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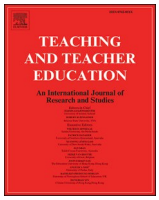
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Research paper

Bookshelves of our lives: Pre-Service teachers' meaningful life stories nurturing identities and professional development

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ABSTRACT

This article explores pre-service teachers' (PST) life stories in the context of identities and professional development. Reflecting on meaningful life experiences can support teachers' identity work and holistic professional development, but research on PSTs' life stories is limited. This study aimed to explore the "what and how" in the life stories. Conducted in a master's-level teacher education course at a Finnish university, narrative data from 152 PSTs were collected. The analysis began by creating narrative themes and defining genres of the dataset, after which 25 stories were analyzed in terms of narrative choices. The findings show the versatility of the data, covering various genres and narrative themes including current topics such as becoming a teacher and health and well-being. Narrative choices in the stories brought out and highlighted reflections on identities. The study underscores the potential of storytelling as means for exploring and supporting PST's identities.

1. Introduction

As authors who have worked in teacher education (TE) for a long time, we have experienced a wide range of meaningful emotions, interactions and stories with our students that have impacted us both professionally and personally. However, in academia, these meaningful experiences often risk being overlooked instead of being recognized, perhaps because their influence on teachers' professional development (PD) is difficult to measure or evaluate. As teacher educators and educational researchers, we have identified the need to support and study pre-service teachers' (PST) growth through narrative and arts-based methods, as these approaches seem to give a voice to those who might be overlooked by traditional academic structures (Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). In this article, we shine the spotlight on PSTs' life stories, illustrating the various identities narrated within them and thus filling a research gap in the exploration of PST life experiences (Clandinin, 2004). Here, we consider PSTs' life stories in the context of identity development, recognizing that significant life experiences influence teachers' PD.

Acknowledging teachers' unique strengths and life experiences can enhance their PD, making it more meaningful and personalized (Korthagen, 2017). This article explores PSTs' meaningful life stories as a part of their identity work in TE. Identity work, a process of expanding self-knowledge through reflecting on identity (Stenberg, 2010), is considered an essential element of PD (Martin, 2021). Here, PD is viewed through the lens of social constructionism and is comprehensively understood as an ongoing and life-long process of growth and learning. This approach involves reflecting on teachers' identities from personal and professional perspectives (Martin et al., 2021).

Knowing oneself is a vital component in how teachers perceive and shape their work (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994; Park et al., 2019). Personal life events and experiences are closely connected with how teachers perform their professional duties (Altan & Lane, 2018). Thus, the opportunity to reflect on their lives can foster PSTs' overall growth as educators and individuals.

Teachers' personal and professional identities are deeply intertwined and cannot be distinctly separated into "professional" and "personal" (Alsup, 2019), and these connections play a significant role in their motivation, dedication, and job satisfaction (Day et al., 2006). Identity is a continuous, evolving process shaped by various external factors, including life experiences (Flores & Day, 2006), and it is socially constructed and changing (Ivanič, 1994). In addition, individuals possess multiple identities that are based on various social groups they identify with and position themselves in (Ivanič, 1994).

TE plays a crucial role in training future professionals in a changing world (Kausar & Ajmal, 2024). The practices and pedagogy of TE must also adapt and evolve to meet the skills required in the future. In this context, some scholars have suggested that incorporating arts into

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teaching and learning methods can enhance TE for the 21st century (Shockley & Krakaur, 2021; Watson, 2018). Although existing studies show that arts-integrated approaches can enhance core 21st-century skills and support innovative pedagogies (e.g., Corbisiero-Drakos et al., 2021), research on the integration of the arts within teacher education remains comparatively limited.

From the viewpoint of narrative inquiry, people are natural storytellers, and narrative research focuses on how individuals perceive themselves and the world and derive meaning from their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Research has been conducted on the shaping of teacher identities through PSTs' narratives during and linked to TE (Anspal et al., 2011), and narrative inquiry has been utilized to explore how significant life experiences affect the attitudes and teaching practices of teachers (Altan & Lane, 2018). However, research focusing on PSTs' personal life stories remains scarce.

Teacher development does not occur in a vacuum but is influenced by our life experiences in the socio-cultural contexts in which we live (Garza et al., 2016; Martin & Kostiainen, 2024; Merseth et al., 2008). Clandinin (2004, p. 121) suggests that instead of separating TE "from the pasts and futures of our student teachers' lives," we should take into consideration how their life stories affect their development and identity as teachers. Therefore, in this article, we examine PSTs' stories about their meaningful life experiences, whether they are more closely linked to TE or not. Our aim is to explore Finnish PSTs' meaningful life stories narrated via an arts-based practice as part of their PD in TE. As narrative researchers, we study PSTs' stories to understand how they experience the world from their personal, individual, and subjective viewpoints (Kelchtermans, 2024). We are fascinated by PST's stories and approach them drawing from Kelchtermans's (2024, 205) view: "Stories … reveal in what way particular situations or events are meaningful to the storyteller. By studying these stories, we can understand how people experience the world."

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Narrative identity

People naturally tell stories about their lives to highlight events and reflect on their meanings (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Sharing stories helps develop a sense of self (McLean et al., 2007), forming a narrative identity—an evolving life story that combines past and future to give life coherence and meaning (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). This identity is shaped by interactions with others within social contexts (Meretoja, 2018). Important life experiences are personally impactful and subjectively valued, as they foster skills, self-awareness, and broader perspectives and can lead to deep personal transformation (Merriam & Clark, 1993). Narrating, documenting, and exchanging stories about our meaningful life experiences gives us the opportunity to pause and consider our lives from various viewpoints, which can profoundly benefit our personal growth and overall well-being (Ihanus, 2019). Narratives serve as spaces in which complex, context-specific, multifaceted, and frequently conflicting identities are formed (Higgins & Sandhu, 2014).

Kelchtermans (2024) describes stories as subjective representations of reality shaped by the storyteller's experiences and interpretations. Storytelling supports identity growth and maintenance (McLean et al., 2007). Through meaning-making, individuals express what their stories reveal about their identity, highlighting traits, goals, skills, or patterns (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Ricoeur (1991) describes narrative identity as an autobiographical continuum that we build through interpretations of our experiences. This interpretation of lived experiences can be seen as a reflection, deep understanding, and interpretation of one's own experiences by revisiting and examining them (Billett, 2016; Bolton, 2010), which is an important part of teachers' PD. Reflective practice contributes significantly to teachers' professional growth by fostering motivation, clarifying educational values, helping them learn from misjudgments in their professional decision-making, and enabling them to navigate the emotional demands of everyday school work (e.g. Pinnegar et al., 2023; Schön, 1983). Identity work through storytelling can support reflection and PD in TE (Anspal et al., 2011; Binks et al., 2009; Martin, 2021).

