

# Writing Autobiographies: A Meaningful Way to Sensitize Trainee Teachers

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## Abstract

This article discusses the final results from a research work which aimed to identify the pedagogical processes that emerge from the autobiographies that modern languages trainee teachers at the University of Caldas write. These autobiographies become a starting point to develop their teaching practicum, and are considered to be of great importance for a better understanding of trainee teacher's daily lives inside the classrooms. The autobiography permits trainee teachers to narrate classroom events, examine patterns and tendencies, and establish intervention points as well as plans of action to avoid replicating unwanted experiences they lived during their academic years. Trainee teachers feel stimulated to relate their previous learning experiences to the process they are just beginning as teachers. It was found that the recurrent points that appeared in the autobiographies referred to childhood memories, teacher's influence, and affective factors. The authors conclude that auto biographies become a meaningful instrument to raise trainees awareness about their own performance as future teachers.

**Keywords:** autobiography, narrative genre, personal accounts, trainee teachers, teaching practicum

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Problem

Globalization and cultural, scientific and technological changes in Colombia and worldwide require a new generation of educators (Delors, 1996; National Ministry of Education-MEN-, 1994/*Ley General de Educación*). These changes require teachers to develop reflective and analytical competencies (National Ministry of Education -MEN, 1999). Therefore, to respond to these changes, and to be consistent with the curricular reform of the University of Caldas, the researchers, who have been in charge of guiding the trainee teachers to face the challenge of integrating research processes with pedagogical processes, have been implementing the use of autobiographies as a research tool. As a matter of fact, by writing autobiographies, trainee teachers can gain awareness of their own teaching practices.

Although trainee teachers attend seminars, and take different subjects related to research, they do not realize the implications of their role as teachers until the last semester of the program when they complete their practicum (Quintero, Buitrago, Gallego, Infante, López & Zuluaga, 2007). This is why the advisers promote the practice of writing autobiographies as a starting point to help trainees understand the meaning of the experiences they underwent during their previous school years in terms of the different kinds of teachers they had and the impact such experiences may have on their teaching practicum. To carry out an effective teaching practicum, trainee teachers are required not only to prepare their lesson plans and give classes, but also to develop a research paper, which is a graduation requirement. In order to develop teaching competencies, they have to observe classes, register information in their journals, and write reports concerning life in school as well as personal experiences. In the initial stage of their teaching practicum, they are instructed to write an autobiography so that they can raise awareness about their own performance as future teachers.

In this article, the authors include four trainee teachers' extracts taken verbatim from their autobiographies to illustrate how their experiences during their school years allow them to face the initial stages of their practicum in a real context.

The curriculum of the Modern Languages Program of the University of Caldas includes subjects in pedagogy such as *Teoría de la Educación*, *Teoría del Currículo*, *Teoría del Aprendizaje*, *Epistemología de la Pedagogía*, *Teoría de la Didáctica* and *Didáctica de las Lenguas Extranjeras*, among others. However, trainee teachers do not know how to relate the theory behind these subjects to the field of practice; in other words, they perceive each subject in an isolated way, thus they cannot articulate their previous knowledge with the new knowledge. Consequently, by the time trainee teachers reach their final semester in Modern Languages, and as they are instructed by the advisers to write their autobiographies, they become aware of their responsibilities as future teachers.

Drawing on the experience the advisers have had for more than ten years in the teaching practicum, they have identified several strengths and weaknesses in the process, and have looked for alternatives to help trainee teachers to begin the practicum. The advisers have found that most of the trainees' biggest frustrations is that the classroom exercises or tasks developed in the theoretical courses at the university are artificial, and that the reality they face when they are in front of a group of students is very different (Quintero, et al, 2007). Some of them feel scared when they have to teach their first class, and they can often feel overwhelmed because they are not able to plan class time properly. Another difficult situation they have to face is discipline, not only because classes are very large -between 40 and 50 students per class- but because children have a lot of behavioral or learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, dyslexia and bipolar disorder, among others.

