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Greek Myths to Co-Build Teacher Identity: Perceptions of Students in the Master of Education Research

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to promote the use of metaphorical stories based on classical Greek myths in academic teacher training. The aim is to favour processes of personal assemblage and the constitution of teacher identity. Based on 8 classical myths, 4 of them featuring a female character and another 4 a male character, the group of participants narrated positive as well as disappointing experiences they had lived through during their academic training. Moreover, they selected the myths, among those proposed, that provided the metaphors that best described their specific personal trajectories. Adopting a qualitative approach, we followed a narrative-biographical tradition and collected 37 stories. This narrative corpus was analysed using the AQUAD software. The results showed that classical Greek myths contain and provide a powerful and illuminating narrative scaffolding, helping students to adopt a different perspective in the narration of their own academic trajectories. The myths equally helped them to become more aware of the most genuine life and personal experiences that shaped their own teacher identity.

Keywords: *Higher education, myths, qualitative research, teacher identity.*

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Introduction

After having fruitfully explored how classical Greek myths contributed to the construction of teachers' identities during their training (Giner et al., 2018), we re-map here this domain (Canales et al., 2019) using new mythical narratives. This time, stories were diversified according to the sex of the main characters. The intention was thus to sail, based on a humanist legacy, towards what, in our view, are more peaceful (Bruner, 1997), ethical (Nussbaum, 2005, 2015), sustainable (Harari, 2018), just (Stiglitz, 2012; Vanassche et al., 2019) co-educational (Agamben, 2009) and caring (Mingyur, 2019) horizons.

The course we are setting is a reconnection with ancestral cultural knowledge. Indeed, we are convinced of the absolute contemporaneity of this heritage and that it helps us to become aware of another reality by making us question our perceptions – which are usually naturalised through a hegemonic positivist rationality (Hellinger, 2010). Such cultural knowledge allows us to put a name on unknown spaces which, like true places, are not yet on any map (Melville, 2001).

In this way, we explored how Greek myths could be used as metaphors (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) to help students confront real situations they live through (Zellermayer & Tabak, 2006). The idea was that they format their own experience using the structure of these mythological narratives to reconstruct their own pre-service teacher identity (Ruys et al., 2014).

The contemporaneity of classical Greek myths

We focused on these classical stories because, as advanced by Heidegger (2006) and Gadamer (1997), far from connoting a weak conception of knowledge, in a dual opposition to the logos identified as a strong knowledge, Greek mythology has

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a deep contemporary potential for both personal and professional development. Indeed, myths powerfully echo the experiences of those who listen to them, triggering an immediate intuition that such a past still lives in us.

The humanist legacy, nested in classical myth, continues to provide us with an immeasurable wealth of resources that can be translated into specific professional fields. In the same way, this legacy can significantly contribute to the human psyche (Harris-McCoy, 2017; Soumaki & Anagnostopoulos, 2010) by exercising the role of companion, problem-identifier and generator of ideal conditions for an intrapsychic dialogue. And it does so by mobilising creative thinking, which in turn leads to reshaping and transforming the personal narratives of those who read or listen to them.

Myths thus have an interesting particularity: their polyseme nature and infinite capacity for reinterpretation, which helps to shed light on those unconscious elements with which we can reconstruct and justify an alternative perception of our conscious identity (Eliade, 2000; Lévi-Strauss, 2002, 2006; Ricoeur, 2013).

Metaphorical narratives and teacher identity

The approach and understanding of teacher identity through narrative-biographical research has engendered, since the 1990s (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Hargreaves, 1996; McEwan & Egan, 1998) to the present (Bolkan et al., 2019; Madrid & Mayorga, 2015; Niemi, 2018) a solid and productive research path towards that Holy Grail: understanding the beliefs underlying teaching performance (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Errázuriz-Cruz, 2020; Pérez-Cabrera & Llanes-Ordoñez, 2020).

Such perceptions are often implicit, automated, naturalised and impoverished, constricted within the neoliberal parameters (Riestra, 1999; Rivas et al., 2017) and limitations affecting the development of a more conscious and emancipatory professional practice (Contreras, 2016; Korthagen et al., 2014; Korthagen, 2016; Martin et al., 2018; Solari & Rasskin, 2014).