As teaching is an emotional and highly social profession, it is important for PSTs to learn to deal with their emotional experiences and empathize with others. We suggest that storytelling can support these aims. For example, dealing with emotional and personal school memories can be an important way to support teachers' identity work (Uitto et al., 2018). Narrative identity encompasses both our past and imagined futures (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Meretoja, 2018), helping PSTs reflect on their hopes, fears, and expectations. It is crucial for PSTs to envision potential futures in education and their roles as experts. Narratives open these possibilities by exploring who we are and who we might become, enhancing our understanding of our origins, current state, and potential future (Meretoja, 2018). Narrative identity highlights life's openness and the evolving nature of identity based on emotional connections (Meretoja, 2018).

2.2. Arts-based narrative practices supporting PSTs' PD and identities

Although there is not a completely unified view of the relationship between arts and narrative (Martin & Kostiainen, 2024), we consider them to be strongly intertwined, and thus, we discuss arts-based and narrative practices in parallel. Arts-based practices include various fields, such as drama, dance, music, and literary and visual arts. Here, we focus especially on practices that combine narrativity and literary or visual arts.

Arts-based practices can be beneficial for the development of PSTs' emotional and thinking skills (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022). Arts-based reflective practices can also support teachers' resilience and well-being (McKay & Barton, 2018; Mead, 2024). Furthermore, arts-based practices and creative approaches can bring out the voices of PSTs and support their growth (Kostiainen et al., 2017).

Despite the fact that arts can evoke a range of emotions, including fear (Selkrig & Bottrell, 2009), anxiety (Ogier & Ghosh, 2018), or anger (Patterson, 2017), PSTs appear to value the experiences of arts-based teaching and learning courses in TE (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022). Arts-based learning and teaching are perceived as authentic (Ogden et al., 2010), profound, and capable of linking classroom education to the external world (Giorza, 2016). As the identities of PSTs play a role in the conscious and unconscious formation of their teaching theories (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000), narrative arts-based practices could also enable PSTs to become aware of unconscious perceptions. Overall, the utilization of arts produces a variety of meaningful learning outcomes for PSTs: emotional shifts, the capability and motivation to act, and altered attitudes (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022).

Writing, in general, is considered an essential means for PD through reflection (Ortoleva et al., 2016). For example, by engaging in reflective writing, practitioners can examine events, emotions, structures, and experiences from various angles, leading to transformative practices and professional growth (Bolton, 2010). While our lived, told, and written stories can never be entirely objective, reflection and reflexivity can expand our perspectives and foster our development (Bolton, 2010).

Creative writing, or literary arts, can support teachers' identity reflection in various ways (Anspal et al., 2011; Binks et al., 2009; Martin, 2021). Creative writing allows teachers to examine experiences or emotions from different perspectives or to distance themselves from them (Kosonen, 2015). Creative writing can liberate PSTs from the constraints of academic or professional language, such as grammar and structure (Bolton, 1999; Elbaz-Luwisch & Pritzker, 2010). For example, metaphors enable participants to create images that help them understand and share difficult experiences, while freewriting exercises can empower writers, as the technique allows them to let go of control and just write whatever comes to mind (Martin, 2021).

Visual expression can also be a useful way to support teacher development. For example, working with photographs (Kettunen et al., 2023) or various visual arts methods (Beltman et al., 2015; Kettunen et al., 2024) can support PSTs in dealing with emotions related to their identities as teachers. Visual narratives can help PSTs tap into their emotions, share them with others, and reflect on becoming teachers (Beltman et al., 2015; Kettunen et al., 2024).

To conclude, arts are a natural way to tell stories. Storytelling can serve as a reflective tool for PSTs, as narrativity can help individuals find meaning in their experiences by sharing and resharing personal stories, allowing them to reflect on the past and shape their future purposes (Binks et al., 2009). For example, Coles (1989) discovers that using narratives from novels and stories helps students see the characters as friends who could assist them in making decisions, finding direction, recognizing moral dilemmas, and gaining a better understanding of their own personal circumstances and experiences. The act of storytelling can offer a secure environment for PSTs to focus on real-life experiences and question assumptions, allowing them to immerse themselves in someone else's experience and uncover realms that are typically inaccessible (Garret, 2006).

In addition to supporting the PD and identity work of PSTs, arts-based narrative methods can be useful for educational researchers. Arts-based narrative practices encompass a range of methodological tools utilized by researchers from various fields throughout different stages of research, such as data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation (Leavy, 2020). These innovative tools incorporate principles from the creative arts to address research questions in a comprehensive and interactive manner, seamlessly blending theory and practice (Leavy, 2020).

Narrative methods are valuable for exploring identity because they enable researchers to investigate how individuals situate themselves within broader societal frameworks and overarching discourses (Higgins & Sandhu, 2014). Moreover, Siegesmund and Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) suggest that arts-based research combines non-symbolic and symbolic expressions to understand human experiences. For instance, illustrating professional growth can be more profound than verbal descriptions (Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). Arts-based narrative methods focus on emotions, reactions, and relationships in learning and teaching (Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008), exploring key aspects, such as experiences influencing the desire to teach (Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). Existing research demonstrates strong engagement with arts-related topics in art TE; however, aesthetic phenomena in generalist TE remain less prominently represented in the literature (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022).

Previous literature has explored pre- and in-service teacher narratives from the perspective of metaphors (Fang & Mizusawa, 2018), plotting (Keränen et al., 2024), and turning points (Dawes & Wheeldon, 2020). Narratives can be approached from plot structures (Keränen et al., 2024), epiphanies (Denzin, 2013), the overall structure of the stories (Smith, 2016), and genres (Gabriel & Ulus, 2015). Gabriel and Ulus (2015) also note that, for a researcher, it is interesting when the plot-driven narrative "collapses" as emotions take over.

3. Aims and methods

3.1. Research questions

This qualitative narrative study seeks to explore the meaningful life stories of PSTs as part of their identity work, which is closely linked to PD. Here, we are interested in how their identities are visible in their stories, whether they are related to teaching and educational field or not. Our research questions are:

RQ1: In terms of genres, narrative styles, and themes, what kinds of stories do PSTs narrate about their meaningful life experiences?

RQ2: In terms of narrative choices, how do PSTs compose their meaningful life stories?

3.2. Context and data of the study

In the Finnish educational system, primary school TE consists of a three-year bachelor's (180 credits) degree and a two-year master's (120 credits) degree (Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2011). This qualitative narrative study was conducted in a mandatory master-level course of a TE program at a Finnish university in 2022–2024. The course was designed for PSTs close to graduation, and it focused on teachers' expertise, challenging them to reflect on their PD from individual and social viewpoints. As teachers on this course module, we planned and implemented a pre-assignment to introduce PSTs to the course topics. This assignment was also used to collect data. Arts-based research typically considers the usefulness of a study from the participants' perspective and involves participants in the research process so that they are active contributors who benefit from participating (Chilton & Leavy, 2020; Morris & Paris, 2021).

As the pre-assignment for the course, the PSTs were given a narrative arts-based assignment called "Bookshelves of Our Lives," in which the PSTs were asked what kinds of books could be written about their meaningful life stories. First, the PSTs made a summary, for example, a list, a mind map, or a drawing of books with titles, of their important life experiences. Second, they were asked to focus on describing and reflecting on one of these life events and its meaning to them in the style or genre of their choice, such as a book cover, poem, news story, diary page, or fiction piece. Examples of visual assignments are portrayed in Fig. 1. The assignment served as an orientation to the course and could also be used to support reflection on expertise throughout the course. All PSTs who attended the course were asked for their consent to use their pre-assignments for research purposes. Participation in the study was optional.

