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Narrative Writing in the Practicum. A Phenomenological Study on the Development of Pedagogical Sensitivity

La escritura narrativa en el prácticum. Estudio fenomenológico sobre el desarrollo de la sensibilidad pedagógica

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Abstract

The training of education professionals faces the challenge of overcoming application-based approaches that reduce teaching to a technical activity of merely transmitting disciplinary knowledge. This study aimed to understand the pedagogical significance of narrative writing in initial teacher education, analyzing the experiences lived during practicum internships and the experiential learning that emerges reflectively through the production of narratives. A qualitative phenomenological-hermeneutic design was employed, thematically analyzing 47 experience narratives written by language and communication pedagogy students during an initial practice semester. The results show that narrative writing enables teacher trainees to deepen their understanding of teaching, highlighting three key dimensions: a) that teaching aligns with students' lives, b) that teaching moves and emotionally engages children, and c) that teaching is sensitive to and recognizes their individualities. It is concluded that narrative constitutes an essential tool for developing pedagogical sensitivity, fostering more authentic and less standardized forms of professional learning in teacher education.

Keywords: Initial teacher training; storytelling; reflection; identity.

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Resumen

La formación de profesionales de la educación enfrenta el desafío de superar enfoques aplicacionistas que reducen la enseñanza a una actividad técnica de mera transmisión de conocimientos disciplinarios. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender el sentido pedagógico de la escritura narrativa en la formación inicial docente, analizando las experiencias vividas durante las pasantías de práctica y los aprendizajes experienciales que emergen reflexivamente a través de la producción de relatos. Se empleó un diseño cualitativo fenomenológico-hermenéutico, analizando temáticamente 47 relatos de experiencias escritos por estudiantes de pedagogía en lenguaje y comunicación durante un semestre de práctica inicial. Los resultados evidencian que la escritura narrativa permite al profesorado en formación profundizar en su comprensión de la enseñanza, destacando tres dimensiones clave: a) que la enseñanza se alinee con la vida del estudiantado, b) que la enseñanza conmueva y movilice emocionalmente a la niñez y c) que la enseñanza se sensibilice y reconozca sus singularidades. Se concluye que la narrativa constituye una herramienta esencial para el desarrollo de la sensibilidad pedagógica, propiciando formas más auténticas y menos estandarizadas de aprendizaje profesional en la formación docente.

Palabras clave: formación inicial docente; narración de historias; reflexión; identidad.

Introduction

In the complex challenge of training trainee teachers, the learning experience that emerges during teaching placements (*practicum*) is a fundamental aspect. Initial teacher training, often criticised for its academic focus and its tendency to standardise professional learning (Korthagen and Nuijten, 2022; Masschelein and Simons, 2014; Mockler, 2020), calls for a shift towards practical experiences to address the complexity inherent in educational relationships within real-world contexts (Contreras and Pérez de Lara, 2010; van Manen, 2023).

In this regard, reflection on practice and experiential learning emerge as essential drivers for overcoming the limitations of traditional models and enriching teacher training (Hizmeri-Fernández et al., 2025). Structuring the educational experience through experiential activities that stimulate active learning enables students to take ownership and develop a genuine commitment (Membrive et al., 2022). Hence the efforts to ensure that practical training experiences are introduced early on and are progressive, so as to allow trainee teachers to have timely contact with the world of schools (Cochran-Smith, 2012).

And whilst there are models that incorporate reflection on practice (Zeichner and Liston, 2014), there remains a gap in our understanding of how narrative and story-telling can contribute to teacher training and the construction of pedagogical knowledge (Sierra et al., 2019; Suárez, 2026; Hizmeri-Fernández, 2025). This study addresses this limitation by exploring how accounts of experiences during the *practicum* enable trainee teachers to

articulate meanings about their learning and develop a deeper pedagogical sensitivity. In doing so, it seeks to offer an alternative to traditional reflective approaches or more standardised teacher learning approaches, emphasising the role of storytelling in teacher training. Indeed, narrative pedagogy constitutes a valuable tool for cultivating experiential knowledge that, through practice, mediates the relationship with other theoretical or disciplinary knowledge within teacher training (Contreras et al., 2019).

Thus, using a qualitative phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, we examined narratives from trainee teachers undertaking their initial teaching practice in language and communication pedagogy, with the aim of understanding the pedagogical significance of narrative writing in initial teacher training, analysing the experiences encountered during teaching placements and the experiential learning that emerges reflectively through the production of narratives.