By incorporating a metaphorical figure in the narrative text, it is possible to break into a teacher's experiential knowledge through an efficient and highly creative alternative path. The method allows to continue to capture these interesting perceptions and subjective theorisations – which are usually difficult to reflect in a descriptive model of a rational argumentative-technical nature (Anspal et al., 2012; Leavy et al., 2007; Mahlios et al., 2010; Martínez et al., 2001; Zhang & Yuan, 2019). In this sense, our approach resembles using an infrared camera to discern "narrative frequencies" that are not visible through a conventional lens.

We have thus configured new teaching topographies, following post-qualitative perspectives (Hernández-Hernández, 2019), open to reflective and creative writing possibilities (Vagle, 2009). The latter, based on a metaphorical approach (Martin et al., 2018; Quinlan, 2019), provide us with dimensions that are not only conceptual in nature but also sensory. They help us to form experiential gestalts with which to access other universes and realities that are not ordinary or usual (Lakoff & Johnson, 1991; Zhao et al., 2010).

This path to self-knowledge may also encompass the therapeutic nature of metaphorical narrative in a quest to define enjoyment, pain, love or hopelessness. In doing so, one looks for meaning in one's own academic experience or for an intrinsic motivation to complete a personal mission, a sort of experiential purpose reflected in a narrative involvement which precedes the action (Hamby et al., 2019; Payne, 2002).

Another remarkable aspect of professional narratives makes them especially relevant for the empowering of teacher identities under construction: the pre-service teacher's resilient capacity induced by the narrative itself (Granados et al., 2017).

In this sense, the adversity that is experienced (Cyrułnik, 2001) seems to sometimes force a metamorphosis, to transform difficulties into taxing tests or challenges. This avoids an anchoring into a painful past and, via the story, negotiates, superimposes and strengthens the subject through symbolism (Montesano, 2013).

This perspective suggests that the story constructed by teachers who have entered a "dialogue" with the mythical plots can make their own identity more visible by observing themselves as unfinished beings permanently under construction, relativising adversity in the process (Rodríguez, 2003).

In short, this narrative-biographical research framework suggests promoting metaphorical stories in teacher training as a way of empowering the vital process itself. Indeed, narrative force can be used to transform and remake "the wounded life" (Carreño et al., 2016; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994;), favouring, in this way, a conscious verbal construction that helps trainee teachers to integrate archetypal and personal aspects in a meaningful and rewarding way. Teachers thus get closer to their creative centre, to the processes of individuation and civic construction (Arraiz et al., 2016) as well as self-transformation, driving themselves along their own paths.

Synergistically, and to the extent that these narratives are linked to a professional learning community (Gergen, 2009; Tarragona, 2013) – since they also unfold within a curricular and cooperative academic process – they perceive how an intense social negotiation unfolds after having searched for the meaning of their experience.

Following this theoretical-practical road map, we sought to encounter knowledge that facilitates knowledge-making (Novoa, 2019), and we analysed the narratives provided by the group of participants based on the following research questions:

1. Among the proposed classical myths, which one reflected the encouraging situations they experienced during their studies? How did they explain their choice?
2. Among the proposed classical myths, which one reflected the discouraging situations they experienced during their studies? How did they explain their choice?
3. Which classical Greek myth did they select to metaphorically describe their academic training trajectory? How did they justify their choice?
4. What arguments did they put forward in support of the potential usefulness of this narrative academic curricular experience?

Methodology

Research Design

This work was based on a qualitative research approach, and particularly on the biographical-narrative tradition (Leeferink et al., 2019; Li & Craig, 2019). Participants were asked to describe their academic training experiences using one of the eight Greek mythical stories proposed to this end: Sisyphus, Arachne, Procrustes, Ariadne, Heracles, Pandora, Pygmalion and Penelope. In order to establish a balance between the mythical characters based on sex, the central narrative character was a female figure in four of them and a male character in the other four.