When we experience meaningful events, transform them into stories, and recall them from specific perspectives, we engage in interpretative processes to understand them (Meretoja, 2018). Thus, we selected the assignment to motivate PSTs to engage in reflective writing and production, aiming for a deeper self-understanding rather than merely narrating their story to others (Anspal et al., 2011). In total, visual and written texts from 152 PSTs comprised the data of this study. The data were numbered, anonymized, and compiled into a text file of 107 pages (Times New Roman 12, 1.5 line spacing). All data excerpts in this article were translated into English and marked with the PST and the number of the participant.

3.3. Analyzing the data: A narrative approach

We examined the PSTs' stories by focusing on their narrative elements, situating this study methodologically within the tradition of narrative research (Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith, 2016). As narrative researchers, we have taken on the roles of both storytellers and story analysts (Smith, 2016), who see arts at the core of narrative research (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Leavy, 2020; Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). We align with the view in narrative studies that experience is inherently influenced by time and the cultural/historical context: The fundamental temporality of experience means that the past and future continuously influence the present (Meretoja, 2018).

We conducted a systematic three-phase dialogic narrative analysis in which we focused on *what* was narrated and *how* (Keränen et al., 2024) in the PSTs' stories. However, the process of narrative analysis is not completely linear and fixed but rather cyclical and iterative (Smith, 2016).

The quality of the study was reinforced by the use of triangulation of analysis (qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis) and researcher triangulation (Patton, 2015). In the latter, two researchers analyzed the data and interpreted the results. In the first phase, we



Fig. 1. Examples of visual data: Bookshelves of our lives -assignment.

conducted a qualitative content analysis of the narratives, that is, the life stories of 152 PSTs. The second phase was a narrative analysis, in which visual expression was used as a means of illustrating the data. In the third phase, the analysis of narratives was deepened and refined by choosing 25 life stories for a closer exploration of narrative choices. These phases are described in more detail below.

The first phase began with a thorough reading and review of the dataset by two researchers. Following the steps of inductive qualitative content analysis, we moved from coding and grouping to categorizing and abstracting the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) in the direction of the research questions. To ensure unanimous agreement on what to code and the level of accuracy required, we started the coding process together. Next, we divided the data in half and continued coding individually in line with RQ1. Finally, we discussed and shared the coded data, checking for consistency. Working together, we categorized the coded data into seven genres and styles, as well as six narrative themes. For the genre categorization, we used typical literary classifications, some of which were also mentioned in the data collection assignment. Stories that did not fit into other categories were placed in the 'Hybrid texts/No clear category' category.

The seven genres were: 1) Narrative plot stories, 2) Book cover texts, 3) Visual texts, 4) Newspaper articles, 5) Poems, 6) Freeform/diary texts, and 7) Hybrid texts/no clear genre. We created the themes based on Smith's (2016) description of a narrative theme as a pattern that runs through a story, summarizing its content. Although some stories discussed several topics, each story was assigned to only one theme which best described the story as a whole. The themes were: 1) Childhood and adolescence memories, 2) Studying to become a teacher and teaching, 3) Relationships, 4) Well-being and health, 5) Learning adventures, and 6) Reflections on life. More detailed definitions of the genres and narrative themes can be found at the beginning of the 'Findings' section.

In the second phase of the analysis, we employed digital visual techniques (using Canva) to represent the data by categorizing the genres into a "painting palette" (Fig. 3) and the narrative themes into books on a bookshelf (Fig. 4). Subsequently, we reread the data and chose 25 life stories that represented the different genres and narrative themes for a closer examination.

In the third phase, analysis of the 25 chosen narratives was conducted by applying and integrating Smith's (2016) dialogical narrative analysis and qualitative content analysis to answer RQ2. As narrative researchers, we explored the structure of the stories (Smith, 2016) by examining the use of plotting, storylining, and linguistic solutions as narrative choices. Through the steps of systematic coding, clustering, and abstracting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), we identified and categorized turning points, transitions, tensions (plotting and storylining), metaphors, narrative point of view, and narrative tense (linguistic solutions). These narrative choices were highly relevant and appropriate in relation to our research interests, which focused on how meaningful life experiences were narrated and how identity was revealed through them. Similar narrative choices have been studied in previous educational research (e.g. Dawes & Wheeldon, 2020; Denzin, 2013; Fang & Mizusawa, 2018; Keränen et al., 2024). These were compiled into a table with 75 citations, illustrating the narrative richness of the data and the depth of the analysis (see examples of each category in Fig. 2). The findings regarding narrative choices are presented at the end of the 'Findings' section.

Original citation	Narration category	Analysis text
Primary school was probably the easiest time of my life -- In high school, a harsh truth hit me in the face. --	Turning point	The author was challenged by the demands of high school, which led them to develop themselves as a student.
This is the story of an introverted electrician who fought against all the odds to make his way to study education.	Transitions	The author describes their transition from one occupation to a completely different one.
graduation is approaching -- the teaching profession does not seem right for me.	Tensions	The author narrates a tension in their future career as a teacher
This journey has made me a better person	Metaphor	Journey as a metaphor for personal growth
This is how [name] begins our interview. After this I am intrigued, how she has succeeded in her learning process. So I ask her.	Narrative point of view	The author has taken on the role of a fictional journalist who narrates in the first person in an interview. The author herself appears in the text in the third person.
"I walked - - I listened to the children play as I walked passed the school - - A child's joy sparked inside me - - Now I have the honour to be accompanying [my students] -- teaching the lessons of life"	Narrative tense	The tense is the imperfect when the poem describes a dark time before the authors' remarkable insight about life. After the turning point, at the end of the poem, the present tense expresses what it is like now and what the author has learned since their insight.

Fig. 2. Examples of the third phase of the analysis: Categories of narrative choices.

4. Findings

4.1. Genres and themes in PSTs' meaningful life stories

To answer RQ1, we first analyzed how PSTs narrated their meaningful life stories in terms of genres and narrative styles. Next, we formed narrative themes to describe the variety of topics in the stories.

4.1.1. Genres and narrative styles

As illustrated in Fig. 3, the genres and narrative styles of the texts were diverse.

Narrative plot stories (n = 39) with a clear beginning, middle, and end included, for example, a humorous love story, a growth story, a story about oneself as a learner, and a career story. These stories were characterized by the fact that they form a complete story about an event or a life course. The following example is about the uncertainty surrounding one's choice of career:

> "Ever since I was little, I have dreamed of working as a teacher in the future. However, in the past year, I have strongly begun to question my own career choice. I am still not interested in any other field, but I am not sure if I want to work as a teacher in the future." (PST84)

Book cover texts (n = 29) or book introduction texts described, among other things, a career change, or a youth internship experience, or were, for example, a self-help book or a poetry book (nomad stories). Typical of the genre, back cover texts were often written to entice readers, offering them a hook that would make them want to read the whole book. The following back cover text tells the story of one's journey toward a dream job:

> "Undaunted is the story of a woman who, even as a child, knew she wanted to be a teacher. Teenage rebellion and the wrong company had derailed her life for years. Eventually, a friend, love, and family support put her life back on track—and the journey toward her dream job can now begin" (PST125)

Poems (n = 19) in the dataset described, for example, inadequacy and exhaustion, concrete and metaphorical journeys in life, illness, motherhood, or relationships. The poems were either in rhyme or free form. They were often evocative to readers. The poems were also typically laid out visually in poetic form.