Considering the above-mentioned limitations, and bearing in mind that they do not have extensive teaching or research experience, they might not know how to approach day-to-day classroom situations. Hence, the task of the advisers is to encourage trainee teachers to reflect on their own experience as students, the different kinds of teachers they have had since childhood, their own learning processes, and the situations that have influenced them in positive and negative ways, so that they can avoid replicating unwanted behaviors that can affect students' learning processes.

### *1.2 Research Question*

How can the autobiography become a starting point to make trainee teachers aware of their academic background and its influence on the teaching learning process they are just beginning?

### *1.3 Objectives*

- To raise trainee teachers' awareness of their academic background and its influence in the initial stages of their teaching process
- To sensitize trainee teachers to face their first classroom experiences.
- To determine the value of the autobiography in the teaching practicum of modern languages students.
- To identify the pedagogical background that emerges from the autobiographies.

### *1.4 Defining Biographical Research*

Traditionally, authors have considered biographical research to be of great importance in the search for a better understanding of individual daily lives. Likewise, biographical research helps individuals to interpret real events and experiences which involve past, present and future accounts.

Concerning the meaning of "autobiography", several authors have coined the term from different perspectives. The definitions given here were selected because they directly refer to what has been done by the trainee teachers themselves during the first stage of their teaching practicum.

The term "autobiography" refers to a personal account written by the person himself or herself. It is guided by the question "who am I?" In the case of education, the key question is "who am I as a teacher or as a future teacher?" Angrosino (1989) states that an autobiography is a form of biographical writing expressed as a narrative account of a person's life that he or she has personally written or otherwise recorded.

In this sense, Creswell (1998) considers biographies, autobiographies, life stories and oral histories to be narrative genres. Likewise, he says that this style of writing is a kind of case study because it is based on the life of a particular individual or a small group of individuals. In just this way, the case study, according to Stake (1995), is a bounded system or an object of study that can be an event, a process, a program, or a small group of people.

Studies carried out by Denzin (1989) and other theorists present a variety of terms related to biographical research such as self-experience, personal experience story, diaries, field notes, anecdotes, life story, self-story, testimonies, critical episodes, oral history, autoethnography, biography, narrative, personal history, case study, epiphany and chronology, among others. Smith (1994, p. 287) says that “life writing comes with many labels, each suggesting a slightly different perspective under consideration”. Smith adds the following to the list: portrayals, portraits, profiles, memoirs, autobiographies, journals, and so on.

The list continues, but the major point here is that biography, “life writing”, comes in multiple forms, lengths, focuses and perspectives. A related point is the importance of insight and creativity on the part of the biographer in the studying, constructing and writing of lives or parts of lives [...] In short, from my perspective, autobiography in its changing forms is at the core of late twentieth-century paradigmatic shifts in the structure of thought (Smith, 1994, p. 288).

This family of terms has commonly been classified in a wide range of genres and narrative techniques. These are also interesting styles of narrative inquiry which have entered with great force in the educational field.

...often the tellers may be the only witnesses to such happenings but, commonly, their accounts can be checked against other written, visual or oral accounts. Nevertheless, how these events are perceived and selected (even chronologically reordered or changed over time) and placed within understandings of the individual life – by metaphor, myth and so on – are necessary aspects of analysis. A constructionist view can be used to help to analyze how the tellers shape the telling of their experiences of particular events – how the “reality” (for them) is formed through the account (Roberts, 2002, p. 8).

On the other hand, when referring to the biography as a type of qualitative study, Creswell (1998, p. 37) argues that:

The focus of a biography is on the life of an individual. One decides to write a biography or life history when a single individual needs to illuminate a specific issue, such as the issue of being intellectually challenged. Furthermore, the researcher needs to make a case for the need to study this particular individual – someone who illustrates a problem, someone who has had a distinguished career, someone in the national spotlight, or someone who lives an ordinary life. The process of data collection involves gathering material about the person, either historical or from present-day sources, such as conversations or observations.

To strengthen the above definitions, Denzin (1989) and Denzin & Lincoln (1994) refer to biographies and autobiographies more as narratives that occur at a certain period of time. These authors consider chronology as a common approach for undertaking a biographical form of writing, in which the narrator presents the individual life in stages or steps according to his/her age.

