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A shift in writer identity: teacher reflections on how their sense of self as writers informs practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences and reflections of primary teachers who participated in a UK collaborative professional development that focussed on developing teacher-writer identity through online writing workshops. The notion that teachers who identify as writers better understand their pupils as writers is central to the study; however, accountability pressures and a lack of confidence in the teaching of writing can create environments that stifle professional growth and pedagogical change in the teaching of writing. The findings within this ethnographically positioned study highlight that sustained engagement with critically reflexive personal writing activities, within an empathetic, collaborative space, leads to shifts in teacher-writer identity and shifts in practice, which ultimately impact on pupils' experiences as writers. Indeed, teacher engagement with crafting personal writing experiences and the self-understanding they gained seemed to be a catalyst for teachers wanting their pupils to experience the same sense of writer agency and emotional connection to writing. Findings also reveal that shifts in practice were enacted in different ways and were determined by teaching experience and subject leadership position. Significantly, although tensions were experienced, all the teachers represented in this study expressed feeling empowered with the pedagogical and organisational changes they were able to make at their level.

Key words: collaborative professional development, primary writing, reflective practice, teacher-writer identity, teachers as writers, writing personal narratives

Introduction

The notion that teachers who identify as writers provide more powerful classroom writing instruction has been well documented over the past several decades (Augsburger, 1998; Cremin et al., 2020; Gardner, 2018; Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1985; Yeo, 2007), yet few primary teachers place their writer identity central to their practice due to the dominance of a skills approach driven by assessment policies and neoliberal agendas (Cushing and Helks, 2021; Moss, 2017), often leading to an overreliance on commercial writing schemes (Gardner, 2018; McKinney and Giorgis, 2009). Accountability pressures and a lack of confidence in the teaching of writing can create environments that stifle professional growth and pedagogical change in the teaching of writing (Cushing and Helks, 2021), causing tensions, especially as teachers are often drawn to the teaching profession because they want to make a difference (Moore and Clarke, 2016). Gaining a deeper understanding of how teacher-writer professional development has the potential to shift teachers' writer identity, the potential to lead to changes in pedagogical practice, and also empower teachers to enact professional change within their own context is of value.

A challenge for a number of teachers of primary writing is a lack of assurance in their own writing ability and feeling anxious about writing in front of others, including the children in their class (Cremin et al., 2020). Studies consistently present findings that reveal how teachers' past educational writing experiences are powerful determiners of their future writer identities, and that previous negative experiences due to an overemphasis on the mechanics of writing continue into adult life and have a lasting impact (Assemakis, 2022; Cremin and Oliver, 2017; Gardner and Kuzich, 2024; Martin et al., 2022). Furthermore, teachers often claim they do not identify as writers due to an association with professional authors who publish work (Cremin et al., 2020; Hennessey, 2021).

Teachers who participate in professional development writing workshops for sustained periods of time are able to reconceptualise themselves as teacher-writers (Cremin et al., 2020; Cremin and Oliver, 2017), which is crucial because when teachers write they understand the ways of their writers

(Cremin et al., 2020; Watts, 2009). Writing through personal narratives is seen to be empowering and provide opportunities for teachers to learn more about themselves as writers, find the power of language, and find a personal voice (Bolton, 1999; Gardner, 2018; Martin et al., 2022; Mckinney and Giorgis, 2009). Furthermore, when teachers have the time to reflect on their craft of writing, it can lead to changes in practice, benefitting the young writers in their class (Cremin et al., 2020; Gardner, 2014; Martin et al., 2022). The emotional responses generated by reflective activities can illuminate the reality of everyday struggles (Bolton, 2018; Linus et al., 2023; Zembylas, 2014) in the teaching of writing, resulting in the questioning of accepted ways of enacting practice (Boud and Walker, 1998; Linus et al., 2023).

This study aligns with the view that a collaborative approach to writer-identity professional development provides a platform for teachers to develop professional relationships, where professional conversations can lead to changes in school policy (Cain et al., 2019) and drive meaningful community change (O'Leary and Wood, 2019). Furthermore, this study advocates for a holistic view of professional development spaces, where creative writing activities offer the potential for individual growth as well as the development of a community of teacher-writers (see Martin et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2022). In such a space, learning is viewed as a collaborative process where teachers offer each other social, personal and professional support, and where they can meet other teacher-writers to face their fears together (Martin et al., 2021). Given that teachers are often caught between their hopes of making a difference to children's lives, and the fear of their school being seen as failing (Moore and Clarke, 2016), creating professional spaces where the teachers can thrive, share practice in the teaching of writing, and make innovative changes is particularly important.

This paper explores the experiences and reflections of a group of teachers who participated in a four-month collaborative, professional development project that focussed on developing teacher-writer identity through online writing workshops, where teachers engaged in, and reflected on, personal writing activities, and experimented with crafting techniques (Myhill et al., 2021). The project was led by the author team who lead Primary English provision within a (*place removed to remain anonymous*) Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provider. In particular, the reflective narratives and 'shifts' in practice of three of the teachers, all of whom are at differing stages in their careers, are shared with a view to gaining a better understanding of how they enact change within their school contexts, thereby furthering the knowledge of how developing teacher-writer identity enhances classroom practice in the teaching of primary writing.

Reflecting on teacher-writer identity

Critical emotional reflexivity is the theory in which this study is located due to the acknowledgment that reflective and reflexive processes are deeply emotional, and that teachers' emotions are deeply entangled with the power relations (Zembylas, 2014) within educational organisations (Cain et al., 2019). Since Dewey's (1933) original ideas about the importance of teachers purposefully thinking about classroom experiences and learning from these to guide future practice, the benefits of teachers reflecting as part of their professional growth are well accepted, such as in Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner, and Kolb's (1983) experiential learning model. Distinctions have since been made between reflection and reflexivity, with the latter being considered more beneficial for teachers to implement as part of their practice (Bolton, 2018). Whilst reflection involves deep thinking and learning from experiences in the classroom, reflexivity is more complex and also involves finding strategies to question attitudes, values, assumptions and organisational power dynamics (Bolton, 2018). While reflexivity is recognised as allowing teachers to be more context aware and transformative in their practice, Boud and Walker (1998) also warn of ad hoc reflections on demand, arguing it can lead to thinking becoming uncritical and inward looking. Instead, transformation of practice takes place in collaborative (Martin et al., 2022), reflexive spaces that recognise the emotional risks of questioning the taken for granted (McCormack, 2018).