Sample and Data Collection

The theoretical corpus was composed of the stories of 37 students enrolled in the Master of Educational Research during the academic year 2019/20 at the Faculty of Education of the University of Alicante. In this cohort, 83.8% of students self-identified as female and 16.2% as male. Regarding age, 27% were aged between 26 and 30 years and 64% between 21 and 25 years. The undergraduate degrees they were enrolled in were Primary and Early Childhood Education studies (88%). A minority came from Physical Education and Social Work degrees (12%). The sample, therefore, was intentional and was not directed towards generalisation, although the results could undeniably be compared with studies designed following a qualitative approach. The narratives were collected through a Google Drive form based on a semi-structured interview format (Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Kvale, 2011). The voluntary nature of the participation, anonymity and mandatory confidentiality were guaranteed and the objective was to interpret subjective theorisations (Dwyer & Emerald, 2017; Ngozwana, 2018).

Analyzing of Data

The obtained narratives, identified by an alpha-numerical code, were processed and analysed by the research team using the AQUAD computer application (Huber & Gürtler, 2021). The tool facilitated the reduction and translation of the dense stories into a code map, which was validated and triangulated by three experts in the field of Education, thus gaining interobserver reliability. Each research question provided the basis for the data analysis. Following the common thread of the four axial research questions, four themes consistent with the initial questions arose. The emerging categories were concretized in different codes and the research team carried out his shared analysis through the reiteration of the interpretive process bringing out deep meanings.

Results

Question 1. Among the proposed classical myths, which one reflects the encouraging situations you have experienced during your studies? Can you explain your choice?

The encouraging situations experienced during their studies were described by both the women and men enrolled in the Master's research degree with the myths of Ariadne, Pygmalion and Penelope. The myths helped them to recognise the importance of narrating their successful experiences in the three situations described next. The first referred to the student/teacher *interpersonal relationship* via their encounters with these guide-figures:

While I was advancing in my studies, some professors noticed my fairly eclectic and creative facet. They encouraged me by giving me reasons to pursue my education and my journey. All those abstract terms of strength, encouragement and hope came to life, as in Pygmalion, and so I continued my training to this day. (Part.015)

Another relevant component for the participants was the successful and enriching **training experiences** both in the Practicum and the degree's Final Project. They gave them an additional feeling of professional competence by providing a real experience of school teaching:

I would choose the myth of Ariadne to describe my learning process during my internship in a kindergarten classroom, (...) the teacher of the class helped me and guided me as if I were Ariadne with an imaginary ball of wool. It helped me to move forward and strengthen my vocation. (Part. 016)

Similarly, special relevance was given to the *intrapersonal relationship*, i.e., individual introspection and confidence in one's own worth and ability:

But because of my persistence, efforts, (...) and the belief that I would succeed, I can now undertake this exercise. And I'm just as happy as Penelope. (Part. 009)

The participants did not always select the mythical stories for the same reasons. In this sense, the three motivations found were linked to three internal forces depicted in the myths that students recognised and made their own: meetings with guiding figures on their learning paths, represented by the myth of Ariadne; the strength to persevere or determination in the face of adversity, exemplified by the figure of Penelope; and the valuable recognition of an interior life, in the myth of Pygmalion, that helps them to perceive how life can be given to something that is inert. This leads them to becoming reborn, to valuing themselves, and to caring for their internal life, understood as their own inexhaustible source and recourse.

Question 2. Among the proposed classical myths, which one reflects the discouraging situations you have experienced during your studies? Can you explain your choice?

The discouraging situations were intensely described by both the women and men participating in the Master's research degree making use of the myths of Sisyphus and Procrustes and to a lesser extent, those of Arachne and Pandora. These unfortunate situations referred to cases where teachers limited participants' initiatives and demotivated them:

The discouraging situations that I have experienced throughout my studies have mainly been cases in which teachers do not use the available resources and do not empathise with their students. They simply come and make their speech, fail to address the students' needs and want to do everything in their own way. That's why I use a comparison with the myth of Procrustes. (Part. 003)

On other occasions, they described their own insecurities and loss of self-confidence:

We need to become aware of how impatient we are sometimes, how we are ruled by impatience, doing tasks quickly, without dedicating the time and concentration they require. This contributes to building these negative habits. (Part. 012)