Among qualitative methods in social sciences, biographical research is an exciting and creative exercise that is shaped by the researcher. According to Roberts (2002, p. 2), “qualitative research has a number of features stemming from its philosophical and theoretical approach to the social world, including the experiences and views of the researcher. The researcher is able to perceive and select real events, feelings and personal events, even those which are chronologically reordered, structured or changed over time.”

The study of lives in educational fields arises from social approaches following the methodological standards of qualitative principles. The terms that surround biographical research such as reflect, interpret or subjective are inspired by the German term *verstehen* coined by Weber (1949). Unlike the positivist paradigm which searches some objective and enduring explanations about reality beyond the realm of ordinary experience, comprehension of the everyday world is a scientific competence that illuminates teachers’ practice. Learning by doing and then reflecting on experience is the typical and natural form of thinking which Dewey (1938) carried out in his conception of schooling. The world of everyday life is the starting point of Dewey’s theoretical description of experience and reflective thinking. Individuals are able to learn about the world they live in, and understand themselves, and their relationship with others.

Concurring with Dewey, that individuals construct their identities through daily experience, educators are at their best emphasizing the ultimate aim of the lived experience inside the classrooms. Educational researchers, based on a social sciences approach, attempt to explore a deeper rationale for narrative inquiry as a new mode of knowing, reflecting on and interpreting social contexts as well as pedagogical experiences. Nonetheless, many researchers argue that “the attempt to recognize the meanings given to the social world by individuals requires rather different criteria” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 6).

During the last century, biographical research explored diverse ways to interpret how individual accounts of real experiences can be understood to help clarify societal changes that occur when the researcher analyzes and interprets social shifts. This branch of narratives not only illuminates individual experiences, but changes that occur within families, small groups and institutions.

Through biographical studies, researchers discover the value of written reflections, anecdotes and life experiences during the process of interpretation and data analysis. Likewise, biographical or autobiographical documents can help educators, learners, counselors and human resource staff to empower people in assuming greater responsibility for their personal growth, education and human development.

Some authors who are uncertain about the use of biographies as a research tool argue that:

Traditionally in qualitative research, commentators in methodological texts have stressed the empathetic orientation to the “subject” on behalf of the researcher, who nevertheless has an “objective” role as the questioner, interpreter and presenter of the finished researched text. More recently the emphasis has shifted to recognition of the collaborative and reflexive role of the researcher. Writers have called for researchers to indicate their own relationship to the study – their presence in the research and the influence of social background, for example gender, race, social class, or religion. However, there is a difficulty in assessing how much of the personal life of the researcher should be considered and entered in the text (Roberts, 2002, p.13).

Hammersley & Atkinson (1994) emphasize the value of the study of lives in psychology, anthropology and other social sciences. The intention of the author is to gain a deeper comprehension of individuals’ experiences within their socio-historical, cultural or educational contexts.

Since the main purpose of biographies and autobiographies is to illuminate and go deeper into individual and social contexts, education has recently used this narrative approach as a meaningful tool for personal development and reflective teaching. Thus the autobiography has become a pedagogical narrative genre. Bolivar (2002, p. 4) claims that narrating our own experiences, feelings and actions and reading them in a meaningful sense becomes a peculiar style of research. The same author emphasizes that structuring personal experiences through narrative is a way of highlighting the investigative nature of personal narratives. Furthermore, constructing meanings, patterns and trends from personal actions through observations, reflections, interviews, descriptions and analysis of autobiographical material is, of course, a research approach (Quintero & Munévar, 2007).

According to the authors previously mentioned, some essential elements concerning the pedagogical nature of biographical and autobiographical research can be listed as follows:

- Autobiography and a hermeneutic approach are closely linked concepts
- The person may tell his life story through a written text or by using a tape recorder
- The experience of the person’s life is very important
- Textual language is included as a source of validity
- A complete and deeper reconstruction of the life of the participant is available for the researcher
- New questions can be posed from the analysis of the autobiographies as well as making real inferences about the culture of a group
- Autobiography is a kind of case study that provides meaningful data and starting points for more extensive research
- The stories or personal accounts of daily life can be useful instruments to explain the actions and interactions of people in real contexts
- Social and educational events are understood as “texts” whose value and meaningful features are given by the self-interpretation that subjects offer in the first person.