Free-form and diary-like texts (n = 19) did not have clear plot structures and were focused on narrating the PSTs' inner thoughts. They included, for example, reflections on incompleteness, growth into becoming a teacher, or one's own identity. These texts focused on reflecting on a particular life event or were contemplative on a general level, as shown in the following narrative:

> "It is difficult to know at what age you usually start to think about questions such as who I am and what I am like. Perhaps one of the

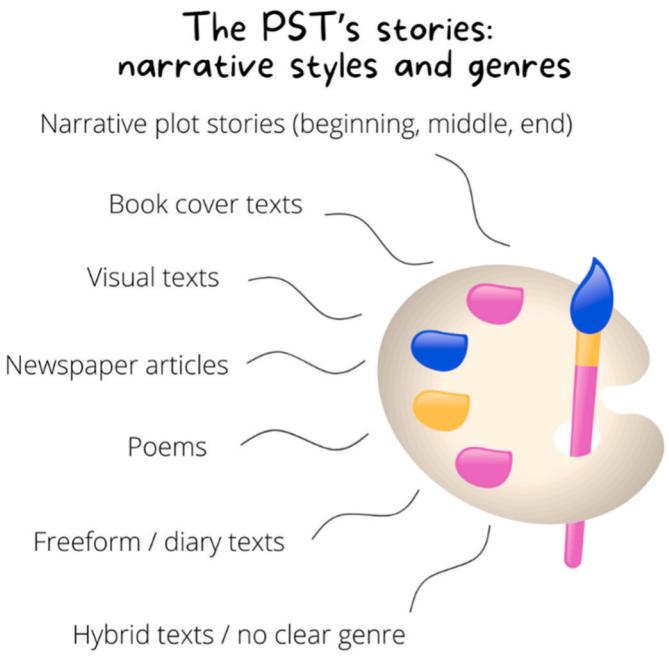


Fig. 3. PSTs' stories: Narrative styles and genres.



Fig. 4. PSTs' stories: Narrative themes: Childhood and adolescent memories; Studying to become a teacher and teaching; Relationships; Well-being and health; Learning adventures; Reflections on life.

> biggest things that has contributed to my self-awareness and well-being is the realization that the reflection—that is probably innate in me is strength …" (PST88)

Newspaper articles (n = 4) included personal profiles (professional perspectives), statements, or articles about achieving important goals. In keeping with the genre, the articles were written in newspaper style, punchy and engaging. The text was also often visually styled as newspaper articles.

Visual texts (n = 6) included images of stacks of books or texts in which visual expression and aesthetics were strongly present. The visual texts were typically carefully composed and colorful. They were either hand-drawn, painted, or created using computer software.

The dataset also contained *hybrid texts* (n = 10) that represented multiple genres or in which a clear genre could not be distinguished.

4.1.2. Narrative themes

We created six narrative themes to answer the kinds of stories the PSTs narrated in terms of content (Fig. 4). The findings reflected the versatility of the PSTs' meaningful life experiences and their impact on their identities. The data covered the whole life cycle of the PSTs, from early childhood to adult life, narrating versatile identities and roles.

Childhood and adolescent memories (n = 12) illustrated the PSTs' early lives (Fig. 5). The stories typically described childhood family and issues that were important to the family. Many of the stories described an important hobby from childhood and youth, such as hockey or music, which had a significant impact on their lives. The stories also recalled the school years and important events, whether positive or negative, that happened to them at school. The following stories from a book back cover text and a diary-like text are about an exciting childhood school memory (PST37) and the pressure to be a good and likeable student (PST26):

Studying to be a teacher and teaching (n = 36) was discussed in many of the PSTs' stories from a variety of perspectives (Fig. 6). In many cases, becoming a PST was described as a "dream come true" and as the certainty of finding one's field. Some of the stories about teaching also described a long or atypical path that eventually led to becoming a teacher, for example, through another profession. Some of the PSTs narrated their struggles and uncertainties about whether teaching was the right choice for their careers after all. For example, on the eve of graduation, the responsibilities and duties of a teacher loom closer and become more uncertain. The following examples are stories of the mixed feelings of a PST on the verge of graduating (PST74) and an early-career teacher reflecting on her style of teaching (PST53):

Relationships (n = 23) such as family, close relatives, friends, motherhood, and fatherhood were at the center of many stories (Fig. 7). The stories described, for example, sibling relationships and the importance of family or grandparents in their own lives. Most of the stories depicted different families and were either growth stories or stories of families with painful memories. The descriptions of relationships were either warm and close relationships with loved ones and friends or complex and difficult relationships. The following are examples of poems written about a big sister (PST40) and "storms" in relationships (PST48):

Well-being and health (n = 16) were at the heart of many stories (Fig. 8). These stories often focused on the narrators' experiences of an illness or diagnosis and how they moved on and recovered. Health-related stories described, for example, the challenges of coping or mental health or receiving a particular diagnosis, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and their reflections afterwards. The stories discussed the achievement or maintenance of well-being. Health and wellness stories were characterized by the way they colored the entire life of the storyteller. One narrative was a poem about rheumatism (PST28), while one narrative was about mental and physical illness (PST13):

Learning adventures (n = 20) focused on various transformative and meaningful life adventures, such as travels, hobbies, career, sports, experiments, and shifts in life (Fig. 9). These adventures took the PSTs to places and situations that changed them as individuals and impacted their personal growth. Falling in love and finding a good friend, for example, were meaningful and positive experiences for many. Negative shifts in life, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, were important milestones in the lives of many. The following is an example of a back cover text about an au pair's summer that affected the storyteller's entire life (PST103), while the other is about the small important moments in one's life (PST19):

Reflections on life (n = 20) included texts that pondered different

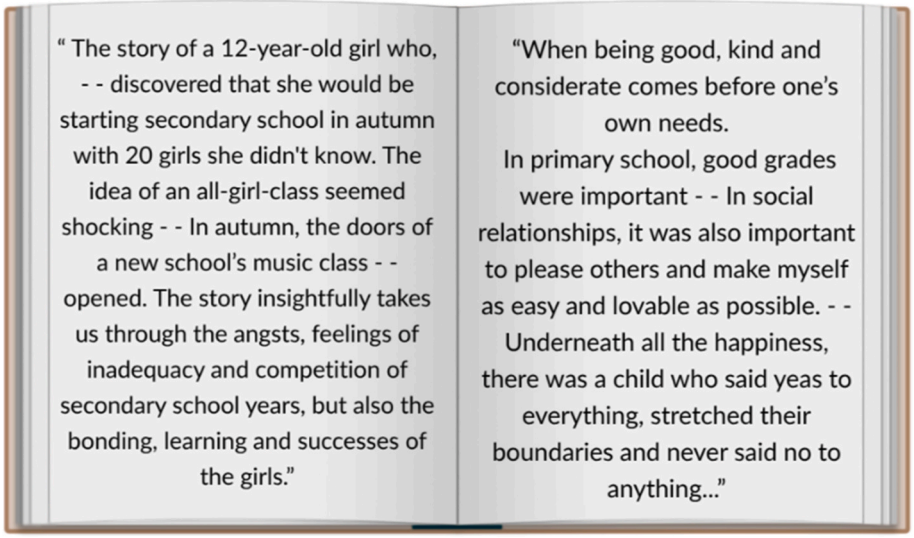


Fig. 5. Childhood and adolescent memories.