Critical emotional reflexivity not only allows teachers to interrogate their beliefs about the teaching of writing, but also how beliefs are often emotionally laden (Zembylas, 2014). Critical reflexivity is also essential for teacher empowerment and agency, enabling teachers to question their own assumptions and values in the teaching of writing and subsequently expose dominant understandings of how writing is taught (Ryan and Walsh, 2018). The developing sense of awareness that occurs when teachers begin to recognise how emotions are entangled with identities and writing practices acts as a form of empowerment, leading to teachers taking a critical stance in their own role, and realising the possibility for change (Zembylas, 2014).

Teachers writing and reflecting on personal narratives

Writing personal narratives provides a platform for developing teacher-writer identity and can help teachers reconnect with the emotional aspects of writing

(Martin et al., 2022; Mckinney and Giorgis, 2009). Writing can be seen as a representation of personal reflexivity, and it is through the crafting and shaping of that reflection that the process of writing itself is better understood (Moon, 2004). Furthermore, engaging in personal narrative writing can provide a sense of discovery because something about the self is revealed (Krueger, 2015). As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), p. 924) explains, 'I write because I want to find something out, I write in order to learn something I did not know before I wrote it'. These intimate insights into the self can support personal development and wellbeing, as well as create a stronger sense of self (Hunt, 2000; Martin et al., 2021). Writing personal narratives can also be viewed as a form of therapeutic writing as it allows the writer to enter an inner world where emotions and feelings can be processed in a safe way (Bolton, 1999), resulting in deeper self-understanding (Bolton, 1999; Kähmi, 2015; Kosonen, 2015).

When teachers write personal narratives, the relationship and emotional engagement with that writing, and how authentic the experience is for them, impacts on their roles as teacher-writers in the classroom (Bearne et al., 2016). Martin et al. (2022) research in Finland exemplifies this viewpoint. The researchers worked with five teacher-writers to develop their creative writing through professional development workshops (Martin et al., 2022). As time progressed, and the teachers participated in writing activities and shared their personal narratives with each other, they were affected in different ways, which impacted on their teacher-writer identity and the way they wanted to teach writing to children (Martin et al., 2022). One teacher, for example, suggested how engaging in personal writing activities was a springboard for pedagogical change where, instead of an overemphasis on grammar rules, she focussed more on children's unique sense of expression (Martin et al., 2022). The teachers in the study also shared how writing and sharing personal narratives helped organise their thoughts and emotions, and how the reminiscing on past events was a therapeutic process (Martin et al., 2022). Overall, the teachers' collaborative reflections revealed they had become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, which led to an understanding that each person, and therefore each child, has their own personal writing path and way of writing (Martin et al., 2022). This is significant because it suggests that when teachers develop confidence in their writing voice and share their reflexive thoughts within a collaborative space, they are then able to encourage their pupils to be creative and brave writers (Martin et al., 2021), and children expressing themselves through writing is beneficial to their own wellbeing (Clark et al., 2024).

Teachers reflecting on their writing craft

Teachers who engage with the craft of writing and experiment with language are more likely to foster such an approach when teaching children to write (Myhill et al., 2021). Donald Graves (1983) originally proposed teachers should embrace two crafts: the craft of how to write as well as the craft to teach it. Graves advocated an approach where children develop their writing ideas after considering the feedback from peers and their teacher (Wyse, 2018). Since the teachers' writing role in this approach is similar to that of an editor (Wyse, 2018), teacher confidence in crafting writing becomes invaluable (Myhill et al., 2021). Whilst some praised Graves' emphasis on children's unique writing voices, others, such as Smagorinsky (1987) criticised his case study work for lack of research rigour. However, four decades of evidence since have supported Graves' view that children who have ownership over their writing craft, and the freedom to make personal writerly choices, are more likely to write for purpose and audience (Wyse, 2018; Young and Ferguson, 2020).

More recently, Myhill et al. (2021) have argued that within a pedagogy of writing it is more helpful to speak of craft knowledge rather than subject knowledge as this emphasises the difference between the pedagogical knowledge of how to teach writing and the writerly knowledge of how to craft and shape a text. In their study which paired teachers with professional authors, five crafting themes that would be helpful for teachers to have knowledge of as teacher-writers were identified: the Writing Process; Being an Author; Text-level Choices; Language Choices; and the Reader–Writer Relationship (Myhill et al., 2021). Whilst the professional authors in the study acknowledged the need to write with accuracy and conventions, they also emphasised richer craft knowledge, particularly the personal resources and intentions that authors bring to their work (Myhill et al., 2021). Teachers who are aware of these techniques are better equipped to engage in writerly teacher-pupil conversations that explore authorial intentions, audience and purpose (Cremin and Twiner, 2020).

Teachers who craft writing for authentic audiences themselves better understand the challenges and rewards of writing (Myhill, 2021), enabling them to empathise with the emotional experiences of their pupils, such as their frustration, joy or apprehension (Cremin and Baker, 2010; Zembylas, 2014). It is therefore important for teachers to overcome any insecurities with their own writing because it is the modelling of their own crafting decisions in front of children, and the modelling of their experimentation and playfulness, which benefits their pupils as writers (Keen, 2017; Myhill and Wilson, 2013; Harwayne, 2021).

Professional tensions

Government policy in the teaching of writing, particularly its emphasis on grammar, punctuation and spelling, has led to a shift in how teachers approach the teaching of writing, which often conflicts with their professional beliefs (Braun and Maguire, 2018; Cushing and Helks, 2021). Rather than focusing on creative composition, teachers often feel pressured to follow a routine of success criteria and prioritise technical aspects of writing, which can be demotivating for teachers (Cremin et al., 2020).

