photos, the teacher had planned learning experiences that focused on understanding the growing cycle. In the first photos from the 1980s, this included a trip to a farm to explore the growing of cotton. In the photos from the 2020s, plants were grown inside the early childhood service, and the child was provided a watering can to look after the plants. This may have been because of more safety regulations, where it was difficult to take children on excursion. The photos were also taken during the COVID pandemic, where, again, restrictions may have limited possibilities for excursions. Nevertheless, the photos both highlight the importance of understanding the environment and caring for the environment, again aligning with early childhood practices.

The third set of photos provide a comparison of portraits that occurred during both settings. The portraits always show a 'happy child' who is by themselves. The photo from the 1980s is a formal photo on a chair with a background from a photographer. The photo from the 2020s shows an action portrait of a child in the school's natural environment outside, taken by the photographer. This photo shows the importance of connecting to the natural environment outside and perhaps the agency given to children in photos to be free moving and mimic play. The child is enjoying the movement in the natural environment. The focus on agency could be because of the EYLF 2.0, which acknowledges the importance of supporting children's agency throughout the day.

	1980s	2020s
Engaging with collage—using a range of different materials		
Outside activities exploring how things grow		
Portraits		

5.3. Family 3

The third family consists of a mother (Natalie) and her 3 year old son (Noah).

Natalie attended the Australian Capital Territory preschool program in the late 1980s 2 days per week from the age of 4 years. The preschool was attached to a primary school and ran between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. The style of education meets the Australian standard of a “structured, play based learning program” [25] with a qualified teacher and a teacher’s assistant.

As an educator and educational researcher, Natalie wanted a more nuanced, natural and contextual approach to learning for Noah, that is, learning that is child-centred, encompasses inquiry and exploration, and outside of the four walls structured play model, and learning from nature and nurturing interests through engagement. Noah attends an alternate boutique home day care education program 1 to 2 days per week for approx. 5 h per day, located in Australia’s Gold Coast. The context includes two early childhood

educators with 10 children per day, and the program is offered 3 days per week. The program is designed to spend 3–4 h a day on an “adventure”, where opportunities are provided to explore the local natural environments from the ocean and parklands to farms and hinterland forests.

During an adventure, opportunities are also established for the children to connect with the wider community, for example, aged care groups, visits to the fire station, community support groups and environmental groups.

The time spent at “basecamp” is an opportunity for the children to engage in inquiry play within an indoor and outdoor learning environment that consists of contextual play areas, vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, grassed hills and sloping cliffs that have wooden stairs, bridges, ropes and climbing walls that allow access to the cubby houses, chicken pens, sandpit and gathering campfire. The children are also immersed in the process of honey making, with the observation of bee hives and turning honey into edible and useful products such as lip balm, furniture polish and creams.

The educators incorporate a connection with Australia’s First Nations Peoples and “mother earth” to teach about care of the land (environment), animals and respect for other people. There is a strong focus on building social and emotional skills to support pro-social behaviours and the wellbeing of the children on their life journey.

In the first comparison of photos, there is a stark difference between the activities provided to demonstrate fine motor skill development. The 1980s photo of Natalie shows a structured space with a set activity planned by the educator. Comparatively, Noah’s photos show the agency of child choice for resources with a variety of containers, spoons and mixtures in an open space and additional outdoor learning opportunities that are connected to purpose, e.g.,: working with friends (Vygotsky’s social learning theory) to clear the leaves out of the drains to stop flooding during wet weather.

Comparing the images from both time frames demonstrates the variety of learning experiences that are available to support fine motor skill development and the comparison of learning opportunities where context and purpose is designated as significant to learning and development.

The second photo group compares portrait photos from both education settings and time periods. The photo from the 1980s is a staged formal portrait taken by a photographer visiting the preschool, and the outdoor setting of the photo is a purposeful selection based on the teacher and photographer’s choice. The photos from the 2020s are portraits captured in the moments of inquiry and exploration that also show the learning environment and provide some additional visual information, highlighting the importance of nature, outdoor and hands-on learning experiences. The photos of Noah provide evidence of children’s agency and learning opportunities compared to a “structured play” environment.

The third photo group reflects the importance of gross motor development as a key aspect of learning development. Movement within early childhood education appeared as a strong part of development and is included in photos of children on various playground equipment that promote gross motor skills.

The photo artefacts again highlight the comparisons of staged and in the moment photography. The photo from the 1980s was a structured play experience where children had to climb up the play equipment and pose for the visiting photographer. The photo shows limited aspects as to the skills required to climb the equipment to reach the point at which the photo was taken. In the 2020s photographs, Noah has been captured in action on different equipment, demonstrating his climbing and movement skills. The recent photographs from the 2020s bring to light the advancements in photography and the accessibility to photograph, and video, children as they play/learn.