And, finally, in the subjects or "hard" knowledge they perceive as difficult to understand:

(...) I was in the middle of the degree and was studying a compulsory subject. The other students' usual comments on the subject were only negative: it was difficult, complex, with a dense content and the teacher showed little empathy towards students; this made me lose my motivation and interest in studying it. (Part. 011)

Regarding the question of what motivated their choice of myth, students had at their disposal at least three "dark" forces with which to activate and fortify their stories: continuous effort and confrontation in the face of adversity in the myth of Sisyphus; the rigidities and corseting of situations and people who "subdue" them, with the myth of Procrustes; and finally, their own inner demons, insecurity and impatience, with the myth of Pandora.

Question 3. Which classical Greek account would you choose to describe your academic training trajectory and how would you justify this choice?

Two issues stood out: the first was that the myths selected for both men and women created a balance between stories driven by masculinity and femininity. In the case of women, they frequently used the story of Sisyphus:

As the protagonist of this myth, I sometimes noticed how I was climbing up a hill, carrying heavy loads, such as family burdens, financial problems, jobs, studies, and those motivational phrases that people say to help you to keep going. And when I reached the top, everything would fade, and the stone would fall down the hill again and I would go with it. (Part. 004)

But also Penelope's story:

Any individual's educational and academic trajectory is a long-distance race, like Penelope's wait for her husband. Yes, there were moments of weakness, but she remained strong in the face of it all. (Part. 019)

In the case of men, the situation was similar. They used interchangeably stories in which women were protagonists or the story of a male myth such as Hercules:

My educational trajectory is the following: Primary School, Secondary School, IT vocational training, a Teaching Degree and a specialisation in therapeutic pedagogy, emulating Heracles as he overcomes a series of challenges, but without the penance aspect. I change that for my "own will". (Part. 030)

Or Penelope's:

Beginning with Penelope's myth, I would describe my university experience as a period of absence. I dedicated myself to weaving looms of knowledge as I was waiting. Then I found my true vocation and it brought me back again to that thirst for knowledge. (Part. 001)

Thus, we observe that for both types of participants, the choice of myth did not stem from the sex of the protagonist, but rather from the powers, values or crucial issues that were resolved. Both types of participants showed how their two guiding vectors were the strength or energy to continue and the patience and perseverance required not to falter.

Consequently, when asked what motivated them to select these metaphorical stories, they mostly described the importance of a "confident" wait, patience, but also, effort, allowing them to follow a path that would lead them to that place in the world they were yearning for.

Question 4. What arguments would you put forward in support of the potential usefulness of this narrative academic curricular experience?

We distinguished two types of argumentations: emotional ones and pragmatic rationales. The reasons that initially emerged were emotional manifestations regarding the experience's novelty, interest or inspiration:

I found it useful and fun (...) It's a way of acquiring a third-person vision of experiences that happen to us in the first place. It's a nice way to reflect on how to face future challenges. (Part.019)

Alternating with these descriptions, they added pragmatic reasonings leading to positive assessments of the experience; for example, it allowed them to recall their own trajectory and to reconstruct it differently:

I found that it was an interesting experience because I even remembered some things that happened in my past to which I had not attached much importance. An interesting reflection that leaves a great taste in my mouth. (Part.002)

The reconstruction promoted self-analysis and introspection because it was told in the third person. It allowed them to identify with the mythical characters who had faced and experienced what they had gone through in some way. It was perceived as similar to what they were facing now, and it enabled them to externalise their own experience.

Finally, they described how a story of themselves emerged, one that empowered them by integrating the past, present and future:

I think that these types of experiences are really useful because in a literary and almost magical way, they invite you to reflect on your own life, the life you have already had and the life you are going to have, the decisions you made, the journeys you have undertaken and those you have left behind, the reasons for them ... (Part. 013)

Discussion

The results showed the importance of interpersonal, real and face-to-face relationships between teachers and students for the participants. Today, more than ever, as virtual teaching seems to gain ever more prominence, it is necessary to remember this powerful educational relationship. Such links are prevalent in genuine educational experiences and they enable students to connect to the knowledge that is mediated by the teacher-guide figure (Korthagen et al., 2014).