The challenges of teacher training, reflection and experiential learning

Following an epistemological shift towards practice, experience has taken on greater significance in initial teacher training. The limitations of traditional, application-oriented or technical approaches hinder the integration of theory and practice, leading to what Veenman (1984) termed the ‘reality shock’ when teachers begin practising. This phenomenon is particularly worrying against a backdrop of increasing attrition within the teaching profession (González-Escobar et al., 2020). In response, mentoring programmes and induction processes have been implemented to support novice teachers in the reflective learning of their profession, thereby reducing the impact of the reality shock and promoting teacher retention (Hizmeri et al., 2021; Maturana-Castillo and Cieza-García, 2021).

However, prior to entering the profession, the *teaching placement* becomes a key setting that enables students to gain an insight into the reality of education (González-Sanmamed and Fuentes, 2011; García-Vila and Sepúlveda-Ruiz, 2022). During this period, support and mentoring, alongside the development of reflective skills, are essential elements for enriching the training processes (Lizana-Verdugo and Burgos-García, 2022; Saiz-Linares, 2023). Thus, the *practicum* stands as a privileged space for trainee teachers to engage with concrete experiences, analyse and question them, and build professional knowledge in settings that foster student participation and deep engagement (Beghetto, 2021).

Thus, far from a technical rationality—which standardises teaching and teachers by reducing their capacity for critical reflection and action (Masschelein and Simons, 2014)—an experiential approach or a pedagogy of experience (Contreras, 2010) would enable a more complex understanding of teaching and educational relationships (Foran et al., 2020; Larrosa, 2003; Orozco-Martínez et al., 2021). Indeed, a close examination of lived experience opens up a clearer view of the multiplicity of dimensions involved in different educational settings.

Experiential or narrative pedagogy

In the context of *the practicum*, experiential pedagogies have gained prominence by placing lived experiences at the centre of the training process, seeking to promote a meaningful learning experience of what it means to teach that is not detached from the way in which educational processes and relationships are experienced in school settings (Contreras et al., 2019), incorporating the interests and concerns of trainee teachers (Goodson, 2003; Martín-Alonso et al., 2021).

In this regard, narrative pedagogy — which focuses on the production and circulation of accounts of experience — has demonstrated its educational potential. Without resorting to abstract theorising, but rather by prioritising a language that phenomenologically adheres to experience, narrativity enables us to name and account for what is experienced in school classrooms. Thus, the act of narrating becomes a means of delving deeper into experience within a shared space of meaning (Contreras et al., 2019; Demetrio, 2023; Hizmeri, 2025).

In turn, narratives that bring to light significant dimensions of experience, whilst allowing us to relive what has been experienced and delve deeper into its meaning, enable the construction of educational knowledge (Huber et al., 2013; Quiles-Fernández and Orozco-Martínez, 2019). It is in relation to these experiences and their narratives that a personal and professional identity is formed. Reflection on lived experiences and the composition of experiential narratives not only have an epistemological impact on reality but also constitute a formative experience of the teacher's own subjectivity. This is why they provide a fundamental context for the identity development of student teachers, with all their individual characteristics and differences (Alsina and Masardo, 2021).

In this way, having a training space for reading, writing and discussion centred on narratives enables trainee teachers to develop a personal and unique experiential relationship with the knowledge of the profession (Martos-Pérez et al., 2024). In particular, narrative writing fosters reflection on lived experiences and the cultivation of experiential knowledge, as the craft of teaching is learnt through the writing of stories (Hizmeri et al., 2025; Pañagua et al., 2019; Sierra et al., 2017; Suárez, 2016).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative design of a descriptive and interpretative nature, grounded in the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition (Frechette et al., 2020; Gadamer, 1992; Ricoeur, 1996; van Manen, 1994). The choice of this approach is based on the aim of exploring in depth the formative significance of the experience of recounting experiences in initial teacher training, focusing on the meanings that trainee teachers construct from their lived experience during the practicum (Connelly and Clandinin, 1995; Contreras et al., 2019; van Manen, 2003).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as the study of experience alongside its meanings (Friesen, 2023), enables access to the essential structures of experience through narrativity.

Based on the premise that there is a constitutive relationship between living and narrating (Ricoeur, 1996) and that narratives shape reality and give form to thought (Bruner, 1987), this design seeks to reveal how the act of narrating has been experienced and what pedagogical learnings emerge from this reflective process.