## **2. Method**

This type of study takes characteristics from case studies, qualitative research and narrative research, as supported by authors such as Angrosino (1989), Stake (1995) and others already mentioned in the theoretical framework.

### *2.1 Participants*

The study included four female trainee teachers, aged between 20 and 22. They were enrolled in their last year of the Modern Languages Program at the University of Caldas. The criterion for choosing just four trainees

responds to the model of the teaching practicum at the university which assigns small groups of students to each adviser. A second reason for choosing this sample was because these four autobiographies were completed and contained relevant information, and finally because the writers agreed to be part of the process.

## 2.2 Procedure

Before beginning the teaching practicum at public and private institutions, the advisers gave the trainee teachers some instructions which contained the methodological criteria to be followed. The following questions were included so that the trainees could have a point of departure to begin writing their autobiography: Who am I? I am going to be a teacher, what does this mean? How did my father, mother, sisters, brothers or relatives encourage me to learn at school? How has life at school and university influenced my beliefs and practices concerning teaching, learning and schooling? Who has had a significant influence on “my life” as a future teacher? Which of the experiences I have had as a student would I replicate in my classes and which ones would I avoid?

The trainee teachers wrote down their autobiographies highlighting the most meaningful experiences they had had as students. To give more meaningful support to their writings, the advisers asked them to collect family photos, school souvenirs and cards with memories. Afterwards, they shared their writing with other partners and reflected on situations that had had an impact on their lives.

During the weekly advising sessions, the trainees developed exercises in which they chose situations that drew their attention and prepared a sketch to be acted out as a role play or represented through drawings. Taking this situation into account, the trainee teachers simulated some intervention points assuming that they were one of the characters and made suggestions to improve the troublesome situation. They also used expressions such as “*If I were that student I would do this... If I were that teacher, I would do...*” Finally, they drew their own conclusions about the importance of the autobiography as a way to recognize themselves as future teachers.

## 3. Results

Qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Goetz & Lecompte, 1988; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994) follows a process to generate categories that emerge from narrative data such as diaries, transcripts, interviews, autobiographies, testimonies, observations and surveys. Taking into account this process of analyzing information, both tutors and trainee teachers went over the autobiographies and began to reflect on the most relevant aspects found. Then, the trainees, with the help of the advisers, started to segment, categorize and codify the information. Next, they grouped the information by creating patterns and tendencies so that they could extract meaningful ideas. The information that emerged from these data allowed them to establish possible intervention points to improve the classroom performance they were about to begin. In this way, trainee teachers became reflective, confident and alert enough to propose changes that could benefit their educational practices.

The authors of this article selected four extracts written by trainee teachers to illustrate the process they followed when writing their autobiographies. This information was taken verbatim.

### Autobiography Number One (Note 1)

In the following narration the trainee teacher expresses her difficulties and achievements during her school and university years. She recognizes the strengths and weaknesses she had as a student and her perseverance in finishing her studies at the university. She also mentions how she realized that the modern languages career was what she wanted to study.

There was a young couple who lived in a small town in South America. One day they made the decision to join their lives. So, due to the customs of their time, they got married. The time passed and they decided to have a baby, someone who would give another sense to their existence. It was at this moment that I arrived in this world.

I was born in Bogotá, Colombia. Some months after my birth, my parents brought me here to Manizales. I remember my first day at school: I was four years old and I felt very nervous, I had many ideas in my mind, though I was happy. We arrived at a nursery school located at “Barrio Versalles”. When I saw all of those children I was shocked and I became shy and aggressive. Every day, the principal (a nun) told my parents that I was a menace for the children, and it was true. Three months later I was home again.

The next year, I began to study at a new primary school. There, things were very different. I had friends and I wasn't aggressive. Things were going well, so my parents decided for me to continue my education there. I remember I was good at Spanish and I liked stories very much. I was also a well-behaved girl.