Moreover, the externalised contexts, such as the internships carried out confirm that powerful learning takes place, as shown in the works of Solari and Rasskin, (2014) and Contreras (2016). Lastly, in the third situation, that is, in the intrapersonal dimension, it appears that a sort of individual introspection begins to form in the participants and it is reflected in their narratives. The introspection makes them aware of the complexity that comes with the building of their teacher identity, but it also helps them to describe and make visible what is unexpressed in them and that by sharing it with the group (Wenger, 2002) they manage to find new meanings (Ching-Leung et al., 2019), senses and metaphors (Erden, 2016; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019) for their academic career, reinforcing their sense of identity independence. Consequently, it leads them towards a permanent state of exploration (Arraiz et al., 2016), one that, within the psychological perspective of narrative therapy (Granados et al., 2017), has been highlighted as a valuable internal flourishing, necessary to establish a human completeness.

Finally, we wish to emphasize in this respect that it did not matter to the participants whether the myth protagonist was a man or a woman – in this case, the selected myths were Ariadne, Pygmalion and Penelope. It was rather the human "wounds" or "strengths" addressed in these stories that opened a dialogue, encouraging them to make their own wounds or strengths explicit.

In relation to the discouraging situations, they encountered during their studies, we first observed that the situations described were the direct opposite of those previously identified as encouraging. That is, their enriching relationships with guide figures were counterbalanced by limiting and constricting experiences with certain teachers. Thus, struggles and ongoing discouragement against adversity emerged versus the strength of perseverance reflected in the work of Pérez-Cabrera and Llanes-Ordoñez (2020). Discouragement in the face of institutional rigidities and the confrontation of their own internal demons – which also shook their own self-esteem – was also visible.

Nevertheless, we began to perceive two recurring aspects. The first was the fact that neither male nor female participants minded using the same myths, Sisyphus, Procrustes, Arachne and Pandora to describe the unfortunate situations they had experienced. This showed, once again, that myths were not selected according to the gender of the myth's leading character, but to the symbolic – though real – plot through which the character survived, in which the participants found a familiar and authentic echo.

We believe that the true power of myths is revealed here: a myth is a universal and timeless narrative. It manifests its creative and co-building potential by providing an alternative way of recounting the participant's tense and academic life (Harris-McCoy, 2017; Soumaki & Anagnostopoulos, 2010). In addition, we cannot overlook but we can oppose a logos that has been erected as the only standard of a powerful and hegemonic thought (Gadamer, 1997; Heidegger, 2006).

Second, it is notable that although the stories themselves recount “shipwrecks and stranding”, their mythical narrative construction allowed participants to externalise their personal stranding. It helped them to evolve as they identified their own wounds and limitations, thus encountering a new starting point for their own alternative narrative of power. They found, this way, a necessary ground to pursue their own personal identity building (Carreño et al., 2016; Cyrulnik, 2001).

With regard to the stories that were interpreted and selected by our participants, a same myth was shared, that of Penelope, and a second differed according to the participants; women opted for Sisyphus and men for Hercules, highlighting the fact that they balanced their choices with male and female myths.

Thus, a recurring aspect was that these choices transmitted the timelessness of myths. Indeed, what they encountered was a story that symbolically touched their own emotional and daily life, reflected in their professional tasks (Fernández-Cano et al., 2012; March, 2008; Ruys et al., 2014).

In the case of women, their choice was motivated by the power of perseverance present in the story of a resilient Sisyphus and the energy shown by a patient Penelope; among the male participants, we observed the motivation of strength and potency found in a vigorous Hercules and a hopeful Penelope to create metaphors of their academic stranding.

A second repeated feature worth noting was the interesting “closures” of their narratives. They usually ended their own life stories with a narrative of the future focused on personal improvement that empowered them by shedding a feeling of helplessness and opening up towards a new symbolic and alternative narrative matrix (Botella & Vall, 2019; Gergen & McNamee, 1992; Patrão et al., 2017).

In this sense, and in tune with what Gonçalves describes (2000), we perceived a new story that deconstructed a previous discourse, which was saturated and, on many occasions, pathologized. Thus emerged a new narrative of success and feeling that empowered the participants as active agents and authors.