Barrs (2019) strongly argues that when policies overlook the creative and expressive aspects of writing it can lead to practices where grammatical features are seen as tick-box success criteria, which can then lead to awkward and unnatural writing. Effective creative writing, however, is not overloaded by unnecessary adjectives and adverbs (Markham, 2014). Calkins' (1994) view is particularly pertinent: just as artistry does not come from endlessly adding coloured paint, writing mastery does not come from simply layering more techniques. Gardner (2014) acknowledges the tensions that educationalists face in integrating motivating creative writing practices within the constraints of curriculum and assessment requirements, noting that balancing their own learning of the craft with the responsibility of teaching is challenging. As Young and Ferguson (2020) argue, a teacher's joy in writing is transferred to the children in their class and therefore teachers need to either be passionate about writing or develop a renewed vigour for writing if they want to foster a writing for pleasure pedagogy with the ultimate aim of developing children as life-long writers.

Opportunities to engage reflexively on current pedagogical writing practices and foreground the writers' craft (Myhill et al., 2021) can benefit teachers at all stages of their career. For early career teachers, this can be an exciting but steep learning curve (Howard and Paige, 2022), especially as they navigate the dominant discourses that limit their emerging teacher-writer identities (Evans, 2022), and where the pressures of an assessment dominated curriculum can lead to an overreliance on commercial literacy schemes (Gardner, 2018; McKinney and Giorgis, 2009). However, even experienced literacy specialists struggle to overcome the dominance of a skills approach driven by current assessment policies (Cushing and Helks, 2021; Moss, 2017). In their two-year study with four experienced primary literacy specialists in the US, McKinney and Giorgis (2009) highlighted the importance of teachers revisiting autobiographical narratives to inform their writing pedagogy. The personal narratives written by the teachers often illuminated tensions between teacher-writer identity and the use of commercial literacy schemes (McKinney and Giorgis, 2009). One teacher in particular expressed feeling frustrated when school leaders enforced the use of a commercial literacy scheme, and she subsequently felt overwhelmed by its mandatory materials (McKinney and Giorgis, 2009). Conversely, writing personal narratives as part of professional development can positively shape teacher-writer identity (Cremin et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2022) and encourage teachers to take both creative and professional risks (Gardner, 2014; Sachs, 2016). Engaging in the challenges and rewards of writing within a community of writers fosters a critically reflexive approach to teaching writing, which can lead to meaningful changes in classroom practice (Cremin et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2022; Mckinney and Giorgis, 2009).

Aim of the study and research questions

Given that numerous studies express the benefits of primary teachers placing their writer identity central to their practice (Cremin et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2022; Watts, 2009), and that engagement with personal narratives can lead to a deeper understanding of the self and be a driver for pedagogical change, we as researchers wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers work together within a collaborative space to foster change, as well as what strategies teachers draw on to overcome the pressures of a skills approach driven by assessment policies. By asking the following questions, we explored the reflexive experiences of teachers who engaged in collaborative, professional development with the intention of developing teacher-writer identity through online writing workshops:

1. How do teachers in the group initially engage reflexively with their writer identity?
2. How does the writing and sharing of personal writing activities within the group impact on teacher-writer identity?
3. How do members of the group work collaboratively to develop a professional community of teacher-writers?
4. To what extent does the reflecting on, and sharing of, school writing practices and professional tensions foster pedagogical change?

Teacher-writer identity workshops

Four online twilight professional development sessions were held over a total of four months, each considering a key area of a teachers-as-writers pedagogy, with an emphasis on writer identity and the crafting of writing. We felt it important to include numerous

opportunities to share writing, developing as a community of writers (Cremin et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021; Smith and Wrigley, 2016). Careful consideration was given to creating a safe and accepting context (Boud and Walker, 1998; Liu, 2017) for sharing and responding to writing, reflections and pupil responses. This encouraged meaning making within the unique experiences of their own teaching-based contexts, roles and levels of influence (Boud and Walker, 1998; Zembylas, 2014). As researchers immersed in the workshop process, we participated fully in all of the activities that we asked the participants to complete (see Table 1 for activities). We shared our writing, completed the in-session my writes, and completed the same gap tasks that we gave the teachers. We wanted to model what we wanted the participants to complete and felt that in order to develop a culture of writing for pleasure and establish trust, we needed to be vulnerable ourselves; we aimed to be self-aware and balance the capacity for empathy and distance, as well as honesty and discretion (Newby, 2014).

Methodology

The study was ethnographically positioned and aimed to further understand the experiences and reflexive engagement of the five teachers who participated in our teacher-writer identity professional development project. We aimed to develop a professional community and create an inclusive learning culture where teachers were able to make changes to practice over time. We were also keen to adopt an approach that empowered teachers and valued their professional choice and agency (Tuhkala, 2021) and we therefore encouraged teachers to choose and develop aspects of practice that are of value to their individual teacher-writer identity and their educational context. The ethnographic lens sought to capture the reality of groups' lived experience (Bhatti, 2021) and to further understand how their reflexive engagement with personal writing activities and sharing of professional tensions fostered pedagogical change.

The research project took place over an academic year with practicing teachers in primary schools in the Greater London area, ranging from recently qualified to experienced teachers, teaching across the full primary 5–11 age range. As with Olin and Pörn's (2023) research, we invited teachers we had previously worked with who showed authentic interest (Aspfors et al., 2015). Whilst this relationship facilitated access to our participants, we remained mindful of ethical issues of power and so emphasised voluntary contribution (BERA, 2024). The established rapport supported early trust and respect, though we recognised that relationships are never powerless (Brooks et al., 2014). To navigate this, we adopted an ongoing reflexive approach to avoid 'false friendships' whilst also maintaining rapport (Brooks et al., 2014, p. 110). For example, whilst we, as researchers and leaders of the professional development, shared our own shifting writer identities and vulnerabilities to address issues of power, we also recognised the risk of teachers feeling under pressure to share similar vulnerabilities in the online sessions, as well as the dangers of us influencing the teachers' responses (Brooks et al., 2014). We therefore provided the teachers space to share with each other in online breakout spaces, providing them with agency with what they shared to the group as a whole. In addition, to avoid influencing the perspectives that the teachers shared (Brooks et al., 2014), we avoided being explicit about our own views and, instead, placed emphasis on the teachers' sharing their own experiences, encouraging them to consider their own values, assumptions, and organisational power dynamics.