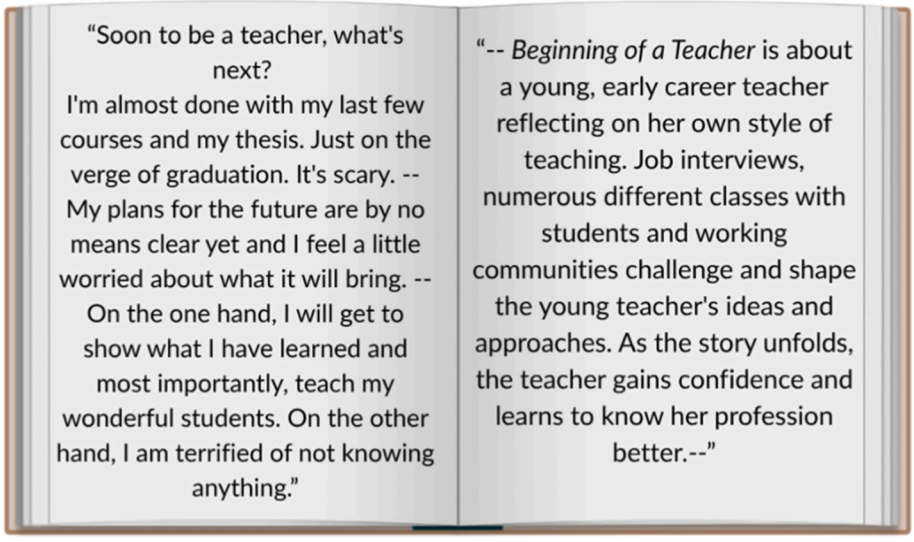


Fig. 6. Stories about studying to become a teacher and teaching.

aspects of life. These aspects included, for example, identity, societal issues, and personal growth from youth to adulthood (Fig. 10). These texts discussed topics the PSTs considered important and reflections of how they wanted to live their lives. Many of the stories dealt with PSTs' values, attitudes, and perceptions in a deep and reflective manner. The following text on the back cover of the book is about living life to the fullest, with all its nuances (PST96). Here, the text begins with a reference to a sleeping half-dead life, which is a popular quote from Minna Canth, one of Finland's most famous authors. The other example is a poem about the narrator's attitude towards growth and learning (PST52).

Finally, a common element in each theme was the range of emotions linked to meaningful life experiences, such as joy, sadness and anxiety. The stories often described feelings of uncertainty relating to the self, personal growth or career choices. Joy and happiness were associated with various life events, such as being accepted into university or becoming a parent. Sadness was expressed through losses and disappointments, such as the breakdown of a close relationship.

4.2. Narrative choices in the PSTs’ meaningful life stories

To answer RQ2, we chose 25 texts for an in-depth analysis, in which we explored the narrative choices in the PSTs’ stories. An important discovery was that these narrative choices seemed to show reflection of identities.

4.3. Plotting and storylining

First, we focused on plotting and storylining by identifying turning points, transitions, and tensions.

Turning points can be described as particular moments, events, or epiphanies that bring about some kind of change in a person's life. Turning points were often about a specific change in life that required or caused some kind of shift of direction. They could, for example, occur during a single phone call, as PST25 narrates: “After that phone call, the decision was made: We would go backpacking around the world.”

In the stories, turning points were, for example, going to therapy, an illness, a recovery, a teacher's recognition of a young pupil's distress, or, as in the following example, an important learning experience when

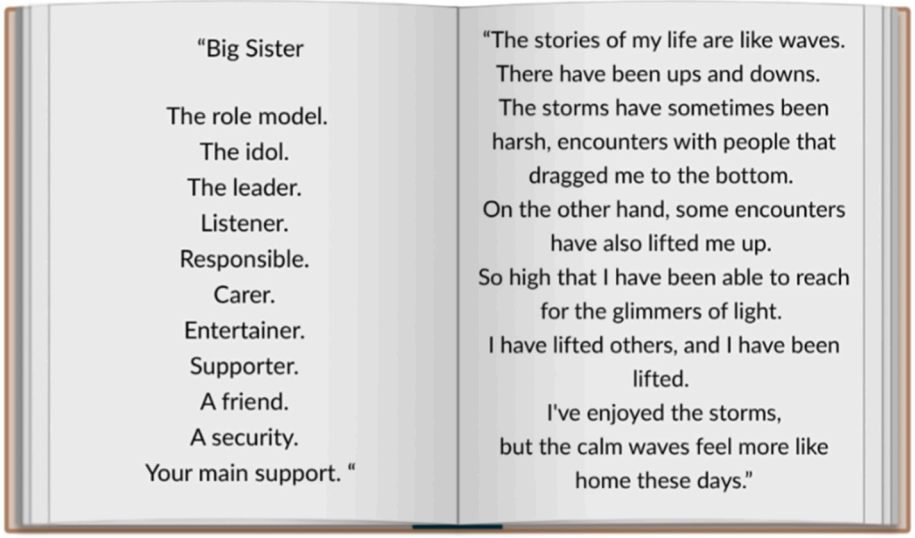


Fig. 7. Poems about relationships.

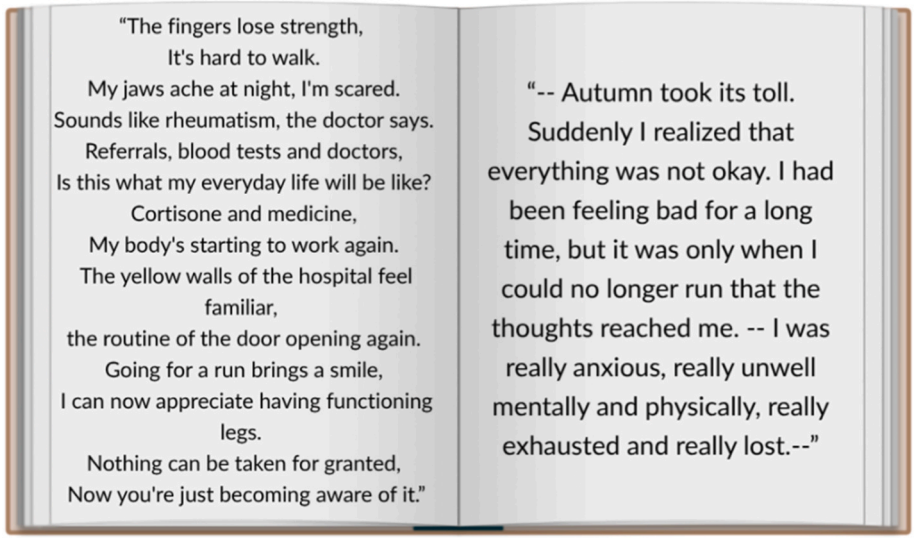


Fig. 8. Stories about health and well-being.

starting high school: "Primary school was probably the easiest time of my life … In high school, the harsh truth hit me in the face: homework should actually be done … It's really a miracle that I stayed committed to my choice and finished studying mathematics while also studying languages." (PST24).