The participants all made use of two types of rationales: first, the story had a conspicuous emotional layer and was described as novel, funny and powerfully inspiring, which co-created meaning and a sense of identity in tune with Rodríguez (2003), Martin et al. (2018) or Quinlan, (2019). Bruner (1997) considered this narrative perspective as a key ability to re-narrate or re-authorise links to a complex and integrative state of teacher well-being.

The next was a pragmatic line of argument in which they pointed out three possible mechanisms for transforming their own pre-service teacher identities. The first referred to a temporal review of their trajectory in which they critically questioned the previous narrative format (Rivas et al., 2017). The second was a necessary reflective introspection in which they externalised their own history and which, as they distanced themselves from it, made them aware of their own life and academic evolution (Duarte & Moreira, 2018; Dwyer & Emerald, 2017; Zhang & Yuan, 2019). Finally, they pointed out the importance of integrating the various aspects experienced in the past into a resilient approach conveyed in the mythical story and that resonated with them (Boldrini et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2019).

Finally, we must not overlook the immediacy and speed with which the mythical stories were captured and used by the participants to re-narrate their own personal experience within their academic journey (Campbell, 2012, 2014).

Conclusion

The curricular experience described in this work leads us to suggest, first, that classical Greek myths continue to reveal the forces that rule our own lives today. In a way, this classic humanist past helped the study participants to interpret what is still unconsciously alive in us today.

The study revealed how mythological characters still describe the present and help us to express and build meaning in our lives: they return us to the infinite and unfathomable possibilities, the ambiguous and unforeseen ways, the powerful and beautiful, dark and luminous manner in which we can tell our stories by adopting new perceptions.

During this research experience, we felt at all times that myths allowed participants to find not only words, but also plots and intrigues with which to weave their own life trajectories. They provided them with a certain understanding of their quest for a place in the world, inviting them to engage in their current personal flourishing both in practical and existential terms.

Moreover, the participants' personal reconstructed narratives based on these metaphorical structures appeared to be true stories of power that allowed them to advance in their individuation. It helped them to reconstruct themselves, crossing that bridge which connects a humanistic and philosophical worldview to a liquefied postmodernity. The study, nevertheless, presented some limitations. First, the data collection instrument was limited to semi-structured interviews. It would thus be of interest in future studies to use other techniques such as observation or discussion groups. Secondly, this study could be conducted with other, more experienced teacher collectives, which would add relevance to the components used to investigate teachers' professional development. The latter would allow confirming the results presented in this study in other contexts.

In short, the myths selected by the participants gave form to their academic trajectories. Their experiences reflected a recurring topic, that of resilience and surpassing. Therefore, they provided empowering alternative narratives with which to potentially overcome adversity and attain, if not some success, at least a better understanding of life and well-being. The experience described in this study convinced us that it would ultimately be a deplorable loss to overlook the humanist legacy of myths. Myths still provide answers. Even in this twenty-first century.

Recommendations

In our research work we maintain that a way to increase ethical and conceptual awareness, sensitive to current problems, that empower our students in action and reflection towards a more equitable world, is the use of the narratives that mythology offers us. Greek. It is a metaphorical resource that facilitates building bridges to a vital reality, saturated with the basic drives of the human being and made visible in the teaching profession. Becoming aware of the inner forces of teaching thought and behavior is a good starting point to gain coherence and professional freedom. We suggest, therefore, the use of Greek myths as a resource for identity reconstruction in the professional development of teachers and also in other disciplinary or professional contexts.

Limitations

Throughout this study we have detected some limitations such as, for example, the experiences of students in their academic history. The participants are teachers who are doing the Research Master. It would be advisable to inquire into the experiences of expert researchers. Likewise, the context in which the research is carried out refers to the field of Education, therefore, it could be investigated in other training contexts that allow investigating the construction of professional identity. The aforementioned limitations open up new lines of research.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Giner: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, admin, technical or material support, supervision, final approval. Iglesias: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, admin, technical or material support, supervision, final approval. Lozano: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, technical or material support, supervision, final approval. Brenes: Data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, technical or material support, final approval.

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