Across the three families in two generations, we identify key themes for discussion around play-based learning and the role of the teacher. These have emerged from looking across the photos of mothers and children within their early childhood settings across time. They do align with some of the play theories outlined in the table within the literature. For example, perspectives of Vygotsky can be seen in the photos of the 1980s, while in the later

photos, the focus moves towards a focus on relationships. As such, the themes provide insights into the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers in Australia and support the notion of “traditions” of practice that are replicated across generations to support play. They are not dependent on a time period but rather are developed and sustained practices.

	1980s	2020s
Fine-motor development		
Portraits		
Gross-motor development		

The first theme is the importance of natural environments and the engagement of young children with nature to support play. This theme appears across both time periods. In all photos, this was associated with gross motor development associated with certain movements (e.g., climbing or jumping). These photos showed the importance of engaging with outside environments and equipment across the two generations in playful episodes. The natural environment also included engagement with “natural materials” such as animals and plants. The children in the early childhood settings appear to engage with

natural materials, with more engagement with natural materials (including water) in the most recent photos.

It could be that the natural learning environment is considered an important space for children's development, especially with gross motor and sensory development. As such, play is a developmental tool to support gross motor development. In this way, promoting movement through play becomes a traditional pedagogy in early childhood education, where children learn through their senses and engage with gross motor equipment (such as A-frames) in the outside environment. It could also be that because of safety regulations and the subsequent design of settings, gross motor equipment is not located internally and must be located outside. Regardless, it appears to also show the importance of this type of learning across two generations within six different early childhood settings in Australia.

Fine motor skill development also emerged as a pedagogy (theme 2) across the two generations, with photos showing fine motor play activities. All the family photos appeared to show children engaged in a fine motor activity, with the majority of these activities taking place inside at tables. The materials allowed for the manipulation of objects in both closed- (puzzles and bead blocks) and open-ended activities (cutting, stapling and glueing). Fine motor skills also allowed the children to be successful in their activity after completion, based on the selection of the fine motor learning material from the teacher. The teacher was therefore responsible for finding materials that were suitable for fine motor development for the children.

Portraits also appeared of the children in the two generations (theme 3); however, in the most recent generation, portrait shots were taken outside in the natural environment and showed children engaged in play episodes. Earlier generational portraits were taken inside, with children sitting and smiling at the camera. Across all of the portraits across the two generations, children appear to be happy and smiling. Images of children crying may not be accepted within social norms of attendance at early childhood settings, suggesting that there is a hidden "rule book" of what is and is not acceptable for taking photos in early childhood education settings in Australia.

Across the photos, links can also be made to the current Australian EYLF 2.0 [2], especially outcome 1, 2 and 4 that focus on the creation of activities. Theme 4 highlights the importance of play-based learning to support these outcomes and a focus on the children's agency and learning that comes from the curriculum. Since the photos have also been taken from multiple time periods, the photos also highlight the importance of play-based learning across generations in supporting outcomes within learning frameworks. While the learning frameworks were not around for both generations, the play-based learning activities were, supporting the same desired children's outcomes.

The use of photos as a methodology has allowed an important insight into the lives of Australian children attending early childhood settings across two generations. The advancement in the quality and type of photos can be seen across the time period; however, the content of the photos remains similar. From this, we can start to document play practices that have occurred or perhaps are reproduced by early childhood teachers in Australian early childhood education. As such, it becomes a narrative of pedagogical practice in early childhood education and care in Australia. This also aligns with the above definitions of pedagogical practice shared by Siraj Blatchford et al. [15].

6. Conclusions

This paper has shown insights into the importance of play and the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers across two generations through the photos. Key themes emerged around the importance of natural environments, fine-motor-skill-focused play activities and the importance of play-based learning to support children's outcomes in the curriculum. The photos over the time periods show that ideas have continued to be implemented across early childhood settings and highlight a generational narrative around traditions in early childhood education for Australia that appear to be implemented by teachers. This narrative for teaching shapes the planning and pedagogical approaches in

early childhood education and provides opportunities for children to explore and engage (as evidenced in the photos).

The narrative also actively promotes the idea of a “happy childhood” within the early childhood setting. None of the photos shared by the families showed the “problems, tensions and dilemmas” that children experience throughout the day in early childhood settings. The photos showed children who were engaged, happy and learning. It is doubtful if teachers document the problems, tensions and dilemmas faced by children and share these images with families as part of the documentation of learning. It is unclear why teachers select “happy childhood” photos as part of the traditional narrative; however, further research is needed in this area. This also includes a key point from the discussion that the photos did not include adults and often did not include other children. Further studies in consultation with the educators regarding the choice of purposeful play opportunities and the selection process of documentation and reporting through photographs, would be beneficial in achieving a wholistic view of intergenerational play and teaching through a visual narrative.