Research methods

Drawing from ethnographic tradition, a range of methods of data collection, including teacher reflexive journals, teacher questionnaires, video recorded conversations (from the online professional development sessions), and observational notes, were adopted (Cohen et al., 2018). All were carefully chosen to privilege teachers' voices (as in Martin et al., 2022).

Our teacher participants completed individual reflexive journals. These reflexive journals had a dual purpose because they served as a professional development tool and as a source of narrative data. We were driven by the understanding that people organise their worlds into narratives that are shaped through their sociocultural context over time, and that teachers' narratives are shaped by their interactions with each other, interactions with researchers during the professional development sessions, and by their individual school context (Moens, 2006). Reflexive journaling provided an opportunity for teachers to engage with their 'wiser self', work through challenges, and to reflexively engage on their professional identity and assumptions (Stevens and Cooper, 2009, p. 134) as teacher-writers. Aware that some may find journal writing challenging due to lack of confidence (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) or time (Stevens and Cooper, 2009), we built reflection time (Billings and Kowalski, 2006; Boud, 2001) into the sessions and provided teachers with a structure and prompts (see Table 2). Teachers were asked to send the journals to us between the sessions.

Given we were particularly interested in how teachers' reflexive engagement with personal writing

Table 1: Teacher-writer professional development online sessions

	Session 1: Teacher writer identity	*Session 2: Personal writing and communities of writers*	*Session 3: The craft of writing and the writing process*	*Session 4: Feedback and cultural writing*
Theme	Connecting with a sense of self as a writer	Fostering trusting environments to develop as a community of writers Therapeutic writing for wellbeing	The writer teacher modelling a recursive process with time for playfulness and experimentation	The role of feedback on pupils' creative writing in relation to being a teacher-writer
Reflection	Reflecting on the emotional impact of teachers' childhood experiences of writing on their practice	Reflecting on the value of sharing writing experiences with children; finding your voice/ Reading writing aloud Giving time and space to children's writing	Reflecting on personal writing processes and preferences; how this informs classroom practice. Engaging children as writers rather than just pupils learning to write Reflecting on potential professional challenges within individual school cultures	Reflecting on developing writer identities and the impact on practice Reflecting on the impact of personal and cultural identities on writing The reader-writer relationship
Gap task 'My write' Personal writing activity	A precious object Personal writing river	Note to self	Character creation or narrative	Cultural identity narrative
Classroom practice-Feeling empowered	Children's free write	Children becoming a community of writers	Children using journals to collect ideas	Children giving and receiving feedback- The author's chair

Table 2: Teacher reflective journal structure

Initial prompts in first session	Do you have positive or negative attitudes to writing? How did your experience as a school child affect your attitudes towards writing? How do your attitudes influence how you teach writing? How do your attitudes towards writing help foster a community of writers in your classroom?
Immediately after the sessions	Teachers were guided to write approximately 250 words of initial reflection, together with initial ideas for adapting their practice
In school	Teachers wrote another 200–300 words after completing an activity with their class and were also free to use the journals for their own creative writing and for reflecting on their developing teacher-writer identity

activities, and how narratives are shaped by their interactions with each other over time, the online sessions were also video recorded which allowed us to identify and then transcribe collaborative discussions. In addition, the online nature of the professional development sessions allowed us to fully participate in the sessions, as well as 'step backstage', rewatch the sessions and unobtrusively make observational notes (Bhatti, 2021, p. 105). Consequently, our transcription of collaborative discussions also included non-verbal data, such as hesitations and pauses, allowing us to be faithful to the actual event (Vaughan, 2021).

An ethnographic positioning required us to accept the meaning making process as an iterative one, where researchers and participants each influence the other over time (Budde et al., 2024; Mertens, 2020). To take account of the collaborative knowledge creation process, we adopted a systematic reflexive approach throughout the duration of the project (Clerke and Hopwood, 2014). In particular, because we are all researchers from the same establishment, we took steps to avoid our thinking becoming institutionalised (Alvesson et al., 2022). After each professional development session, we completed our own researcher journals to record our insights and thoughts on the session. We were particularly aware that writing about a group that shared a culture of being in school and were now part of a culture of writing was complex (Mertens, 2020) and so we wanted to ensure that we were aware of any tensions between what the participants said in their reflective journals and how this was observed in the online professional development sessions. Engaging reflexively with our initial observations and responses to the online sessions, whilst simultaneously reading the teachers' reflective journals, provided us with a deeper insight into potential tensions. Furthermore, writing straight away after each session, and then discussing it with each other later, allowed us to keep checking how our assumptions and biases could be affecting the findings (Alvesson et al., 2022).

For the research team to take account of ambiguous observations and minimise any threat to the validity of the research (Hedges, 2021), each teacher completed a questionnaire at the end of the professional development (see Table 3). Some qualitative and some quantitative responses were required; for example, teachers were asked to rate their teacher-writer identity development using a Likert scale, and then also reflect on why they had made such a rating.

Analysing the teacher-writers' experience

Having a range of data enabled us to analyse personal experience, which led to a deeper understanding of cultural experience (Kara, 2020). Thematic narrative analysis was utilised to analyse the teachers' individual and collective voices (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Riessman, 2008). Given that there were several researchers analysing our data, and in recognition that analysis is a reflexive, iterative and interpretative process, we adopted an approach that incorporated several stages as suggested by Creswell (2013). First, we individually coded through an ethnographic lens, capturing salient words and phrases (Bhatti, 2021) from within the reflexive journals, the collaborative discussions, observational notes and the teacher questionnaires. After independently immersing ourselves in a single data source, we then collaboratively identified emerging common themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022), before moving on to the next data source. Completing the analysis in several stages provided us with opportunities to reconvene at various points throughout the analysis process to discuss our thoughts, agree on emerging categories and themes, which then guided subsequent further independent exploration (as in Hajisoteriou et al., 2021).