Context and participants

The study was conducted within the context of the introductory *Practicum* module of the Language and Communication Education degree programme in south-central Chile, corresponding to the fifth semester of the curriculum. This *practicum* is structured according to a concurrent model, in which trainee teachers simultaneously participate in two training settings: weekly university lectures (2 teaching hours) and placements in secondary schools (5 teaching hours per week) over the course of an academic semester (18 weeks). During the placements, the course aims to enable students to develop an experiential understanding of teaching practice through observation, collaborative participation and, crucially, systematic reflection on their experiences by writing accounts of these experiences.

Forty-seven teacher training students (32 women and 15 men), aged between 20 and 24, took part in the study. Convenience sampling included all students enrolled in the fifth semester of the academic year 2024, who were undertaking their initial teaching placement in schools in the region, including state schools, state-subsidised private schools and fee-paying private schools.

Strategies

During their placements, the trainee teachers produced *field notes* which were subsequently developed into *experience narratives*, aimed at capturing the essential aspects of their placement experiences. These narratives were shared and explored in depth during weekly seminars (the course was divided into four groups of between 11 and 14 students). Drawing on the readings and discussions, they rewrote their accounts, incorporating reflective questions and theoretical insights, resulting in *reflective reports* on their experiences. The quotations presented in the ‘Findings’ section were taken from these reflective reports, as they represent the most in-depth and mature development of the trainee teachers’ thinking, integrating their initial experiences with subsequent theoretical reflection.

Table 1
Instruments used in the research

Instruments	
Field notes	Brief entries (150–300 words), written at the end of each day of the placement, describing events or situations that were significant to them. Approximately 12 field notes per participant over the course of the semester.

Experience accounts	Extensive narratives (800–1,200 words) providing an in-depth account of a significant experience during the placements. Based on the field notes, they incorporate experiential descriptions, dialogues and initial reflections (total = 47 accounts).
Reflective reports	Final documents (1,500–2,000 words) in which they rewrote one of their accounts, enriching it with reflective questions and connections to literature to provide a deeper interpretation of the formative significance of the experience described (total = 47 reports).

Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in the reflective quest to elucidate the structures of meaning within the lived experience (van Manen, 2023). The process, carried out by a team of two researchers, unfolded in a series of interconnected phases to ensure analytical depth from the narratives through to the final dimensions.

Initially, a) *a textual approach* was undertaken through an immersive and comprehensive reading of the 47 *reflective reports on experiences*, with the aim of bringing to light what emerged as essential in the experience of narrative writing. In this process, expressions, phrases and passages were highlighted. Subsequently, through b) *collaborative reflection amongst the researchers* (van Manen, 2003), the themes that were emerging as significant were analysed, articulating and triangulating the interpretations through the fusion of shared meaning (Gadamer, 1992). In this process, we moved in a meditative manner from pre-understandings to shared understandings (Frechette et al., 2020; van Manen, 2023).

Through c) *thematisation*, the significant statements were grouped into common dimensions of meaning (van Manen, 2003), seeking recurring patterns across the corpus. For example, from Beatrice’s statement “... it is necessary and of the utmost importance to link the pupils’ tastes/things that spark curiosity/interests with life outside the school”, the preliminary theme “The relevance of pupils’ lifeworld in planning” emerges, which, together with other pithy statements, led to the thematic dimension “Teaching that aligns with children’s lives”.

Finally, through the process of d) *imaginative variation*, we assessed whether the themes essentially belonged to the experience described (Friesen, 2023), by examining whether, when the statements were altered, the phenomenon under study retained its essence or lost its meaning. Through this process, the emerging themes were refined iteratively to ensure consistency with the experience under study; structural aspects were revealed; and representative quotations from the narratives were integrated alongside the research team’s interpretative descriptions. Where two passages conveyed a similar meaning, the one that was more expressive and evocative in its narrative form was selected. This is because, within phenomenological writing, the ‘vocative’ dimension plays a fundamental role in accounting for the non-cognitive—that is, pathic—aspects of

experience (van Manen, 2023; Contreras, 2013), without compromising the credibility and plausibility of the narrative (Connelly and Clandinin, 1995; Bochner, 2002).

This formed the basis for the *Findings*, which highlighted as key themes: a) the relationship between teaching and students' lives; b) the importance of teaching that connects with emotions and inspires action; and c) the importance of recognising and valuing individuality in teaching.