This paper has shown the importance of photos as a research method to explore pedagogical practices of early childhood education in Australia. This has provided opportunities to reflect upon changes in teacher pedagogy across two generations, showing vast similarities in this study. We hope that future studies will add to the use of photos as a part of analyses to highlight different perspectives over time. As such, photos play an important role of becoming historical artefacts within teaching.

This study is limited by its visual analysis approach. Visual analysis is subjective, and through our narrative visual analysis approach, we, as researchers, undertook a “private reading” (p. 97) [26]. That is, visual analysis is personal. This study would be strengthened with the addition of interview data, including from the children of the younger generation who are depicted in the photos. This study would then provide a more comprehensive picture of the role of play across two generations.

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Article

Teacher Morale and Mental Health at the Conclusion of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: As teachers entered the 2021–2022 school year, schools tasked teachers with the challenge of closing the learning loss gap, maintaining the same standards as a typical school year, implementing COVID-19 safety protocols and teaching to grade-level standards. The current study used the theoretical framework of teacher demoralization to explore teachers' experiences of morale and mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. The participants included 830 PK-12 individual teachers from across the United States who completed an online survey. The data were analysed using Pearson's correlation and the hierarchical multiple regression model to determine the predictor variables. The results showed significant predictors for both teacher morale and mental health. The implications focus on steps that school leaders can take to support teachers' morale and mental health.

Keywords: teacher morale; teacher mental health; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Teaching is a hard job. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher attrition had been a long-standing problem, with almost half of teachers leaving within the first five years [1,2]. Teaching did not get any easier during the COVID-19 pandemic as teachers became frontline workers providing instruction to students in many different formats. Throughout the pandemic, teachers took on new and unprecedented challenges to provide instruction to students [3,4]. Research also found that teachers had high stress levels and felt overworked [5–8]. For example, Pressley [9] found that teachers had higher stress levels due to the expectations of teaching multiple formats (in-person and HyFlex students) and the lack of guidance from the administration to overcome the new challenges of teaching during a pandemic. A silver lining of the pandemic for some teachers and school leaders during this time was that it forced educators to connect with parents and students more intentionally—especially when school was remote. However, not all interactions with families were positive. The negative feedback and lack of support from some parents also took a toll on teacher stress [10,11].

Other studies conducted throughout the pandemic found increased teacher anxiety and depression [12–14]. This had an overall impact on teacher well-being and led to lower morale and life-work balance by the end of the 2020–2021 school year [15]. However, some teachers found ways to limit the mental strain. For example, Walter and Fox [14] found that teachers with empathetic leadership, good working teams, and increased resources had a better sense of well-being than other teachers.

The impact of the pandemic went beyond teacher stress and burnout. Teacher self-efficacy also decreased as teachers navigated the ever-changing requirements and expectations [14,16]. Thus, many teachers felt they were underperforming pedagogically due to the new requirements and expectations during this time. In addition, as teachers tried to adjust to new teaching approaches and feel confident in their teaching, they also

faced increased anxieties about teaching during a pandemic with very little input on return to learning plans [14,17]. Overall, society asked a lot from teachers during the first year and a half of the pandemic, which significantly impacted their well-being.

As teachers entered the 2021–2022 school year, schools across the United States had a variety of requirements in place for teachers to enforce to keep students safe and faced continued uncertainty as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed [14]. These safety protocols would change throughout the year, leading to inconsistencies across states and schools with teachers having very little say in policy changes. On top of the safety protocols, schools were pushed to return to more normalcy and to address the learning loss that occurred during the pandemic [18]. This included the return of mandated state standardized tests, new curriculum initiatives, and lofty teacher expectations for the 2021–2022 school year. Enforcing safety protocols and additional pressure to raise student achievement were just two of the requirements and expectations put on teachers' shoulders. Survey research conducted at the conclusion of the 2021–2022 school year found that 29.5% of teachers reported having low levels of morale [15]. As such, it is important to understand the toll that teaching during the pandemic had on teachers' morale and mental health. Thus, the aim of this study was to improve teaching conditions by exploring teachers' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their morale and mental health by asking the following questions.

1. What was the state of teacher morale and mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year?
2. What variables predicted teacher morale at the end of the 2021–2022 school year?
3. What variables predicted teachers' mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year?

2. Literature Review

Demoralization occurs when teachers believe they are “violating basic moral expectations that educators should embody: do not harm students, support student learning, engage in behavior becoming of a professional” [19] (p. 43). Teachers faced new demoralization issues throughout the pandemic that challenged their morale [20]. These challenges included instructional requirements that did not meet students' learning needs, limited parental support [21,22], and limited mental health resources [4,23]. These aspects have led teachers to have a lower teacher self-efficacy [24,25], higher levels of burnout [11,13,26], and higher levels of stress and anxiety [8,27], with risks to overall teacher well-being.

