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

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

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

1.1. Teachers' Professional Identity Development

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

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

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

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

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

1.2. The Biographical Narrative as a Method for Professional Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3. Rationale and Research Questions

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

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

The research questions are:

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

2. Materials and Methods

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

2.1. Participants and Context

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

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

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

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

2.2. Procedure

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

   If yes, note,
   What was the change? (Describe the status before and after.)
   Can you recognize turning points? What were they?
   What helped the personal development process?
   If not,
   What were the hindering factors?
   What would you like to be different?
   What could have helped you progress?

   (Identify main themes from the journal. Notice the developmental process; what did you learn about yourself as a human being, a teacher, a group member?) Present examples from the journal that demonstrate success or non-success in the course.
4. Did the Biographical Narrative (yours or others') contribute to your personal development and in what way?

2.3. Data Analysis

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

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

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

2.4. Validity and Reliability

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

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

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

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

2.5. Ethical Issues

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

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

3. Findings

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

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

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

3.1.1. Professional Development as a Process of Personal Change

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

3.1.2. Professional Development as Progress towards Personal Goals

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

Karin wrote:

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

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

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

3.1.3. Professional Development as Growing Ability to Open Up

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

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

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

3.2. The Biographical Narrative as a Method for Professional Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Orit also referred to the group responses:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

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

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

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

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

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

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