Table 2
Thematic analysis

Experiential dimension	Meaning of the experience
The connection with students' lives	Trainee teachers understand the importance of ensuring that content is aligned with the students' experience.
Emotions in the educational experience	Trainee teachers understand the importance of the emotional dimension in stimulating learning.
Recognising and valuing individuality	Trainee teachers understand the need to value and recognise the uniqueness of learners.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the university's Ethics Committee. Participants signed an informed consent form setting out the purpose of the study and the use of their accounts, as well as the safeguards in place. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, a code was assigned and pseudonyms were used in the presentation of results, whilst maintaining gender identity. Furthermore, any reference to educational institutions, supervising teachers or school pupils mentioned in the narratives was removed.

Results

The findings of this research offer a deeper understanding of the educational scope of narrative writing during teaching placements for trainee teachers. Although this is an early-stage practice, the experience demonstrates the development of profound insights into the demands of teaching and the maturing of a sensitivity towards the central role of children in this process. According to the thematic analysis, the findings show that trainee teachers have come to understand the importance of aligning content with children's experiences, the significance of emotional factors in stimulating learning, and the need to value and recognise the uniqueness of learners.

Teaching that aligns with children's lives

The experience of trainee teachers highlights the importance of pupils and their world within the educational process, and how teaching requires them to engage with pupils' tastes and interests and to take account of the experiences pupils have had that go beyond

the subject matter. In this regard, the experiences recounted point to the recognition of pupils' individuality and to taking into account their worlds beyond school: "My practical experience has shown that, when planning a lesson to teach a topic, it is necessary and of the utmost importance to link pupils' preferences, the things that intrigue them and their interests with their lives outside school" (Beatrice).

Beatrice's account reveals how important it is for the subject matter (content) to connect with the pupils' lives. Ariana also elaborates on the importance of ensuring that what is taught relates to the pupils and their lived experiences—including personal experiences that extend beyond the school setting—when she states: "We must move away from practices that merely deliver content."

This highlights the need to move beyond a knowledge-centred or transmissive approach that clings to the subject matter without recognising or involving students in their own stories and their world. The act of 'leaving behind' implies a conscious break with inherited models—an ethical and pedagogical stance that emerges from engaging with the reality of the classroom. Teaching, they understand, is not limited to knowledge of the subject matter and how to teach it, but requires recognising the central role of the students in an educational process where educating is more than merely imparting content.

However, this understanding coexists with the realisation that it is absent in observed practice. Reflective writing enables teacher-training students not only to appreciate this principle, but also to develop a critical awareness of practices that deviate from it. Macarena, for example, discovers that the problem of students' lack of attention was not solely due to a lax attitude, but to a fundamental disconnect:

I remembered what a girl had told me, realising that the problem was not just that the students were taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere, but also that my supervising lecturer was not presenting the subject matter in an engaging way, where she connected it to the wider world, to the context, and to the experiences and interests of the students sitting in front of her, so that the content could truly resonate with them. (Macarena)

This finding, which emerges from reflection on the writing itself, adds nuance to the initial understanding. It is not enough to *know* that one must connect; one must *know how* to do so. Consuelo's account reveals a second layer of learning: a critique of routine teaching which, as Magaly observes, is evident in the 'lack of student participation, the teaching strategies used by the teacher and the pupils' reactions to the content presented'. Thus, the realisation of the importance of connecting with students' lives is challenged by the observation of practices that fail to do so, leading to a more complex and situated form of learning.

However, this would imply the need to be prepared to look at the students, to allow their subjectivities to speak, as is evident in Margarita's account:

Getting to know our students well – understanding their learning pace, their strengths and weaknesses, and even their tastes and preferences – is a crucial factor in lesson

planning, as it allows us to connect the knowledge we are teaching with their reality.
(Margarita)

Margarita's words highlight that knowing the students thoroughly is fundamental to teaching. This knowledge is not abstract, but situated and relational: it involves paying attention to how they learn, to their experiences, to their learning paces and to their interests. From this perspective, lesson planning becomes a complex practice rooted in the recognition of students' subjectivity as a mediator between knowledge and reality, far removed from a technical rationality that establishes sequenced procedures for acquiring knowledge without considering each student's cultural context.