Demoralization specifically focuses on “consistent and persistent frustrations in accessing the moral rewards of teaching” and leads teachers to “feel they no longer can do good work or teach ‘right’” [28] and thus feel they must leave the classroom. Demoralization is especially important in times of change [28]. Though demoralization may encompass aspects of teacher burnout, such as depression or shame, demoralized teachers will have continued frustration in providing the best instruction to their students [28]. This often occurs when teachers face a change they perceive no longer allows them to provide good teaching [19]. Thus, new expectations and requirements from school leaders can often lead to teacher demoralization [19,28].

Morale has been linked to mental health in a variety of contexts. In discussing teaching conditions, Edwards [29] argues that teachers must be secure in a position where “personal integrity is maintained, and group harmony is fostered” to attain high morale. He goes on to state that societal and school factors make this almost impossible to achieve, and as a result, “the morale of teachers is at a low ebb and their total mental health adversely affected” (p. 18). In a medical context, Mojinyinola [30] connected job stress to work morale, finding that job stress significantly impacted nurses' health and mental health. Additionally, morale has been linked to mental health in military contexts [31,32], with findings indicating that higher morale levels lead to lower instances of PTSD. More recently, Kendrick [33] found that low morale had a negative impact on the mental health of academic librarians, citing that “demoralized academic librarians experience depression and related conditions, including PTSD” (p. 873).

2.1. Teacher Morale

Teacher morale is defined as the degree to which a person's needs are satisfied and the person's perception of how the job situation brought that state of satisfaction of the worker to fruition [34]. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher morale has been shown to positively correlate with student achievement [35,36]. In addition, low teacher morale negatively impacts teacher productivity and results in a detachment from students [37,38]. Furthermore, factors such as motivation, effort, and job satisfaction have been linked to teacher morale [39–41]. Dunn [42] discusses how Coughlan's 1970 work, in which he found 13 factors that affected teacher morale, is still relevant today. These factors were organized into four categories: administrative operations, working relationships, school effectiveness, and career fulfillment [43]. More recent literature on teacher morale has discussed the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on job satisfaction [40]. Intrinsic factors include job security, ability utilization, and social service, and extrinsic factors include compensation, authority, school policies, the opportunity for advancement, recognition, and power distribution. Compensation was found to be a significant factor for teacher morale in a number of studies [38]. The literature has also demonstrated a relationship between teacher autonomy and their morale [44]. Teachers who feel they can make decisions that best meet the needs of their students and who are trusted to use their unstructured professional time also report higher levels of morale. Teacher morale has continued to be an important factor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has found a relationship between morale and an intention to remain in the profession [20]. With research before and during the COVID-19 pandemic indicating the importance of teacher morale, researchers, school leaders, and teachers should continue to develop a better understanding of teacher morale as schools move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Teacher Mental Health

Previous studies have explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health and well-being across different educational settings [45]. However, researchers have only recently started investigating teachers' mental health and well-being, as researchers have associated declining teachers' mental health and well-being during COVID-19 with many teachers leaving the teaching profession [46]. For example, during the fall of 2020, teachers' mental health and well-being drastically declined due to a variety of additional demands at work, such as an increased workload, multiple roles (i.e., covering colleagues' classes), and a sense of uncertainty, as well as a lack of resources at work, including social support, work autonomy, and coping skills [47].

In addition, the challenges of online teaching, including the lack of connection to students, have been shown to negatively impact teacher well-being and mental health [48,49]. The lack of connection to students that many teachers experienced and the inability to build meaningful relationships with their students affected teachers' mental health and posed a significant barrier to their personal and professional development [50]. Kush and colleagues [51] found a striking difference in teachers' mental health based on teaching format. Kush et al. surveyed 135,488 teachers during the 2020–2021 school year and found that teachers who taught in person were significantly less likely to report feelings of depression or isolation compared to peers teaching remotely. Teachers also reported high levels of stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction due to the challenges they faced online teaching during COVID-19 [14,52].

Similar to the online environment, teachers who taught in a HyFlex environment also saw an impact on their mental health [47,53]. Kim and colleagues [47] surveyed teachers across three-time points in the 2020–2021 school year and found that teachers' stress and burnout reached an all-time high in November 2020 when HyFlex teaching was introduced in schools in the United States. Teachers' narratives reflected that HyFlex teaching was particularly challenging, as they were never trained to teach in such a way. Similarly, Pressley et al. [8] found that HyFlex teachers had the greatest increase in anxiety during the fall of 2020 when teachers returned back to school after the United States shut down schools in the spring of 2020.

While instructional methods have varied and changed throughout the pandemic, teacher morale and mental health remain a concern. With the increase in teacher attrition and more being asked of teachers, having a better understanding of teachers' morale and mental health is critical for school leaders. Providing environments that support teachers could be important ways to keep teachers in the classroom [46].

3. Method

This exploratory study focused on understanding potential variables related to teacher morale and mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. Specifically, we used a survey design to reach a large number of teachers across the United States.