Findings: Shifts in Darcey, Clara and Ayesha's writer identity

Our analysis of the data revealed that, over the course of the professional development online sessions, all

Table 3: Final Teacher Questionnaire.

Teacher Questionnaire
1. Before you began the Teacher-Writer project, how did you see yourself as a writer? (rate 1–5)
2. Why did you rate yourself as a teacher-writer in this way?
3. How would you rate yourself as a teacher writer after completing the CPD? (rate 1–5)
4. How did engaging with personal writing activities enable you to connect to a sense of self as a writer?
5. How did being part of a community of writers support your identity and practice?
6. In what way does seeing yourself as a writer impact on your practice? Comment on the most significant aspect/s.
7. Which aspect of the CPD resonated with you the most?
8. Is there any aspect of 'teachers as writers' that was not covered, but you would have liked to be included in the CPD?

participating teachers increasingly identified as writers. When we asked the teachers to evaluate the professional development at the end of the online sessions, the teachers suggested the most powerful aspect was engaging in personal writing and sharing within the group. In relation to how the teachers' developing sense of self as writers informs their practice, four key themes emerged from their evolving writer identity: *making connections*, *shared empathy, feeling empowered* and *writer agency*. Firstly, we share how these themes developed across four online sessions, and how these themes translated into new and critical ways of practicing the teaching of writing, which consequently led to changes in the way their pupils viewed and experienced writing. Because experiences varied depending on context and experience, we also present the individual cases of Darcey, Clara, and Ayesha to honour the complexity of their individual journeys (Smith and Sparkes, 2012).

Reflecting on past experiences helped teachers *make connections* to their writer identity. Writing with *agency* about personal topics such as family, challenges, or joyful moments deepened their self-understanding, supporting Hennessey's (2021) view that writing is culturally and personally situated. Teachers enjoyed the gap tasks and often adapted them for classroom use. Teachers' engagement with crafting personal writing experiences and the self-understanding they gained seemed to be a catalyst for them wanting their children to experience the same agency and emotional connection to writing.

Our observations suggest that over time, as teachers shared personal narratives and vulnerabilities around writing and teaching it, a *shared empathy* developed within the group. Teachers noted this brought them closer together as a group and led to more emotionally focussed feedback. For example, during the first session there was a sense that the teachers were nervous to share their writing, and there were comments within the group about their peers being better writers. However, by the final session, our observations showed that discussions and reflections were more open and focussed more on crafting writerly intentions and reader emotional impact, aligning with Zembylas' (2014) perspective that emotions are central to reflexivity. As in other studies, this shared empathy supported more respectful, reflexive feedback and fostered greater recognition of writer agency and authorship (Cremin and Twiner, 2020).

Finally, the teachers' comments suggest they felt more *empowered* to change their practice, particularly when given agency over which aspects of their writing practice they wanted to develop. We observed pedagogical shifts: more personal writing, increased student choice, and a move away from focusing solely on technical skills. Teachers spoke with pride about children's writing and felt they knew their pupils better as individuals. However, experience mattered here. More experienced teachers felt confident leading change at a school level, while less experienced teachers applied changes within their classrooms. Echoing Cushing and Helks' (2021) findings, we found that assessment pressures often constrained personal approaches to teaching writing and that leadership and peer support were crucial in enabling meaningful change.

The following further exploration of Darcey, Clara and Ayesha's experiences shows in more depth how these teachers shifted in their writer identity. Although their experiences differed due to their position in school, the shared empathy they experienced as a writing group enabled them all to develop writer agency and identity, make connections to their practice, and feel empowered to act upon these with the children they teach.

Darcey: As an early career teacher, Darcey's initial doubts about her own writing shifted as she grew more comfortable in the group.

> *The air was chilling; her breath billowed out in clouds of steam. Gnarled oak trees towered over her like menacing monsters waiting to attack. She frantically pondered her options. Should she step further into the home of these intimidating beasts? She knew that she must continue*

despite the insurmountable task that lay ahead. "Pull yourself together, Helen!" she muttered almost silently under her breath. Her dusky blonde hair swept across her face as a sudden gust of wind attacked her. Whilst she was tucking her hair back, she saw a glinting movement out of the corner of her eye. Was it her mind playing tricks on her? Helen, the last child, froze on the spot, partially hidden by a large leafy and bushy shrub. The light shimmering through the canopy of the forest appeared green. It was beautiful but rather eerie. The monster was near; she could sense its presence. Crunching sounds enveloped her ears filling her mind with impending doom.

As an early career teacher, Darcey was the least experienced teacher in the project, and did not initially identify as a writer. However, over the professional development sessions, her confidence and writer agency grew, empowering her to make changes to her practice and positively impact the young writers in her class. Initially, Darcey was reluctant to share her gap task writing (see above) with the group, but the more she wrote and shared, the more her confidence grew and by the final session, Darcey was openly sharing how she was experimenting with crafting techniques. In the following conversation, we witness a sense of shared empathy between Darcey and another teacher as they each reveal their feelings of vulnerability about sharing writing with adults rather than their pupils.

Darcey: It was fun, it was actually ok! I was quite nervous at first …
Teacher: (nods and smiles)
Darcey: Originally, I didn't see myself as a writer at all and now that I do write stuff, I feel more writerly.
Teacher: Yeah, I know what you mean because although I share a lot with children, I don't with other adults so sharing my writing was a real leap of faith. At first, I felt really vulnerable.
Darcey: I agree.
Teacher: I listened to your writing, Darcey, and I thought I can really picture that. Yes, I thought, I could really illustrate that using your words.
Darcey: Thank you. But when everyone is doing it [reading aloud their writing], it's shared, isn't it?!