The accounts highlight those experiences that seek to go beyond the traditional to build bridges between the subject matter and real life. Fabiola, reflecting on her experience during her teaching placements, notes: "I've been struck by her motivation to take students out of their comfort zone. In other words, she seeks to take them outside the classroom so that they can discover, experience and learn through new experiences". The sense of wonder at taking the students to new settings reveals the importance of learning beyond the classroom and reflects a concern that they should construct meaning from the familiarity of everyday life. This reflection is also shared by Nancy, who observes how the teacher stimulates interest by linking the reading of a book to the students' own experiences:

It made me reflect and realise that the way the teacher approached that lesson and the dynamics she created made the pupils even more interested, as they related the themes of the book to their own experiences, discussed them and expressed their opinions freely.
(Nancy)

This connection between what they have read and their own experiences sparks their interest because reading is no longer something alien to them; it begins to relate to them personally, engaging them directly. When they feel engaged, they become actively involved and express the resonances that the text evoked. These experiences show that teaching is not confined to the classroom or the text, but involves seeking to connect with the students' own familiar world. When they engage with what is closest to them, their lives become part of the process and knowledge ceases to be abstract, becoming something that makes sense, thereby fostering interest and learning.

Therefore, reframing the subject in relation to the students—beyond the purely technical teaching of the discipline—involves self-reflection, self-discovery and the expression of their own experiences, so that educational engagement can take place. Ana puts it this way:

What made this experience meaningful was the way the teacher encouraged individual expression and critical reflection on writing, by helping them to reflect on their experiences and giving them the freedom to choose the story they wanted to tell. The students were not merely consuming information about literacy; they were actively participating. (Ana)

The contrast between ‘consuming information’ and ‘participating’ highlights an essential pedagogical insight: authentic teaching requires students to be active participants, not passive recipients. The freedom to choose the story they wanted to tell is a gesture recognising the legitimacy of their experiences as pedagogical material. These reflections reflect a pedagogical understanding that is being cultivated amongst trainee teachers, linked to the importance of recognising each pupil and their individuality, to the way in which a sense of closeness is an essential condition in the teaching process, and to the way in which the lesson must capture pupils’ interest, enabling a connection between the teaching and the pupils’ own experiences.

Teaching that moves and emotionally engages children

Recognising pupils’ individuality is an essential prerequisite for designing educational experiences that stimulate interest and foster a connection between the subject matter and real life. In this regard, trainee teachers in their initial training came to realise the role played by emotion and enthusiasm when faced with activities that challenge more traditional teaching methods. Jaime recounts:

The pupils were enthusiastic about taking part in this activity; my colleague and I were giving them advice on creating artistic pieces, as well as helping with the captions and more. I was thrilled to see a different kind of assessment situation, as the tests in the textbook tend to follow the same format throughout the term. (Jaime)

Enthusiasm involves a lifting of the spirits, a stepping outside of oneself. Doing things differently and offering alternative assessment approaches that break away from traditional education encourages students. In contrast to the predetermined and familiar path, new forms of assessment or assessment experiences lift them out of monotony, surprise them and engage them. Jaime’s excitement at witnessing this transformation reveals a profound understanding: assessment is not merely a measuring tool, but an opportunity to stimulate learning when designed creatively. The same occurs when the educational setting is enlivened with playful elements, such as when a teacher introduced an interactive activity that challenged them to answer questions and progress through different levels of difficulty.

A particular case involved a student, X, who had never participated in any lessons and focused solely on his mobile phone, watching videos or looking at photos of cars and everything related to them. The student showed interest only in the dynamics of the PowerPoint presentation, which was based on answering questions and progressing through levels of difficulty until reaching the highest level without making a mistake; in this way, he was able to answer most of the questions correctly, having become interested in a subject such as lyric poetry. (José)

This excerpt invites us to reflect on the fact that teaching, beyond the mere delivery of content, is a complex practice involving the careful arrangement of elements. It is the

result of an approach that seeks to capture attention, draw pupils out of their immediate world and distract them in order to engage them with the subject matter. The transformation of the pupil who 'had never participated before' highlights the power of activities that connect with children's interests and ways of learning.

It highlights the importance of providing diverse educational experiences. Andrea, during her teaching placement, says: "Personally, I believe that seeking out new ways of teaching in different settings is very important, because as well as being educational, it is also entertaining and interesting." From this perspective, innovation means not always sticking to the established norms, thereby opening up the possibility of more authentic and meaningful forms of learning. Teaching can be interesting and entertaining, broadening the focus to a rich and interactive environment that is aligned with children's engagement and participation.