Transitions in the stories were less precise than turning points. They typically involved a gradual transition from one stage of life to another. In the data, transitions included descriptions of becoming: from a boy to a man, from a student to a parent, or from an electrician to a teacher. In some stories, the transition was described as a slow recovery from illness. To sum up, stories that used transition as a narrative choice were often narratives of development: "This is the story of an introverted electrician who, against all the odds, fought his way to study education." (PST23).

Turning points and transitions were used to describe and reflect on life changes, and often these changes impacted not just the individuals telling the story but also everyone close to them. For example, PST9 came from a family with a low educational background and was not encouraged to take academic studies: "I feel lucky and privileged to have been able to study for an academic degree, and I am grateful and proud of my starting point … I am a combination of these two worlds, and I will not choose sides." PST9's worldview was broadened because of studying, which "have also had a positive impact on other family members and relatives."

Tensions appeared in the stories when a PST simultaneously balanced their lives between two ideas, issues, or experiences that pulled them in different directions. These tensions were often used to illustrate and reflect on identity-related issues, such as important values. They often occurred simultaneously, and the situation was characterized by the difficulty of finding a solution at that particular moment or by the fact that there was simply no solution. One of the tensions described was the storyteller being stuck in a role, for example, that of a humorist, which no longer satisfied the storyteller. Social tensions were also described, such as tension between feeling lonely and an outsider even when you belong to a group. Identity-related tension was well illustrated in the following quotation, in which the student struggles with their career choice:

> "Thelma [name pseudonymized] is a 23-year-old young woman struggling with her future. Graduation is approaching, and the closer she gets to getting her master's degree, the more anxious she feels. I

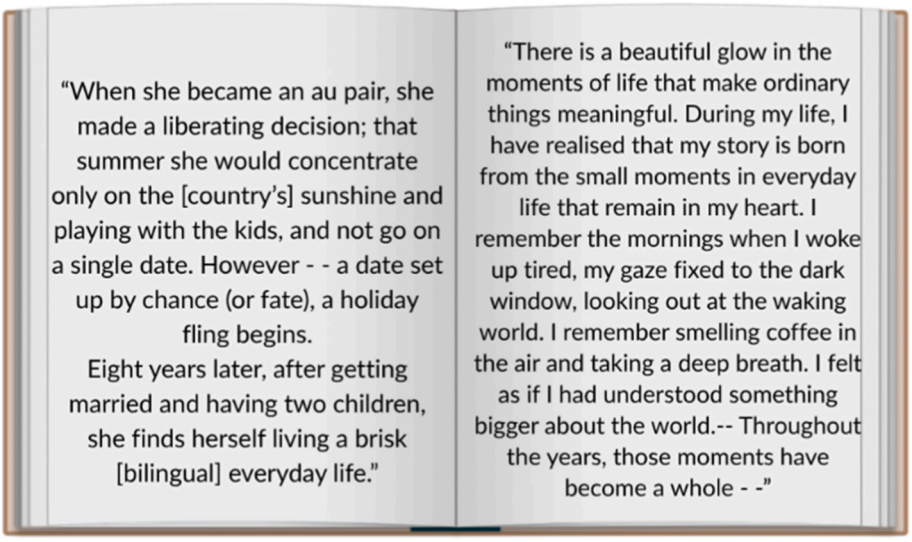


Fig. 9. Stories about learning adventures.

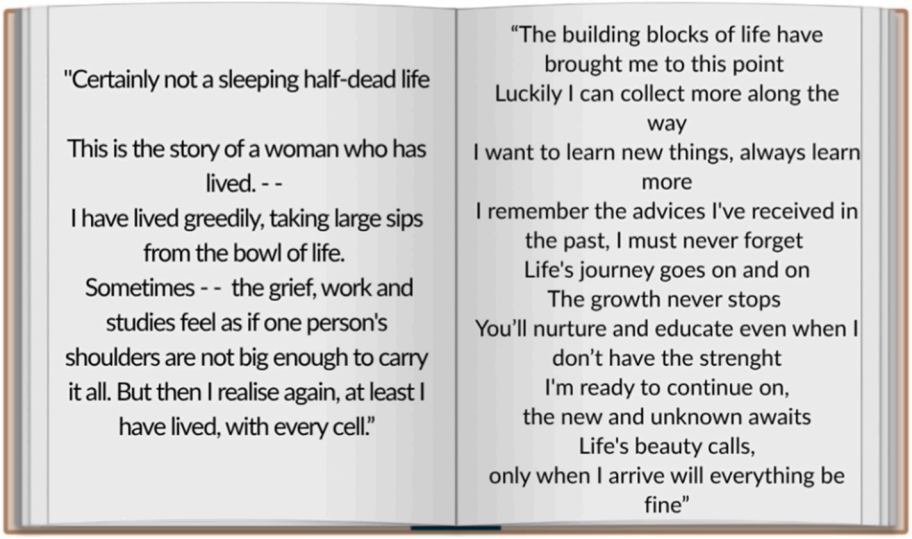


Fig. 10. Stories about reflections on life.

am ashamed to admit that after five years of studying to become a classroom teacher, the profession of teaching does not feel like my own." (PST3)

In some examples, tensions were linked to transitions or turning points. In the following example, PST21 faced a turning point that brought up tensions between their previous attitudes and future relationship plans: "The worst thing is to date a farmer! However, after four dates, he became the last thing I think about at night before going to bed and the first thing I think about in the morning when I wake up … It might not be so bad to be with a farmer."

4.4. Linguistic solutions

Second, we investigated linguistic solutions through the use of metaphors, narrative points of view, and narrative tenses.

Metaphors describing meaningful life experiences were identified in 18 stories of the 25 stories chosen for in-depth analysis. The most common metaphor was "journey," which was used to describe the PSTs' process of development and growth as a person, a parent, or a future teacher. For example, PST2 used the journey metaphor to illustrate their process of taking agency in their well-being: "I am still by no means ready in this journey … The therapy journey has definitely helped." Similarly, PST13 described their journey to being healthier: "This journey has made me a much better person … Happy that I am already at this point in my journey." In PST13's story, journey was also present in descriptions of movement, as they used metaphors of a stream and a road, with uphills and downhills, to describe the nonlinear growth process.