In 1991, I started my life in secondary school. In sixth grade I was good at Spanish and I enjoyed English classes; however, I wasn't that good at Math or Science. In seventh grade I thought I wasn't going to pass the year because of Mathematics but I studied day and night. So, I finally succeeded. After that, in eighth grade I had a terrible surprise: I didn't pass the year and I didn't want to continue studying there, I couldn't stand the fact that my friends would be one step ahead of me. I made one of the most important decisions in my life: I decided to start studying in another school. This school was a little bit different because the students had behavioral problems and the discipline was terrible. I felt totally confused but at that moment the decision was made.

There, I was the best student and I had a lot of friends. When I was in eleventh grade I was chosen to represent the school in a spelling contest. It was going to take place in the morning, the time passed and all the students of the other schools were eliminated and suddenly I was the last one. I couldn't believe what was happening at that time, I was the winner, and I had to represent the department in the national contest. I traveled to Bogotá but I didn't win that time; however, it became a great experience in my life because I met people from all over the country, and I learned that if I wanted to get something I had to focus more and acquire self-confidence.

The year after, I entered the university. Everybody was surprised because I began to study Music. Maybe it wasn't the right choice because I had no ability with my hands for playing an instrument, though I loved music and I could recognize melodies and songs. I studied for one year and I decided not to continue, I knew I had to do something that I had ability for and I could love. I'm sure I made the right choice. I started in the field of Modern Languages in 1999. During that year I got pregnant but I kept studying. I had a beautiful girl called Sofia. I had to cancel my studies for one semester but now I'm here, Sofia is three years old and she means everything to me.

I'm full of expectations and I hope I can do everything in the right way. Honestly I'm a little nervous but happy to know that this is the last step in my career; something I love very much.

### **Autobiography Number Two (Note 2)**

This trainee teacher affirms that her grandfather became her first model and best teacher once her father died. She remembers her best teachers very well and recognizes how much they had an influence on her. She decided to study Modern Languages because her English teacher exerted a good influence on her. She also reveals a very positive attitude, and talks about the values she learned during her school years.

Different things matter to me at different times in my life. Studying in a school, overcoming a problem taking on a project, teaching many languages. I want to tell you about some experiences like these in my autobiography.

Mariela, a secretary that worked as a sales girl of beauty products, never thought that her life would change forever. The story began that morning when she attended a conference about "Personal Development" led by the psychologist Limberto de Jesús. Before finishing the conference Limberto talked to Mariela's father. When he saw her, he fell in love immediately. One year later they got married. After six months, they decided to have a girl that was born nine months later.

My name is Yelixa. I live with my mother, my father died in an airplane accident when I was three months old. I study Modern Languages at Caldas University.

I want to tell you some things about my life. I will begin by telling you about my grandfather, who was the most important person for my mother and the most significant for me. After my father died, my grandfather, Antonio, lived with us. He was the best teacher I had. From that moment he taught me to have hope and how to be brave.

I began my kindergarten at "La Asunción" school. There, I learned how to share with my partners and to believe in God. After that, I studied at "Eugenia Ravasco", an excellent school. I was very happy in this place, and I learned many things such as how to paint, to read, to write, etc. Several teachers worked with me, but Amanda was my favorite one because she played with us, she sang beautiful songs and she taught me how to multiply.

In high school I had good teachers such as Yolanda, who taught me Geography. This was my favorite subject. My memory for facts about climate, trade routes, principal products of various countries and other details was very good. I liked painting towns, boundaries, rivers and roads.

I graduated from “Eugenia Ravasco” high school. The following year I began to study Biology and Chemistry at Caldas University, but I didn’t like it; for this reason I didn’t finish that career. I didn’t know what to do, and then my mother registered me at the Meyer Institute where I met a professor called Ana María. I owe this girl my interest in being an English teacher. I love my profession and I enjoy my pedagogical classes. My life has changed greatly since I began studying at Caldas University.

I am lucky to have a lovely family, a lot of friends, the best teachers and an excellent education. I am fascinated with my profession because I have learned that a teacher not only teaches a subject or a language, a real teacher teaches about life.