However, this view of emotional closeness is complicated by its own limitations and risks. The aspiration to be the 'cool teacher' turns out to be an ambivalent ideal. Magaly reflects on this tension, acknowledging that it can end up having a negative impact on teaching:

... the vast majority of teacher training students, myself included, have always wanted to be the 'cool teacher', but this experience I observed teaches us that we must be careful with that. (Magaly)

This ambivalence becomes more pronounced when we observe how certain practices, which appear to be engaging, can take on a punitive character. Marcela describes how reading aloud – a potentially enriching activity – was used by her supervising teacher as a punishment, adding 'five extra minutes of reading if she heard the students chatting' (Marcela). This contradiction between the educational potential of a practice and its use as a tool for disciplinary control introduces a critical dimension to the analysis, showing that emotional engagement is not an end in itself, but that its pedagogical value depends on the intention and the context in which it is embedded. The search for a balance between warmth and rigour, between motivation and discipline, thus emerges as a central dilemma in the construction of teaching identity.

Another account shows that, once the importance of linking academic content to students' emotions has been recognised, the educational experience becomes an opportunity for them to explore their potential, bringing out a passion for active participation:

It was clear that they were excited at the prospect of an assessment that differed from the usual written tests. The journals began to take shape, and the students' creativity, imagination and artistic skills flourished in every setting. (Paula)

Teaching has the power to evoke feelings of joy and excitement in children, focusing on nurturing and bringing to light their strengths through creativity and the ability to envisage possible futures, linked to their own stories and sensory experiences. Juan notes that 'every lesson will always be a new challenge' – a challenge in which only the

pedagogical sensitivity of the teacher's approach allows progress to be made, recognising that there are many paths to fostering children's growth and that this is not confined to a single body of knowledge or to following predetermined techniques. This shows that every lesson opens up a renewed and ever-changing educational encounter with knowledge, context and the people involved.

A teacher with a commitment to pedagogy and driven by their pupils' desire to learn designs cross-curricular activities that harness the children's autonomy, enabling them to take on an active role. Paola explains how these activities allow them to make sense of their curiosity and develop their own interests:

Changing the classroom dynamic greatly encouraged student participation, and the fact that the news items were chosen according to their preferences also made the activity much more effective, as several students were motivated and, deeply intrigued, commented on the news. (Paola)

Etymologically, 'intrigue' implies a tangle, and this activity demonstrates how pupils are encouraged and adopt a more participatory attitude as their personal tastes and interests become interwoven with the lesson. The classroom should be a space where teachers foster the connection between content and the construction of meaning, enabling pupils to engage and learn.

Teaching that raises awareness and recognises their individuality

The experiences recounted reveal that teaching not only imparts knowledge but also recognises children in their uniqueness. One teacher implemented a project in which pupils wrote stories based on their own experiences and emotions. Carmen, who was initially reluctant to take part, found in this activity a way to express herself and recount a meaningful experience. Throughout this process, the teacher provided her with confidence and support. Attentive to the way she behaved in the classroom, he singled her out, encouraging her to recognise her strengths and overcome her fears. Karla recounts:

The teacher had told me that she found it very difficult to speak in public and also to organise her thoughts when writing, which had been evident in the previous term, but in recent months she began to participate more, following a simple gesture on the part of the teacher, who, after marking one of her essays, decided to highlight one of her ideas and asked her to read it out to the class. (Karla)

For the narrator, it is essential to understand that a teacher's work goes beyond simply delivering content. A teacher's sensitivity is evident in their desire to build trust, to highlight talents and to bring out the best in every student. The 'simple act' of highlighting an idea and asking her to read it out to the class is by no means simple: it is a pedagogical gesture steeped in meaning, which recognises Carmen's uniqueness, validates her voice and creates the conditions for her to dare to participate. This illustrates

the importance of a pedagogy that focuses on addressing what others need in order to grow and on celebrating the positive, rather than concentrating on negative aspects.

In this way, a teacher can be the architect of a movement that enhances children's educational potential and helps them to develop in the best possible way. Omar reveals that: "The teacher would make comments such as: 'Children, listen up! Look what Student X has written!'. She would congratulate and praise them, whilst still offering constructive criticism, but she really emphasised their strengths; she didn't focus on saying 'this is wrong'. This scene illustrates two essential aspects of the educational relationship: firstly, appreciating pupils' efforts by recognising their progress rather than focusing solely on what they fail to achieve or lack; secondly, it promotes academic development through positive feedback that encourages growth.