3.1. Procedures and Sampling

To understand teachers' experiences of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their morale and mental health, the researchers used convenience and snowball sampling from 4–18 May 2022. The researchers selected this time period as a majority of teachers were within the last few weeks of the school year. This would also allow teachers to reflect back on the year, which for many included changes in COVID-19 policies throughout the school year. To be eligible to participate in the research, individuals had to be currently employed as PK-12 teachers in the United States at the time of the survey administration. This research received IRB approval prior to the start of research activities. Researchers distributed an anonymized link to the survey to personal networks and posted the link on social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Researchers also emailed the survey to recent graduates of a teacher preparation program. Using social media platforms allowed for an extensive sample of teachers from across the United States to participate in the current study. Finally, researchers encouraged teachers to share the survey with other teachers if they were so inclined.

3.2. Participants

The current sample included 830 PK-12 individual teachers from across the United States ($N = 49$) states; however, if a participant had missing data, they were not included in the final analysis. Participants were 40 years of age ($M = 40.41$, $SD = 10.38$), had almost 13 years of teaching experience ($M = 13.26$, $SD = 8.97$), and were overwhelmingly White (86.8%), female (87.8%), and taught at the elementary level (PK-5; $n = 339$). Just over half of the participants (61.4%) taught in a Title 1 school, and more than four in five (82.8%) taught in a traditional public school. Almost half of the participants (48.1%) taught in a suburban school; about a quarter taught in an urban setting (25.3%), and the rest taught in either a rural or small-town setting. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the study sample.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the study's sample.

Variable	N	%	M	SD
Age			40.41	10.38
Years of Teaching Experience			13.26	8.97
Gender				
Female	729	87.8		
Male	91	11.0		
Other	9	1.1		
Race/Ethnicity				
African American/Black	31	3.7		
Asian American	17	2.1		
Hispanic	28	3.4		
Jewish ^a	2	<0.1		
Native American/Alaskan	1	<0.1		
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	5	0.6		
White/Caucasian	721	87.1		
More than one race	21	2.5		

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	N	%	M	SD
Title 1	508	61.4		
Special Education Teacher	81	9.8		
<i>School Type</i>				
Traditional Public School	686	82.8		
Magnet School	34	4.1		
Charter School	57	6.9		
Private School	52	6.3		
<i>Geographic Location</i>				
Rural	120	14.5		
Small Town	100	12.0		
Suburban	399	48.1		
Urban	210	25.3		

Note: ^a Self-described.

3.3. Survey Development

Several factors were considered when developing the survey used to answer this study's research questions. Research we had conducted during the pandemic prior to this study suggested that teachers' workloads, stress levels, and burnout were elevated during the crisis [6,11,15]. Additional studies echoed similar findings [7,13,25,54,55]. As such, we opted to measure several constructs with a single item to reduce the burden placed on teachers to complete the survey. We believed this design was appropriate in order to capture teachers' experiences during an important moment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.1. Teacher Morale, Teacher Mental Health, and Student Mental Health

To understand teacher morale, teacher mental health, and student mental health, participants responded to a single item on a 0- (*very bad*) to 10-point (*very good*) scale. Teacher morale was measured similar to how Senechal et al. [56] measured the construct asking participants to respond to the question, "In terms of how you currently feel, rate your morale as a teacher?" We similarly asked participants to respond to items about their mental health and their students mental health with the questions, "In terms of how you currently feel, rate your mental health?" and "How would you currently rate your students' mental health?"

3.3.2. Administrative Support

The survey included a scale measuring administration support [57]. Teachers were presented with questions about their perspectives on a 6-point scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree*. Example questions included "I believe that my efforts in the classroom are unappreciated by the administrators". In this study, the administrative support scale yielded strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$).

3.3.3. Teacher Autonomy

Teacher autonomy was measured with the Teacher Leadership and Autonomy Scale [58]. Similar to the administrative support scale, teachers were asked to respond in terms of the extent to which they agreed with each item on a 6-point scale. Example questions included "I control how I use my scheduled classroom time". In this study, the teacher autonomy scale yielded strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$).

3.3.4. Student Work Completion and Parent Support

To measure student work completion, a single 6-point Likert scale item was included that asked teachers about the extent they agreed with the statement, "Most of my students complete all assigned work". Similarly, to measure parent support, a single 6-point Likert scale item was included that asked participants about the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "My students' parents have been supportive of my teaching".

3.4. Data Analysis

Two separate models were tested to better understand predictors of teacher morale and teacher mental health. Separate models were tested, one with teacher morale as the dependent variable and one with teacher mental health as the dependent variable. Pearson's correlations were conducted to determine the association between variables. Each of the predictor variables included in the models was significantly correlated with each other. Additionally, the researchers conducted a hierarchical multiple regression model to test predictor variables, controlling for ethnicity, gender, and years of teaching experience. Lastly, the researcher screened the data to check that the assumptions for multiple regression analyses were met. No issues were found with singularity, multicollinearity, the dependence of errors, normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity of residuals [59]. All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 28.