### **Autobiography Number Three (Note 3)**

In this autobiography the trainee describes her school years from kindergarden to university. She argues that she really learned with strict and demanding teachers. She talks about the personality of the teachers and how their attitude had an influence on her learning process. She highlights the characteristics of an outstanding teacher. Finally, she describes how an unfair and insensitive teacher prevented her from learning.

My name is Luz Adriana. My mother’s name is Luz Stella and my father’s name is Luis Fernando. I have two sisters: Geny and Viviana.

My kindergarden was marvelous; the only thing that I did was laugh. When I was 6 years old, I studied with an excellent teacher. Her name was Magola and she used to be demanding and thanks to her I learnt a lot, in other words: it was a very good way to learn!

From 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to primary school I was in “Julio Zuluaga School”. There, my teacher was very understanding, I mean, I was a very bad student and the reason was that I had no friends. I really do not have very good memories of that place. There are many different kinds of teachers: different styles, sizes and colors, even different methodologies, but not only those characteristics represent an integral teacher.

My 5<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school was in a public institution. There were (especially) two teachers. One of them was Carlos, he was cute and sweet. He used to be very patient and at the same time very demanding. On the other hand, there was Bermar, he was like a monster. I lived there my worst experience as a student, because he used to ridicule me whenever he had the opportunity. I remember that I had to memorize “multiplication tables”. When I returned to the school, Bermar asked me for “multiplication tables” but I could not remember anything, he got angry and hit me on the head.

Thank God, the high school was different. My 6<sup>th</sup> grade was in “Instituto Chipre high school”. There I felt as if it was another world. I saw a lot of people and I liked it very much. The only thing that I really knew was that it was a big challenge, and it was. After 8th grade, I began to show disruptive behavior. I changed my high school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and at last I began to behave very well. This school was Instituto Villamaría. I graduated there.

I studied at Quindío University, but I wanted to explore other perspectives. Then I began studying Modern Languages at Caldas University. This is the greatest experience that I have ever had. In general, I can say that all the teachers I have had were well prepared. I am trying to keep the best characteristics of each of them, and I am trying to learn about those that are not really good too.

In spite of the fact that in kindergarden, in primary school, in high school, at the university and throughout our whole life we receive education, we cannot forget that the family, friends and in my case my husband have been very important for me, and thanks to their intervention in my life I am a beautiful person.

### **Autobiography Number Four (Note 4)**

In this autobiography, the trainee begins with a short poem in which she expresses sad feelings about her past experiences. Then, she narrates her academic life since she entered elementary school. She highlights the most important events during her school years, and focuses on her teachers’ humanistic behavior.

Today I begin to write a draft about  
one part of my life,  
one part of my school life.  
My sadness, happiness  
and lack of affection  
remain forever

reflected in these pages.

When I look back at my past  
as I write in my journal  
I try to bury my past  
because life goes on....

I was born in Manizales on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1977. I lived with my mother and two sisters. According to my mother I looked very much like my father who I never met. I did not go to nursery school or kindergarten because my mother was our teacher. She taught us the numbers, the vowels and the alphabet. She always allowed us to play with newspapers, pieces of fabric and recycled material. My mother painted one of the living room walls green, for us to learn how to write, so I learned how to write my name on this wall using a piece of chalk. When I was six, I started my studies at elementary school with my sister. We studied together in the same class, and she always helped me with my homework. I was a very active and talkative girl, sometimes nutty but I always got good grades in my classes.

My school had some excellent teachers, they helped us all the time; for example, they explained the topics using pictures, songs, the board, and gestures. Besides, they talked about the importance of values. However, there was a teacher that yelled at us all the time to maintain discipline. She was called "the monster" because she pushed the children to make them quiet.

In high school I learned drama, to play the guitar, and to make handicrafts. The school was big and comfortable. It had a church, a swimming pool, a theater and a library. The teachers were well qualified. Some of them were nuns, some classes were dynamic. I did not like history or chemistry class because the teachers smoked in class, and they smelled very bad.