In line with previous studies, Darcey's initial doubts about her own writing shifted as she grows more comfortable in the group (Cremin, 2006; Gardner and Kuzich, 2024). The climate of empathy and trust that had been created in the group appears to support Darcey in taking risks, express her feelings (Boud and Walker, 1998), and ultimately share her writing (Bolton, 2018). Darcey later reflects on this experience and writes in her journal:

It was lovely hearing the reflections of other teachers and reassuring that we didn't really view ourselves as writers. I found out that I am a writer despite deciding that writers are those who are paid to be so … In terms of my own development, I am pleased with the feedback I received from the breakout group. When [a teacher] shared her writing, I was worried that my feedback wouldn't be as detailed as hers. I surprised myself with how straightforward it actually worked. It was really inspiring hearing other teachers' writing.

Darcey's early non-writer identity appears to be partly linked to the belief that only those who are published are writers (Cremin et al., 2020; Hennessey, 2021). However, as indicated in her reflective journal, it was through collaborative reflexive engagement that she began to make the connection that the act of writing, and the desire to write it, is central to developing writer identity, whether it is published or not (Hennessey, 2021; Myhill et al., 2021).

As the sessions progressed, Darcey also began to critique and challenge dominant ways of teaching writing (Evans, 2022). Early on, Darcey explains that her school places emphasis on success criteria that focus on technical aspects of writing. However, several workshops later, Darcey expresses feeling empowered to change her own classroom practice and consequently finds ways to offer her pupils more agency and choice in their writing, and plan innovative writing experiences (Martin et al., 2022). Darcey's journal shows her own growing empowerment and agency:

I have been lucky to have the full support of my school, however [some teachers] are rather resistant to change and set a rigid structure for writing. I have needed to go slightly of tangent to give my children a broader choice … It is important that my children feel that they have the power to choose their own writing style, not rigidly focused on one size fits all.

I am glad I took ownership of this English unit and put more emphasis on writer choice, which was such a delight…I have been finding it difficult to manage my workload … Taking back control of my teaching, particularly my marking and planning, has helped and I want to maintain my goals.

Being confronted with school practices that differ from one's own beliefs can be discomforting (Kelchtermans, 2009), but Darcey's reflections show how she is able to challenge the dominant social norms of school practice and feels empowered to reclaim agency, an experience that seems deeply emotional (Zembylas, 2014). Whilst Darcey was able to take control of the learning in her class, it was more challenging

at an organisational level, aligning with Eteläpelto et al. (2013) research findings.

Darcey's shift in writer identity and her feeling of empowerment suggest she has been able to place her own experiences as writer central to her practice; she explains how this impacted on the children's responses to writing, as illustrated in the following extracts from her journal:

> *I share my own writing with my class which has encouraged them to share their own writing. Quite a few of my children have their own notebooks in which they enjoy jotting down ideas.*

> *I have noticed great improvement in my classes writing. They are more motivated to start writing and part of that is linked to free choice and that I allow them to express their creativity. I encourage children to work collaboratively, sharing ideas with each other and as a whole class.*

Overall, Darcey's reflections and journal extracts help to illustrate how participating in the writer identity workshops fostered her growing writer identity and confidence in crafting writing. As her confidence grew, she felt empowered to shift her practice, which led to her pupils writing more creatively and taking risks. Sharing her writerly craft helped foster a writing for pleasure classroom, which is a valuable component of an effective writing pedagogy (Young and Ferguson, 2020).

Clara: As English lead, Clara is able to impact change influenced by the pedagogical knowledge and understanding developed from completing this project.

> I spent the majority of my childhood holidays in Hastings as my uncle had a bungalow there and was often away for work, so we would stay at his house. So many of the experiences we had and places we visited inspired my writing. I was forever writing mysteries set in caves or poems about the funfair.
>
> ***Hastings***
>
> *My mountain is the cliff tops – the beautiful view as the road rises to meet the blue sky and the sea becomes the horizon-an infinite blue diamond powered by the sun. The sweet smell of donuts takes me by the hand and leads me towards the sea front. I'm greeted by that familiar sound of the arcades, the crunch of the pebbles, the waves lapping against the old legs of the Pier. A trip to the old town, my favourite shops, trinkets a plenty – the Magpie, always full of treasures, a journey on the cable car and greeted once again by the view as we sit and drink it all in. A trip to the caves, the darkness with secrets hidden in every corner, the adventures that I long for – like the ones I've read about in my books. Crazy golf – will this be my turn to ring the bell? It doesn't matter – it's time for fish and chips. We sit by the sea, we eat. We savour every last mouthful and wait … it's nearly dark. Fireworks on the cliff tops – the sky illuminated by the brightest colours and sounds which echo around us then disappear in a trail of smoke.*
> *Time to go home, back to the bungalow – to be awakened by the soothing sound of the wood pigeon – eager for all the fun to begin again.*

Clara's reflective journal states she is a lapsed writer. She reflects that as a child she had an enthusiastic and carefree attitude, but as an adult she has become more critical and less confident, editing her writing to make it 'perfect'. Clara is an experienced key stage 2 (KS2) teacher and the English subject lead. Analysis of Clara's reflective journal and of session transcripts indicates that she began this project acknowledging that she writes all the time within her job but states 'I am not a writer, I am a teacher'.

Clara's reflections show that as she reconnects with writing, she feels her sense of self as a writer returning, and she starts to take a more critical stance, consciously reflecting upon her role at class and school level as a teacher of writing. As the following extract suggests, this comes with a sense of empowerment, as she realises that the shift in herself can impact upon others: that she can position her practice differently (Ryan and Walsh, 2018).