However, this sensitivity to individuality is challenged by the unpredictable nature of the pupils and the inertia of school culture. Franchesca realises that pupils are "unpredictable; you can never know what's going to happen or how they're going to react; they're going through a lot of things we don't know about". This unpredictability defies any attempt at standardisation and demands constant, context-sensitive attention. At the same time, there is a fear that dehumanisation is becoming the norm within the system. Eduardo expresses his "concern" at the possibility that "humane treatment by a teacher might be a rarity" and that an "authoritarian tone" might prevail. This tension is compounded by an awareness of the danger of labelling, which denies individuality even before it is properly understood. Franchesca warns that "as teachers, we must never label a pupil or a class, because it creates a prejudice before we have actually understood the dynamics in the classroom". Recognising individuality, therefore, is not only an act of positive appreciation, but also an active struggle against prejudice and oversimplification.

The accounts also reveal the importance of students being able to look inwards to examine their own ways of thinking and feeling. Fernanda recounts an experience of how a teacher fosters this self-awareness and reflection:

One point worth emphasising is that the transmission of knowledge is evident in the teacher's interaction with the pupils, talking to them and addressing questions that arose whilst they were working through the guide, such as one asked by a pupil, who said, "Teacher, you know, I don't understand how the toad might have felt; I feel he just felt angry – is that right?" The teacher, responding to the question, said, 'How would you feel if a friend who comes to see you every day said to you, "You're so ugly!"?' This response fostered empathy and critical thinking. (Fernanda)

This account highlights the importance of interaction between teachers and pupils. It illustrates an educational relationship that recognises that every voice counts, and every experience is a learning opportunity. This kind of learning invites them to reflect on themselves and empathise with others. They also come to understand that teaching can be an opportunity to engage their moral imagination in relation to literary characters.

The teacher suggested that they analyse the story and its characters together (she had previously explained to us that this is how she checks whether or not the reading has been done). Although not everyone had finished the book, participation was good. So much so that they began to discuss the characters' behaviour and identify themes such as tragic fate, death and family relationships, amongst others. (Ariana)

Teaching shapes the mind. Alongside the characters they read about – the heroes and anti-heroes of the stories – they delve into the reasons behind their actions, assess their behaviour and its implications, and come to recognise and forge their own identities. Ultimately, this sensitivity is tempered by an empathetic understanding of the teachers' own limitations. Cecilia, although dissatisfied with the lack of assessment criteria, feels “sympathy for her [the teacher], as if she failed to draw up criteria (...) it may be due to her heavy workload”. This compassionate view of the teacher's difficulties adds a layer of complexity, showing that the recognition of individuality also extends to their own colleagues, within a system that often imposes burdens which make it difficult to attend to individual needs.

These experiences recounted by teacher-training students show how their understanding of the educational process matures during their teaching placements. They reveal that teaching is not merely a process of transmitting knowledge, but, above all, an act of recognition. In this regard, teachers play a central role in addressing the individuality of each pupil, based on the conviction that this not only facilitates learning but also contributes to the construction of their identity, insofar as recognition means they feel seen and heard, which fosters trust and the development of their potential. Furthermore, dialogue is key in this process. Through interaction, students can test their own ideas, reflect on their emotions and broaden their understanding of the world.

Finally, the accounts highlight the value of recognising and incorporating students' voices into the teaching process. This fosters meaningful learning, and education is transformed into a space where each student is valued for their individuality, enhancing their development through a relationship of trust and mutual respect. However, the narratives also reveal that this educational vision is not achieved without friction: the unpredictability of students, institutional inertia, the temptation towards authoritarianism and the risks of ill-judged closeness are an integral part of the experience of trainee teachers, lending their learning a complexity that goes beyond the mere acquisition of desirable pedagogical principles.

Discussion and conclusions

This research analysed the experiences of students on teaching placements in the Language and Communication Education programme, delving into the learning that emerges reflectively through narrative writing. The findings reveal three essential dimensions that trainee teachers come to understand through the act of narrative writing: the need to align teaching with pupils' lives, the importance of engaging them

emotionally, and the requirement to recognise individual differences, although these insights emerge within a framework of tensions and contradictions with the reality of school life.