I never forget one time when I did some homework for a classmate and she paid me for it. My teacher found out and scolded me. I realized I did wrong, but I felt annoyed when the teacher told me that my sister was better than I.

When I finished high school I started studying Bilingual Secretary, I was the best student and I received a medal; however, I could not do my practice because I was rejected for being pregnant. After my son was born, I began the university. I was not very sure about being a teacher; however, later on I realized that being a teacher implies a great commitment with humanity; moreover, this profession requires energy, creativity and patience; besides, it is possible to interact with many people and learn day by day.

The above extracts included in this study reveal several patterns and tendencies that come up when reading, sharing and analyzing the trainee teachers' writings. One can observe how teachers influence trainees' academic life; for instance, they can make them feel frustrated, provide them with unforgettable moments, help them adapt to the school, and give them reasons for rejecting a specific school, subject or teacher. Moreover, it is evident that there is a strong influence from the trainees' parents when the former choose which program to study in higher education. Other important tendencies that emerge from their writings are teaching models used by their previous teachers, different kinds of punishment, ways of praising students, and different types of interaction.

To summarize, the recurrent points most commonly observed in the autobiographies written by the trainees are: memories about events that happened during the early years of schooling, teachers' influence, and fears, personal and social characteristics of the teachers, discipline factors, affective factors, motivational factors, teachers' methodologies, family influence, classroom interaction and praise.

To give an overview of these recurrent points the following categories are provided with the corresponding testimonies:

#### **a) Memories throughout the years of schooling**

The trainee teachers express that aspects such as having a lot of friends, participating in school events and overcoming personal obstacles such as pregnancy were the greatest memories throughout their years of schooling. Although the trainees do not mention how their learning process was directly affected, they highlight the importance of values such as solidarity with their friends and good manners.

- I had friends and I wasn't aggressive.
- There I was the best student and I had a lot of friends.
- When I was in eleventh grade I was chosen to represent the school in a spelling contest.

- I was the winner, and I had to represent the department in the national contest.
- I got pregnant, but I kept studying ...having a child was not an obstacle in my academic life... My baby has been the best gift that God has given me.

#### **b) Teachers' positive influence**

It is evident that having demanding and understanding teachers exerted a positive influence on the trainees' learning process; moreover, they emphasize not only academic aspects such as being well prepared but personal qualities that a humanistic teacher should possess such as being patient and affectionate.

- I studied with an excellent teacher.
- In this school my teacher was very understanding.
- I can say that all the teachers at the university were very well prepared.
- Carlos was cute and sweet. He used to be very patient and at the same time very demanding.
- I am trying to keep the best characteristics of each of them.

#### **c) Teachers' negative influence and Fears**

In contrast to what was mentioned above, trainee teachers came across other types of teachers that stopped them from learning effectively. For instance, authoritarian and offensive behavior, such as threatening, ridiculing and insulting, affected their interest and motivation to learn and perform in class properly.

- Every day the principal told my parents that I was a menace to the children.
- The teacher used to ridicule me whenever he had the opportunity.
- When I could not remember the multiplication tables, he got angry and hit me on the head.
- I lived in this school my worst experience.
- In seventh grade I thought I wasn't going to pass the year because of mathematics.
- This school was a little bit different because the students had behavioral problems.
- The discipline was terrible.
- I am trying to learn about those teachers that are not really good either.

#### **d) Affective factors**

The trainee teachers highlight the importance of humanistic education; they see the nucleus of family, friends and teachers as a whole because each party has a certain kind of influence on their learning process. Again, affective factors play a very important role in their academic life.

- In kindergarten, in primary school, in high school, at the university and in life we receive education. My family, my friends and my husband, all of them are important for me, and thanks to their intervention, I am a beautiful person.
- I am fascinated with my profession because I have learned that a teacher not only teaches a subject or a language, a real teacher teaches about life.
- My parents are always with me, they support me in my decisions.
- I met a professor called Ana. I owe this girl my interest in being an English teacher. I love my profession and I enjoy my classes.