> *The more I see myself as a writer and understand the processes, setbacks, highs and lows involved, then the more I can encourage, nurture and work with the children I teach.*

Session observations show Clara's emotionally laden reflections direct us to her critical reflexivity as she questions her own attitudes and values in the teaching of writing (Zembylas, 2014). This impacts on her practice in the classroom, and in the wider school community (Bearne et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2022) as she reflects upon her teaching. In the final session, Clara discusses how a trusting environment and shared empathy between children can help to develop their personal writing:

> *I want children to just talk freely about their culture and what they think, letting them listen to each other, because then they will learn from listening to each other and that might be a good start. I love the idea of bringing in objects or things that reflect them which might be a good starting point for them. We don't always make time, as we are so busy, to just talk and listen.*

Clara's reflective journal suggests a desire to shift practice, with less teacher-led writing, and instead developing the importance of children's choice, as the extract below reveals:

> *Currently teaching is driven by success criteria and the end product, and feedback is more focussed on how children's writing should be, with little time spant on discussing their ideas with them. This needs to change.*

As English lead, Clara is able to impact change influenced by the pedagogical knowledge and understanding developed from completing this project. Before starting the project, staff had requested adopting a school-wide commercial writing scheme, something which her reflective journal shows she feels empowered enough to now voice her concerns against. This, coupled with worries expressed in her journal and in session observations about overuse of model texts, has led to her intention to change both the writing policy and action plan. Within the final session, Clara talked about how she now felt empowered her to look at writing in school, making the changes to practice she desires:

> *We need to go right back to Key Stage 1 and then start right from the beginning so it filters through the whole school … we are very heavily product and success criteria focussed, I think.*

Emotive vocabulary such as *need to*; *must*; *definitely*; and *worry* all suggest her sense of empowerment and critical emotional reflexivity (Zembylas, 2014) with shifts in her practice instigating shifts in the children's understanding of the power of writing.

The therapeutic power of writing personal narratives (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2000) is exemplified by a child who chose to write about himself, but his writing was actually a series of questions about starting a new school in Year 7.

> *… it was clear from this that this is something at the forefront of his mind but these feelings or worries he's been experiencing would never have been shared with us had it not been for the writing process.*

Writing has empowered this child to organise and confront some difficult emotions (Hunt, 2000; Martin et al., 2022) As Clara reflects:

> *For these children, success is not about how many words they can spell correctly or how many fronted adverbials they can use in their writing, but more importantly that they have been inspired to write freely and enjoy what they are doing.*

Clara's stated desire to shift away from technical and end product driven writing lessons (Barrs, 2019; Cremin et al., 2020) has led to children identifying as successful writers.

Ayesha: As a writing subject lead, Ayesha feels empowered to shift in practice; however, curriculum constraints are still high profile in her thinking.

> *I wouldn't consider myself a writer – the writing I do in the classroom is for work, and at home I'm only writing for a purpose, like to catch up with friends or annotate a recipe. Writing for someone who isn't five years old is something I find quite daunting in the first session.*

Ayesha is an experienced Key Stage 1 teacher and the school's writing subject lead. Her reflective journal and session contributions indicate that she is developing her own writer identity and is deeply reflexive about the impact of the project on her class, and her role. Shifting practice in her school is seen as a challenge she is embracing as her school's policy meets practice. Ayesha's initial reflections (above) show that she sees herself as an unconfident non-writer. As noted in our observations, Ayesha's comments when sharing her first piece of free writing support this, and we note the other teachers in the group smile and nod in shared empathy:

> *Ayesha: I found it really interesting because I've been making notes this whole time in my notebook, but then I wrote this [free writing] on scrap paper because it was a separate thing and I knew it was going to be scrappy and messy*
> *Lecturer: Do you have a line you could share with us?*
> *Ayesha: well, I mean, it's not very good (Laughs).*
> *Lecturer: (laughing along) but that's not the point*
> *Ayesha: errr … so I put … (reads out a line from her writing)*

Her continuing reflections show how she makes connections between her own developing writer identity and her practice, leading her to become more aware of the benefits of being a teacher-writer (Cremin et al., 2020; Gardner, 2018; Graves, 1983) for herself and her class.

> *I think I still need to think more about myself as a writer rather than just a teacher of writing. The majority of writing that I do at the moment is to model to the children and is dictated by the skills I need them to demonstrate, rather than being uninhibited writing, so I would like to explore further the idea of creating a community of writers.*

Ayesha's shift in her own writer identity appears to have begun, and by the end of the project this shift

seems more fully developed (Cremin et al., 2020; Cremin and Oliver, 2017) with growing awareness of the impact her writer identity could have in school practice (Watts, 2009).

> *I hadn't really considered myself a writer at all, but being part of this community through the CPD has really help give me the confidence in my own writing ability, as well as lots of easily achievable ideas for the school.*

Ayesha's reflective journal comments state that she feels empowered to make immediate changes to her practice (Ryan and Walsh, 2018); she is starting writing activities with more time for children to talk and plan flexibly (Keen, 2017; Young and Ferguson, 2020). Her reflections indicate that she is critically emotionally reflexive about her shifting beliefs about the teaching of writing (Kelchtermans, 2009; Zembylas, 2014), and her desire for professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), shifting practice in her class and as subject lead (Cremin et al., 2020; Cuncliffe, 2016; McKinney and Giorgis, 2009; Ryan and Walsh, 2018).

> *I have been thinking about the children having more autonomy over their writing choices. I am in the process of updating the English overviews for next year and I have removed the expectations on children coming into year 1 to begin more structured writing at such an early stage. Instead, there will be more writing experiences with the children choosing what they want to write about.*

> *We have just planned an unstructured unit for post SATs which will be led by the children in terms of the sorts of things they want to complete, and this is something I am keen to explore further if successful.*

The language of her journal '*something I … wish to explore further/need to think more about/want to look into in more detail*' suggests an awareness of the constraints the wider school curriculum structures hold, and the juxtaposition of these with her desire to enact change (Barrs, 2019; Cain et al., 2019; Cushing and Helks, 2021; Sachs, 2016). Her critical emotional reflexivity (Zembylas, 2014) is showing her struggle of both following and questioning the accepted school practices (Boud and Walker, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2009; Linus et al., 2023). As Ayesha reflects:

> *Our curriculum is so pinned down in terms of what we are writing about … our planning is very descriptive and does not allow much creative freedom.*

> *We have an assessment of skills related to reading impacting on writing, but because it is a skill to be ticked off, I do not think we are utilising this as much as we could.*

Internal tension arises in discussion Ayesha has with the Assistant Headteacher about geography writing her class did; the children needed to write home in role as an Arctic explorer, but Ayesha feels empowered and gives them the autonomy to write about the part of the lesson they were most interested in instead (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). This highlights both her shift in practice, but also how curriculum constraints are still high profile in her thinking (Cremin et al., 2020).