4. Results

Teachers were asked to rate their experiences of morale and mental health on a 10-point scale. As such, the average teacher morale ($M = 3.76$) and teacher mental health ($M = 3.95$) suggested that teachers had low morale and mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year.

A Pearson's correlation was conducted to determine possible predictors of teachers' morale and teachers' mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. For teachers' morale, the results suggested positive associations with teachers' mental health ($r = 0.64$), administrative support ($r = 0.44$), teacher autonomy ($r = 0.43$), student mental health ($r = 0.40$), student work completion ($r = 0.34$), and parent support ($r = 0.30$).

For teachers' mental health, the results suggested positive associations with teachers' morale ($r = 0.64$), administrative support ($r = 0.37$), teacher autonomy ($r = 0.37$), student mental health ($r = 0.40$), student work completion ($r = 0.30$), parent support ($r = 0.27$), and teaching experience ($r = 0.10$; see Table 2 for correlations).

Table 2. Correlation matrix of variables included in models.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
I. Teacher Morale	1						
II. Teacher Mental Health	0.638 **	1					
III. Administrative Support	0.438 **	0.371 **	0.405 **	1			
IV. Teacher Autonomy	0.429 **	0.371 **	0.394 **	0.573 **	1		
V. Student Mental Health	0.397 **	0.396 **	0.275 **	0.198 **	0.162 **	1	
VI. Student Work Completion	0.340 **	0.297 **	0.373 **	0.265 **	0.229 **	0.373 **	1
VII. Parental Support	0.296 **	0.268 **	0.380 **	0.273 **	0.324 **	0.263 **	0.410 **

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

The same set of predictor variables was used for both the teachers' morale and mental health regression models. This allowed for us to compare predictors across models. Because of missing data, each model only included participants who completed all of the measures for each variable included in the model.

4.1. Teachers' Morale

After controlling for ethnicity, years of experience, gender, Title 1 status, and urbanicity, the regression indicated that the model explained 34% ($R^2 = 0.340$) of the variance, and the model was significant $F(11, 745) = 37.724$, $p < 0.001$. Specifically, six variables remained as significant predictors for teachers' morale, including non-White race/ethnicity ($\beta = 0.411$, $p = 0.026$), Title I school status ($\beta = -0.391$, $p = 0.011$), administrative support ($\beta = 0.065$, $p < 0.001$), teacher autonomy ($\beta = 0.564$, $p < 0.001$), student mental health ($\beta = 0.213$, $p = 0.001$), and student work completion ($\beta = 0.172$, $p = 0.002$).

To explore further differences in teachers' morale, we also ran an independent-samples *t*-test to compare the teachers' morale scores based on race/ethnicity. A Levene's test found that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met ($p = 0.527$), which was important given the difference in sample size between White and non-White teachers. Teachers who identified as White had a slightly lower morale level ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 2.29$), compared to teachers who identified as non-White ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 2.42$). This difference approached statistical significance, with a small measure of practical significance $t(776) = 1.91$, $p = 0.051$, $d = 0.21$. We also operationalized teacher morale similar to Senechal and colleagues [56], coding a response of 0–3 as low morale, a response of 4–5 as medium-low morale, a response of 6–7 as medium-high morale, and a response of 8–10 as high morale. More than half of the sample (53.6%) reported having low morale. A Chi-Square goodness-of-fit test found that participants reported low morale significantly more often than any other level of morale ($\chi^2(3 \text{ d.f.}) = 394.410$, $p < 0.001$). See Table 3 for beta coefficients and standard errors for the teacher morale regression models.

Table 3. Regression findings for teacher morale models.

	Model I	Model II
Variable	β (SE)	β (SE)
Teaching Experience	0.011 (0.009)	−0.008 (0.008)
Female	0.258 (0.259)	0.219 (0.213)
Non-White	0.566 (0.254) *	0.411 (0.206) *
Title 1	−0.091 (0.176)	−0.367 (0.145) *
Rural	0.250 (0.246)	0.137 (0.202)
Urban	−0.447 (0.204) *	−0.178 (0.167)
Administrative Support		0.065 (0.011) ***
Teacher Autonomy		0.564 (0.091) ***
Student Mental Health		0.312 (0.037) ***
Student Work Completion		0.172 (0.055) **
Parental Support		0.114 (0.060) +
N	757	757
F	2.238 *	37.724 ***
F Δ	2.238 *	78.832 ***
R ²	0.018	0.358
R ² Δ	0.018	0.340

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.10$.