The first dimension highlights that teaching cannot be reduced to the transmission of subject-specific knowledge, but rather requires a connection with pupils' subjectivity (Martín-Alonso et al., 2021). We agree with the authors on the centrality of curriculum design; however, we explore how trainee teachers understand this requirement first at an experiential and individual level, by observing how pupils engage when the content connects with 'life outside the school'. This understanding emerges not from theoretical prescriptions, but from a sense of wonder at the transformation of pupils when teaching is rooted in their lived experience, suggesting that narrative pedagogy facilitates situated learning that precedes and underpins more abstract understandings of curriculum design. This sense of wonder, however, is tempered by the realisation that this ideal does not always materialise in the practices observed, revealing a gap between desirable pedagogical knowledge and the existing school culture.

The second dimension, relating to emotional engagement, partially coincides with studies on active learning and creativity (Beghetto, 2021; Membrive et al., 2022). However, beyond recognising the importance of emotion as a motivational resource for learning, our findings suggest that trainee teachers understand that emotion is not a means to a cognitive end, but a constitutive dimension of the educational act. Expressions of 'enthusiasm', 'intrigue' and 'emotion' in the narratives refer not only to effective teaching strategies, but also to an ethical understanding of teaching as an experience that should move people – in the sense of moving-with, of affecting and being affected. This distinction is crucial and challenges instrumental approaches that subordinate the affective to the cognitive. However, the accounts also reveal the ambivalence of this emotional closeness, showing how the quest to be a 'cool teacher' can conflict with pedagogical rigour and how potentially mobilising practices can be instrumentalised as tools of control – a dilemma that enriches our understanding of this dimension.

The third dimension, centred on the recognition of uniqueness, resonates with Larrosa's (2003) perspective on teaching as a living experience in which otherness is fundamental. However, our study provides empirical evidence of how this understanding is constructed narratively. The narratives show that trainee teachers not only learn 'about' essential pedagogical issues, but also experience them phenomenologically by recounting specific situations. Writing narratives allows them to relive these experiences and draw from them an embodied pedagogical knowledge that goes beyond abstract principles. This construction, however, is not a linear process; rather, it is forged amidst the constant tension arising from labelling practices (Cochran-Smith, 2012), the unpredictability of the classroom, and an empathetic understanding of the systemic constraints faced by the trainee teachers themselves.

Our findings also complement those approaches that understand reflection as a critical process aimed at questioning the power structures and institutional conditions of

teaching (Zeichner and Liston, 2014), although narrative writing also activates an affective, sensitive and subjective dimension of reflection. We agree with Goodson (2003) on the importance of narratives alongside a critical analysis of teachers' experiences, as they express emotions, ethical dilemmas and questions of identity that are not captured by more rationalist models of reflection. This suggests that narrative pedagogy, in certain respects, transcends more traditional reflective approaches by integrating subjectivity and emotional experience as legitimate sources of pedagogical knowledge (Contreras et al., 2019; Martos-Pérez et al., 2024). By fostering a more subjective and identity-centred process in the construction of pedagogical knowledge, it enables trainee teachers to find a personal and authentic way of teaching (Browning and Korthagen, 2021), as an alternative to the standardising approaches that characterise contemporary training models (Mockler, 2020).

Given the phenomenological nature of the study, which is limited to trainee teachers of Language and Communication, it is worth asking whether narrative writing has the same impact in other subject areas. It would be relevant to explore whether, in mathematics or science – where different epistemologies predominate – narrative can trigger similar reflective processes. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could examine the scope of narrative writing in professional development to explore whether these initial insights are sustained and deepened.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that teacher training programmes systematically integrate narrative writing as a curricular component of *the teaching placement*, setting aside time for writing, reading and discussion; training university- and mentor teachers in narrative pedagogy; and creating communities of narrative practice that bring together trainee teachers, mentors and university staff in shared reflective dialogues.

The central contribution of this study lies in empirically demonstrating that narrative writing in the *teaching placement* is not merely a tool for record-keeping, but a pedagogical device that triggers deep reflective processes and transforms lived experience into pedagogical knowledge. Unlike more instrumental approaches to reflection, narrative enables trainee teachers to access the affective, ethical and relational dimensions of teaching that remain invisible in application-oriented training models, thereby fostering a sensitive and reflective professional identity that transcends standardised frameworks.

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