In addition, the autobiographies allowed the researchers to detect other tendencies that have affected the trainees' academic life, including the unwillingness to replicate teachers' behavior which could seem inappropriate; for instance, screaming and yelling was a common issue in the narratives. Trainee teachers also discovered institutional factors such as school regulations, organization, and relationships among school, family and community. The former tendencies require the implementation of different institutional strategies to improve the quality of education.

### **3. Discussion**

It is important to highlight that the autobiography is an excellent source for reflection about pedagogical processes. Trainee teachers agree that this exercise is both useful and provocative. This tool is a means through which educators gain insight into unexpected events that could happen in the classroom. Moreover, the autobiography permits trainees to relate classroom events, examine patterns and tendencies, and establish

intervention points as well as plans of action to avoid replicating unwanted experiences they lived throughout their academic life. Furthermore, this type of writing allows readers to gain an adequate portrait of the trainee teachers' family, school group, institution or culture.

As a pedagogical tool, trainee teachers feel stimulated to relate their previous learning experiences to the process they are just beginning as teachers. They share their worries, doubts, fears, successful ideas and teaching strategies with their peers to give mutual support. In other words, trainees learn to share, to listen to each other, to give and receive positive criticism, and to value other people's work. Thus, the autobiography is a tool that helps trainees to recognize who they are as teachers, the real meaning of the teaching profession, and what they want to achieve; in other words, they become aware of how their previous experiences have an effect upon what they can do in the classroom. Likewise, the autobiography, as a tool for reflection, allows trainee teachers to become aware that times change and education evolves; consequently, the strategies they used to learn during their school years will not necessarily be used by future generations. This tool also encourages them to write about their lives and emphasizes the most important and significant moments they experienced throughout their educational process. Through the autobiography, the trainees can express their personal feelings and emotions that influence them in their professional development.

Finally, the use of autobiographies can be a valuable contribution to both advisers and trainee teachers because it stimulates personal growth and transformative learning. Thus, fully placing a new generation of teachers within the biographical genre means recognizing that they all have stories to tell. Furthermore, the autobiography in pedagogical settings provides data to make trainee teachers aware of the positive or negative factors within education, classmates, family and community.

To conclude, as a narrative research genre, the autobiography is useful for collecting empirical data and interpreting what happens inside schools. It also becomes a fundamental part of educational processes and teacher training. Hence, creating autobiographies can not only help trainee teachers to reflect and reorder their lives, but can allow them to draw upon their own experiences, feelings and actions.

From the autobiographies created by trainee teachers of the B.A. in Modern Languages at the University of Caldas, some pedagogical implications emerged to improve their attitudes as future educators. The autobiographies are rich in content, emotions, meanings and feelings that can contribute to a better understanding of pedagogical knowledge.

It can be stated that the autobiography is a research support that accumulates empirical evidence of pedagogical training processes. Also, trainees feel that every narrated detail provides educational content, strengthens emotional aspects and allows a deeper look inside the classroom.

The autobiography can be recommended as a teaching resource because it improves writing skills, encourages self-reflection, and provides empirical evidence concerning learning processes. It is an excellent starting point to become familiar with the narrative approach as a branch of qualitative research paradigms.

To summarize, the authors of this article recommend writing autobiographies as a form of narrative inquiry because this practice opens a door to recover hidden treasures: the invaluable experiences of teachers and students. Consequently, other educators can use this research tool in their own context which can be replicated inside Colombian educational institutions. More specifically, the authors think that schools, high schools and higher education establishments should provide teachers with the opportunity to enjoy the experience of writing autobiographies.

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## Notes

Note 1. By María del Pilar Gutiérrez. She was a seventh-semester trainee teacher from the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program. University of Caldas. Taken with the author's permission.

Note 2. By Yelixa del Valle. She was a seventh-semester trainee teacher from the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program. University of Caldas. Taken with the author's permission.

Note 3. By Luz Adriana Cardona Sánchez. She was a seventh-semester trainee teacher in the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program. University of Caldas. Taken with the author's permission.

Note 4. By Aracelly Mahecha Buriticá. She was a seventh-semester trainee teacher in the Modern Languages Licenciatura Program. University of Caldas. Taken with the author's permission.

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