4.2. Teacher Mental Health

After controlling for ethnicity, years of experience, gender, Title 1 status, and urbanicity, the regression indicated that the model explained 30% ($R^2 = 0.304$) of the variance, and the model was significant $F(11, 754) = 29.892$, $p < 0.001$. Specifically, six variables remained as significant predictors for teachers' mental health, including Title I school status ($\beta = -0.593$, $p = 0.020$), teaching in an urban school ($\beta = -0.593$, $p < 0.001$), administrative support ($\beta = 0.040$, $p < 0.001$), teacher autonomy ($\beta = 0.480$, $p < 0.001$), student mental health ($\beta = 0.306$, $p < 0.001$), and student work completion ($\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.037$). A follow-up item asked participants if they had seen a mental health counselor during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 30.92% responded affirmatively. See Table 4 for beta coefficients and standard errors for the teacher mental health regression models.

Table 4. Regression findings for teacher mental health models.

	Model I	Model II
Variable	β (SE)	β (SE)
Teaching Experience	0.027 (0.009) **	0.012 (0.007)
Female	0.011 (0.238)	−0.040 (0.207)
Non-White	0.302 (0.235)	0.161 (0.201)
Title I	−0.111 (0.162)	−0.327 (0.140) *
Rural	−0.041 (0.227)	−0.111 (0.195)
Urban	−0.831 (0.187) ***	−0.593 (0.162) ***
Administrative Support		0.040 (0.011) ***
Teacher Autonomy		0.480 (0.088) ***
Student Mental Health		0.306 (0.036) ***
Student Work Completion		0.112 (0.054) *
Parental Support		0.106 (0.058) ⁺
N	766	766
F	5.216 ***	29.892 ***
F Δ	5.216 ***	57.186 ***
R ²	0.040	0.304
R ² Δ	0.040	0.264

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ⁺ $p < 0.10$.

5. Discussion

The results of this exploratory study suggest that teachers' experienced low levels of morale and mental health at the conclusion of the 2021–2022 school year. A similar survey was conducted at the conclusion of the 2020–2021 school year [15]. In that study, the researchers similarly operationalized teacher morale [56] and found that 29.5% of teachers reported low levels of morale, compared to 53.6% in May 2022—an 82% increase over the span of a single year. The current study also found that teachers reported low levels of mental health, and 30.9% reported having received mental health counseling during the pandemic—much greater than the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent national estimation that 20.3% of Americans see a counselor [60]. To be clear, we do not assume that seeing a counselor is necessarily negative; however, we find these figures to be concerning, and follow-up tests found that participants in our sample who saw a counselor reported lower levels of mental health than those who did not. The current study's descriptive statistics align with previous studies conducted throughout the pandemic: teaching during COVID-19 has taken a toll on teachers mentally (e.g., Pellerone, [16]) and physically (e.g., Kotowski et al. [61]).

Across both models, the data suggest significant predictors explaining close to a third of the variance of each dependent variable. It is important to note that for both teachers' morale and mental health, the variables of teaching at a Title I school, teaching at an urban school, administrative support, student mental health, and student work completion were all significant predictors. One positive to note from the research is that teachers who identified as a minority had slightly higher morale compared to teachers who identified as white within the sample. Though the difference was small, it suggests that minority teachers may have felt more support or teacher autonomy to support students compared to their white peers and, thus, may feel less demoralized. These findings align with other studies completed during the pandemic, which suggest that minority teachers may have fared better mentally during the pandemic [48]. Baker et al. suggest that this may be due to underreporting or may imply resilience within this subgroup [48]. Future research should continue to explore this aspect in more detail to learn more about these results.

As the educational system has shifted and evolved throughout the pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of demoralized teachers [19]. The current findings suggest that factors such as the school environment, teacher autonomy, teacher concerns about student mental health and motivation, and administrative support influence teachers' morale and mental health. The lack of teachers' autonomy and administrative support may

suggest that teachers do not always feel they can provide the best support to students as they see fit [28]. Low teacher morale and mental health may lead to teachers feeling more depressed or ashamed of their inability to support students in the best possible way and may lead to higher teacher attrition rates. In addition, teachers may feel more pressure from administrators to raise student achievement. Students completed less work and learned less overall than prior to the pandemic, and this was exacerbated for students who attended schools that spent more time engaging in remote learning [18,62,63]. This left many teachers feeling low morale as helping students catch up and learn new material became increasingly difficult [28].

The current study's findings align with previous work on teacher well-being and the role of administrative support [12–14]. Specifically, the low teacher morale is unsurprising as Marshall et al. [15] found teachers had lower morale at the end of the 2020–2021 school year. What is concerning is that the current findings suggest the low morale has continued through another school year. With the potential impact on student achievement [36] and relationships with students [37], it is important for school leaders to take immediate action. As supported by the current predictor variables, school leaders might consider intrinsic and extrinsic [40], administrative operations, working relationships, and school effectiveness categories [42] as potential first steps for supporting teacher morale.