In Finnish, both trip and journey are translated into the same word *matka*. PST18 reflected on their life from the point of view of relationships using a bus trip (*bussimatka)* metaphor: "I often describe my life as a bus trip. Some people have already gotten off at stops, while others have gotten on at new stops. Sometimes the stop button hasn't even … opened for the people who should get off the bus." PST18 narrated themselves as the bus driver, who, although always the same person, played different roles: "different versions of the driver have sat in the driver's seat during the journey."

Path was a journey-related metaphor that PST23 used to describe their PD and becoming a teacher: "The magic cards from the guidance counselor set the boy on a new path. An unexpected path to become a

classroom teacher." PST23 used the same metaphor to describe their "unashamedly authentic story of a young woman searching for her career path and, at the same time, herself."

Metaphors were also used to illustrate the PSTs' various emotions. For example, PST14 described their experience of becoming a parent during teacher studies as a "rollercoaster of emotions, with bottomless love at the top." In their poem about recovering from a difficult time, PST7 used weather and light metaphors to express their emotions: "sink deep into the darkness; the low pressure in my head turned into a glow; the high pressure into sunshine."

Narrative points of view, that is, the use of personal pronouns, were multifaceted in the PSTs' stories. The pronoun choices were used to, for example, narrate one's personal story from an outside observer's perspective. From the texts chosen for an in-depth analysis, 15 texts were written in the first person and eight in the third person. Third-person narration was typical in book cover texts and texts that had a traditional story structure. First-person narration was common in diary-like texts and free-form texts, as well as in some of the more traditional stories with a beginning, middle, and ending.

In some of the texts, the pronouns shifted and changed. These were not accidents but deliberate narrative decisions. For example, PST2 wrote a journal article about their experience of recovering and taking agency in their well-being. Here, PST2 wrote about themself in the third person but also adopted the role of a journalist who narrates the journal interview: "'I am not nearly ready for this journey'. This is how [name] starts our interview. After this, I start to wonder how [name] has succeeded in their learning. So, I ask them."

PST1 wrote a book cover about them becoming a parent during teacher studies, focusing on societal norms and breaking them. PST1 began the text with a passive voice: "First, you have to go to school, get married, and have a house and a job ready. A stable household and relationship, the world traveled, and above all, you have to live your youth! Only then will it be good to start a family," and then continues by asking, "But what if you do otherwise?" After this introduction, the text continued in the third-person narration until at the end, when the writer's voice emerged as the narration changed to the first person: "With this story, I would like to instill in others the belief that everything in life will work out if you just have the courage to trust yourself and your own goals or dreams!"

Narrative tense was the final subject of our analysis. In the stories in which the tense did not change, the present tense was the most popular. The present tense was used especially in free-form and diary-like texts. For example, in PST20's text, the present tense showed the writer's attitude toward life, as they wrote about not wanting to become a fully grown, boring adult and wanting to live in the moment while they were still young: "I have about 10 years to become a young and cool teacher, after which I will begin to wilt. Work life is approaching too quickly."

Shifting and changing the narrative tense were common in most of the stories chosen for the in-depth analysis. On some occasions, this seemed to be a way of following the style of a particular genre, for example, a book cover text, by using the present tense when "advertising" the book and the past tense when describing what the book was about: "This book narrates how [name] drifted from work to work and course to course without being able to truly concentrate on anything. Despite concentration difficulties and poor school performance, [name] was not discouraged by the first few unsuccessful application rounds, and with the help of ADHD medication, [name] finally got into to studying educational sciences …" (PST8).

Narrative tense was often used as a means for reflection. First, one common structure was starting the story with past tense to describe events from the PSTs' lived lives and then changing to the present tense or present perfect to describe how the PSTs' experience their lives currently. This mirrored the reflective nature of the texts, as the present tense was often used to discuss what the PSTs learned from their past experiences or how those experiences changed their lives. This is apparent in PST7's poem:

> "I walked with a weight in my head, a twinkle gone out of my eyes, my creativity disappeared … I listened to the children play as I walked past the school … Decided: it is time for a change, the magic of life must be restored … A child's joy sparked inside me … Now I have the honor of accompanying [my students] … teaching the lessons of life."

Second, another way of using the shifting of tenses was to extend the text from a specific memory to a broader societal discussion, as PST15 did in their story. They used the past tense to describe their childhood memory of playing tag and then changed to the present tense when pondering how, in society, one thinks that they would always win because of their own skills when there are actually many resources that they could use to help them progress in life: "… they still think that they are making it on their own and are surprised when someone falls off the ride."

Third, the changing of tenses was used to explain or analyze an experience. In PST16's evocative story, they reminisced about their adolescent years when their mother was not doing well and they had to take care of their younger siblings at the expense of their own studies. The story, accurately describing the events of one morning, was narrated in the present tense. The story was interrupted by a comment in the past tense in which the narrator opened up to the reader about having a broader perspective of their youth, explaining that this particular morning was not an exception but a usual occurrence:

> "I have no choice but to stay home with my little siblings. I was the middle child, so I often had to stay and watch over my little siblings as my mother drove the older ones to high school. It was not very pleasant because my mother always ran late. This morning was no exception. The waiting feels long. I feel like crying because I always get into this situation."

5. Discussion

In this study, we explored the meaningful life stories of PSTs. Drawing on narrative data from 152 master's-level PSTs in Finland, we analyzed what kinds of stories (genres and themes) PSTs (N = 152) narrated about their lives, and then deepened the analysis by exploring how they utilized different narrative choices to compose their meaningful life stories (N = 25). Similarly to some earlier research, we recognized that their PD is shaped by personal life experiences and interconnected with their professional surroundings (Garza et al., 2016; Martin & Kostiainen, 2024; Merseth et al., 2008). Instead of studying the PST's perceived effect of storytelling on their development, we explored how identities were visible in their stories, composed through creative expression. We focused on identity work, a process linked to PD that is conducted by reflecting on narrative identities. This approach was based on the understanding that teachers' PD is influenced by their personal life experiences and does not occur in isolation from their professional environment (Alsup, 2019; Clandinin, 2004; Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). As teacher educators, we felt privileged to be invited to experience glimpses of the PSTs' meaningful, evocative and highly personal stories that, based on our experience, traditional methods in TE and educational research seldom have space for. In what follows, we discuss the study in relation to the research questions.

First, the PSTs used various narrative styles and genres to narrate their stories, from book cover texts to poems. In these genres, the PSTs narrated stories with various themes. As the data were collected as a pre-course assignment for the PSTs in formal TE, it would have been expected that the stories would be linked mainly to teaching or becoming a teacher. However, although some of the stories were clearly related to teaching, others did not mention teacher-related topics. The six narrative themes created in the analysis included stories in which the PSTs described the sociocultural contexts in which they lived and interacted with people and places. For example, many students narrated their

travels as important growing experiences. Previous research has shown that teachers recognized the impact of travel on their teaching methods, as they viewed travel as a cultural exchange and an important educational experience (Altan & Lane, 2018).