> *The end result was all quite different to each other but showed the children's passions. They all used the grammar points they had been learning in English. After … I was explaining how proud I was of the children and how good their writing was, but we were talking in relation to assessment. We discussed how it would be harder to assess what had been achieved in this price of writing, but we do need to have more times like this where the children show clear ownership of their writing.*

Ayesha has been able to shift the focus of her class's writing from a focus on technical aspects, to the children writing for their own authentic audiences and purpose. Ayesha's reflective journal entry demonstrates her understanding of their pride and ownership in this (Myhill, 2021).

> *It has been lovely to see their enthusiasm and has enabled us to have conversations about who they are writing for and the choices they will need to make based on this. They think more about their word choice and the effect it has on the reader, rather than just including an adjective because it was the purpose of the lesson.*

> *They love to share their ideas first and discuss what they are planning on doing. That, and talking about what they had written after completion.*

The children appear to be shifting into seeing themselves as authors, who craft their writing and are keen to share with others. Writing is becoming for them is a way of making connections as a social practice to communicate, with talk at the heart of the process of their craft (Cremin et al., 2020; Young and Ferguson, 2020).

Conclusions and implications for teacher-writer professional development spaces

This study aimed to further understand how online teacher-writer identity professional development sessions create an environment where reflexive conversations can be drivers for pedagogical change in the

teaching of writing and our findings suggest there are implications for future teacher-writer professional development. Indeed, the online nature of the teacher-writer workshops provided a space that fostered a culture of trust, where teachers could share their respective organisational challenges in a safe way. The shared empathy that developed between the teachers within the group contributed to their developing confidence as writers and sharing their writing. Participating in writing personal narratives and engaging with the craft of writing enabled them to make connections to their practice and enabled them to make critical changes to how they teach writing. All teachers felt empowered in their professional roles to make changes, and for those with more experience and leadership roles, the changes went beyond the classroom.

Through sharing the experiences of three of the teachers—Darcey, Clara and Ayesha—who participated in the four-month project, it has been shown that for these teachers, the group workshops provided a platform for a shift in practice in the teaching of writing. Whilst Darcey, Clara and Ayesha all expressed differing starting points in relation to their writer identity, by the end of the project, all stated their writer identity had shifted and that they all now saw themselves as teacher-writers. Sharing the experiences of the three teachers has also shown how sustained engagement with critically reflexive writing activities within a collaborative setting can lead to shifts in teachers' writer identity and shifts in practice, which in turn impacts on children's experiences as writers in the classroom. Whilst Darcey and Ayesha initially felt apprehensive about sharing their writing and crafting techniques within the workshops, the vulnerabilities and empathy they shared with each other encouraged all of them to share their writing. The personal nature of the writing activities also enabled them to get to know each other more, so the more they shared, the more confident they became. Significantly, engaging with personal writing activities and experimenting with crafting techniques inspired them all to adapt and try similar activities with their class, leading to them offering the children more choice with their writing and more of an emphasis on author intentions.

Each of the teachers presented in this study expressed feeling empowered with the pedagogical changes they were able to make at their level, which ultimately led to them making a greater connection to their pupils as writers. Darcey, the least experienced teacher, openly expressed how she felt empowered to make changes in her class, and although she finds the resistance of her year colleague challenging, small changes, such as providing more pupil choice within their writing activities, seem to foster a sense of enjoyment in the teaching of writing. Clara and Ayesha were the more experienced teachers, both holding roles of responsibility in their respective schools as English subject leads. Similarly, through sustained engagement in crafting writing, in the form of personal narratives, both were able to reconnect with writing. Clara's reconnection to writing helped her to realise the value of teachers placing their identity central to their practice, resulting in her moving away from buying into a commercial writing scheme, signifying feeling empowered to directly affect policy within her establishment. Ayesha recognised that her own purposeful personal writing experiences contributed to her teacher-writer identity and felt compelled to challenge school managers on the school's approach to teaching writing, expressing a preference for a pedagogy of teaching writing that valued children's voices and their personal narratives. Her plans to trial such a pedagogy in year 1, with the view to creating an unstructured unit of work for year 6, suggests she is willing to overcome the concerns of senior leaders and resist the pressure of an overly technical approach often brought about by the pressures of assessments.

Recommendations and limitations

Having synthesised the findings of the study, we propose the following professional development recommendations:

- Create safe spaces for teachers to be reflexive and share writing experiences and professional challenges
- Create opportunities for teachers to make emotional connections to writing by engaging with personal writing activities, as well as experimenting with crafting techniques
- Create agentic spaces that empower teachers to enact pedagogical practices grounded in their identities as writers.
- Encourage teachers to prioritise focusing on author intentions, and to promote choice in the writing activities children engage with.

We acknowledge the exploratory nature of this study and that only a small group of teachers participated in the group, all of whom had a natural interest in teaching writing. We therefore do not aim to generalise the data to all teachers. Within this study, developing teacher-writer identity was revealed to be a powerfully emotional experience for all three teachers, and all teachers who participated felt empowered to make changes at some level. We appreciate that not all teachers are in such a position to enact change. However, in an era where performance policies dominate, we are hopeful that the pedagogical changes the teachers in the study enacted will encourage others to follow.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Ethics statement

Full ethical approval was gained from St Mary's university and informed consent was gained from all participants involved.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared. All data are qualitative and are not shared due to ethical and privacy reasons.

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