Similar to previous literature, the current results suggest low teacher mental health [46]. Specifically, administrative support and the resources available to teachers play a key role in teacher mental health [47]. Beyond the support teachers receive, students also play a key role in teacher mental health as the current study found student mental health and work completion as significant predictors. Though previous studies have not explored these aspects, other studies have found the relationships teachers build with their students play a significant role in teacher mental health [50,51]. This was especially true for teachers in an online environment [14,52]. Therefore, school leaders might consider finding resources for teachers to support students within their class(es) and provide resources for teachers, which may also increase job satisfaction and decrease feelings of burnout and demoralization [46,47].

5.1. Implications

Supporting teacher morale and mental health is always important, but this is especially true after a time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As schools continue to push back to a pre-pandemic approach to learning, school leaders still need to be aware of and find ways to support teacher morale and mental health. Support is especially important for teachers in Title I or Urban school settings. This may begin with providing teachers school-level support for their instruction and mental health. A demoralized teacher does not feel that they are supporting their students in the best possible way. School administrators can start by communicating with teachers about their needs and finding ways to support teachers and students. Teachers spend the most time with students and may be able to gauge the most appropriate ways to support student needs rather than a program pushed from the top-down. School leaders may consider looking into mental health programs that can be brought into the classroom to support teachers' and students' mental health. This may also lead to teachers feeling more autonomy in their classrooms and feeling less demoralized as they can support their students and their own needs. Schools can also support teachers' mental health by providing telehealth resources to access professional counselors or providing mental health days to teachers throughout the school year.

Another way school leaders may support teacher morale and mental health is by encouraging teachers to support each other at the grade/subject level and the school level. This may include providing protected planning time to meet as a grade level or giving teachers an opportunity to voice perspectives during faculty meetings or through surveys [39]. School leaders can use this feedback to provide a supportive environment that would benefit the teachers. Encouraging a supportive environment may help teachers feel that they are not alone and build more of a team environment rather than an individual one [14].

Additionally, teachers need support from their administrators. This support may come through resources but also flexibility and understanding. Throughout the pandemic, teachers have shared feelings of being overworked, limited flexibility in instructional approaches, and increased expectations as schools return to normalcy [14]. School leaders must provide flexibility and set realistic expectations for teachers, understanding that students are behind and trusting teachers to make sound decisions to support student learning [10,14]. School leaders can provide flexibility when available by providing a substitute teacher for an extra planning period, provide mental health days by allowing teachers to work from home on days students are not in the building, or limit the requirements put on teachers, such as extra paperwork or implementing new curriculum materials.

Finally, schools need to support teachers and recognize how demoralized teachers are at the moment. Almost three-fourths of teachers indicated that they considered leaving their job at the end of the 2021–2022 school year, a figure that was up sharply from the year prior [20], which was much greater than historical trends [1,64]. School leaders must take steps to provide appropriate resources to teachers and find ways to appropriately compensate teachers for the jobs they are completing [38]. Teachers have put in longer than usual hours throughout the pandemic [22] with little to no compensation. School leaders and policymakers need to compensate teachers appropriately for their work and will continue to put into educating the future—especially if they want to ensure that they remain in the classroom beyond the pandemic.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

The current study is one of the first to explore teachers' experiences of morale and mental health at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. The results provide a starting point for school leaders to support teachers and limit teacher attrition as schools return to post pandemic practices. As research continues in these critical areas, it is important to note some of the current study's limitations that others may look to address in future studies. First, though the current study had a larger number of teachers, the sample lacked diversity. Researchers should work to have more robust and diverse samples that may glean further insights into teachers' experiences of morale and mental health. Second, data collection occurred at one point during the school year. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal design that examines changes in teacher burnout throughout the school year.

Additionally, as research has indicated throughout the pandemic, there is a concern about teachers' overall well-being. Future research should consider specific interventions to support teacher well-being. This will require more advanced research designs including different approaches to exploring teachers' experiences. The sampling procedure also represents a limitation. The anonymous link to the survey was posted in several places across multiple social media platforms to reach a large number of teachers. However, it should be acknowledged that teachers who elected to participate in this research and complete the survey may differ in important ways from those who never encountered the social media posts or did so and elected not to participate. Finally, as we discussed previously, the current study used a limited approach to measuring several constructs including teacher morale and mental health. This was aimed at limiting the burden placed on teachers needed to dedicate to participating in the study. Future studies should consider more robust teacher morale and mental health measures and explore other predictor variables that may decrease or increase teacher well-being.

In conclusion, the current study was one of the first studies to focus on teachers' experiences of morale and mental health as schools looked to return to normalcy at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the current study sheds light on variables that may predict teacher morale, mental health, and job satisfaction. These results are important as states and schools continue to see an exodus of teachers leaving the profession. Moving forward, school leaders can use the results from the current study as a starting point to support teachers.

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