Second, this study revealed the multiple ways in which the PSTs narrated their life stories through plotting, storylining, and linguistic solutions that utilize creative expression. The use of a narrative, arts-based practice "Bookshelves of Our Lives" allowed the PSTs to express their meaningful life experiences. Understanding the impact of personal life experiences is important for PSTs' identity work and PD, as well as for teacher educators. However, the pedagogies in TE tend to narrow the understanding of our students to view them only as student teachers (Lovat, 2020). Crucial to this perspective is recognizing that our lives are made up of various narratives, each contributing to the complexity of our existence (Clandinin et al., 2009).

Third, narrating the stories seemed to support the PSTs' reflections, which are integral to identity work and teachers' PD. Our study revealed elements of reflection in the linguistic choices of the PSTs' narrated stories. For example, changes in tense from imperfect to present tense showed the student's reflection to the reader. Reflections on identities were apparent in the stories. These identity definitions were, for example, related to the self and the body (e.g., personal well-being journey), profession (e.g., from an introvert electrician to an educator), and events or other people (e.g., becoming a farmer's spouse, becoming a parent). We share Cooner and Tochterman's (2004) view that storytelling can be a powerful tool in PST reflection as it helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, which continues to be a key concern in pre-service and in-service TE (Korthagen, 2017). Supporting reflection also allows PSTs to actively create growth plans. The PSTs also reflected on ethical issues. Narrative practices are indeed intertwined with ethics, as they involve reflecting on various approaches to the question of how we should live, and they shape our ethically influenced shared reality and identity as moral beings (Meretoja, 2018).

Fourth, the results revealed that the use of a narrative, arts-based expression allowed the PSTs to write about, share, and show their past, current, and future selves, facilitating a process of self-discovery and self-understanding. The use of a narrative, arts-based expression serves as a means to link past experiences to the present (McMahon & Penney, 2013). In addition to narrating past experiences, the PSTs also envisioned their future hopes and expectations, which are an integral part of narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Meretoja, 2018). The results showed that the PSTs composed a wide variety of stories from different stages of their lives. Therefore, they portrayed and discussed various concurrent narrative identities. Acknowledging narrative identities helps people express who they are, how they have developed, and where they see their lives heading (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Finally, the stories show an individual's growth and development, which can support growth as a teacher. Although many PSTs chose to tell stories about their lives that were not directly linked to their teaching or TE, these stories showed growth and development as individuals, which previous research has suggested to support growth as a teacher (Altan & Lane, 2018). Meaningful life experiences, whether closely connected with teaching or not, can shape the identities of PSTs, and reflecting on these experiences can help them recognize their strengths.

This qualitative narrative study did not aim to generalize but rather to reach an in-depth understanding of PSTs' life stories as part of their identities. The quality and credibility of research data are always influenced by and are dependent on the specific goals of the researchers (Kelchtermans, 2024, p. 212). For example, the instructions for data collection and the situation in which the task is carried out always affect the data produced. Therefore, it is important to reflect critically on the influence of researchers on the data and how the data are interpreted. In our study, we aimed to give students creative freedom in the story task, and the research question focused on the stories "as such" and did not intend to impose them solely on the TE agenda. In narrative research, it is essential to ensure that the narrators' voices and expressions are heard as much as possible (Altan & Lane, 2018; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). We intended to bring out the PSTs' unique voices, which can be seen in the quantity of data excerpts. The PSTs' stories were often very personal and sensitive. As teacher educators, we are aware that we could learn something about our students that would not have come to our attention without their stories. Thus, maintaining the anonymity of the PSTs was absolutely crucial. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, but several students did not give permission for their stories to be used for research purposes.

While the use of large amounts of data is clearly a strength of the study, offering a rich and diverse basis for analysis, it also introduces limitations. The sheer quantity of data means that it is not possible to examine each story in great depth, which may affect the precision of the interpretive analyses. Therefore, we chose only 25 texts to close and deeper analysis. In addition, we read the data as a whole several times and discussed different perspectives on it frequently during the research process. The quality of the study was strengthened by researcher triangulation and analysis triangulation (Patton, 2015).

5.1. Implications and conclusions for TE and future research

Based on the findings of this study, we suggest that TE could offer PSTs more opportunities to narrate their meaningful life experiences, whether closely connected to teaching or not. We wish to encourage and inspire teacher educators to include creative storytelling into their teaching practices. According to previous research, the space to narrate one's own life without any strict pedagogical purposes can be useful for student teachers (Alsup, 2019; Clandinin, 2004). These narrative practices can support PSTs' identity work, and arts-based approaches offer embodied and evocative ways to share, reflect, and learn about their life experiences.

When storytelling can significantly influence and transform our lives (Noddings, 1991), it would be a waste not to take advantage of this opportunity in TE. We agree with Clandinin (2004, p. 121), who proposes that rather than isolating TE from the past and future experiences of PSTs, we should consider how their life stories influence their growth as educators.

Moreover, it is important to understand and give room to the range of PSTs' narrative identities. Variations in people's life stories are equally as diverse and fascinating as the differences found in any other facet of human individuality (McAdams, 2001). The more diverse PSTs that can be harnessed in the pedagogy of TE, the more holistically informed teachers we can educate. We agree with Korthagen (2017) that recognizing the individual strengths and life experiences of teachers can improve their professional growth, making it more significant and tailored. Although TE practices emphasize collaborative and relational practices such as group discussions (see e.g. Kostiainen & Pöysä-Tarhonen, 2025), creative practices such as our Bookshelves of our lives -assignment can enable PSTs' to reflect upon their experiences individually without the pressure of having to share their personal experiences with their peers or in a formal academic situation.

More research is needed on PSTs' life stories and how to utilize creative storytelling in TE. Examining aesthetic phenomena in generalist TE could help develop systematic knowledge to foster creative, open-minded, and risk-taking teachers (Møller-Skau & Lindstøl, 2022). Future research could also explore the kinds of stories PSTs write for different audiences—students, colleagues, or a broader audience—and how these narratives reflect their professional identities. Whereas our study focused on PST's life stories as such, it would be beneficial to implement case or action research to examine the impact of storytelling on PD, for example, PSTs' perceptions of how creative storytelling could support their narrative identity work.

This study has strengthened our belief that arts-based creative expression can help produce meaningful and rich data for educational researchers (Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). In addition, narrative and

arts-based methods can deepen and bring new insights into the qualitative analysis process (Martin & Kostiainen, 2024). Narrative methods are useful for examining identity, as they allow researchers to understand how people position themselves within larger social structures and dominant narratives (Higgins & Sandhu, 2014).

The starting point for this study was a question that arose in our work as teacher educators: What kinds of life stories do our students carry with them? To explore this, we created an arts-based assignment to make visible the various meaningful life experiences from their time before and during teacher education studies, as previous research recognizes the impact of lived experience on teachers' identities and PD. Through a narrative analysis process, we illustrated the versatility of the stories in terms of both what the stories were about and how they were narrated. The findings revealed reflective and varied accounts, spanning early childhood to adulthood, with themes such as entering the teaching profession and health and well-being. What the stories had in common was that they mirrored the identities of the storytellers. To conclude, this study contributes to the field of educational research on TE, emphasizing the potential of narrative and arts-based approaches as ways of nurturing identities and professional development.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emma Kostiainen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Anne Martin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

We assure that there's no financial or personal interest or belief that could affect our objectivity.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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