"Beyond a Thesis": A Duo-Narrative Inquiry into Possible Selves of Generation-Z EFL Teachers in Graduate Education

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Abstract: Teacher-researcher identity is commonly conceptualized as one of the central components of teachers' professional identity. Such identity development is not only configured toward the past and present but also oriented toward the future. This retrospective duo-narrative inquiry aimed to portray such orientation by exploring the possible selves envisioned by two female Gen-Z EFL teachers upon the completion of their Master's graduation theses in the Mekong Delta region. Informed by Possible Selves Theory, this study drew upon qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with two primary participants and two outsiders for data triangulation. Subsequently, data were analyzed utilizing thematic analysis for each case, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify convergences and divergences in their lived experiences. Findings revealed that participants reconstructed their teacher-researcher identity through three dimensions of possible selves, including the hoped-for, the ought-to-be, and the feared. They envisioned their identity as personally developed, institutionally grounded, yet potentially at risk of being contextually dissolved. The study was pedagogically significant for maintaining teachers' motivation in the teaching profession through an envisioned sense of possible selves. Pedagogical implications were offered to inform Master's students, teacher education programs, and tertiary institutions in Vietnamese contexts and beyond.

Keywords: EFL, Generation-Z, Graduate Education, Master's Thesis, Possible Selves Theory.

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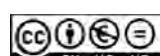
Introduction

Professional identity is conceived as a cornerstone of teachers' continuing professional development (henceforth abbreviated as CPD) (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As Hsieh (2010) asserted, the lived experiences of teachers continuously shape, reshape, define, and redefine how they construct and negotiate their identities in the professional sphere. Among the various dimensions of teacher identity, teacher-researcher identity is particularly salient, denoting how they perceive themselves as teacher-researchers and how they are recognized as professionals in the field (Leuverink & Aarts, 2018). For the last decades, this identity has been commonly believed to be exclusively constructed by tertiary lecturer-researchers. However, it is critical to note that this identity transcends higher education, encompassing school-based teachers who integrate rigorous research practices and evidence-based methodologies into their teaching routines to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Phan et al., 2025; Prabandari et al., 2024). Çakmak and Çelik (2024) further evaluated whether situated in tertiary or school-based institutions, and public or private settings, teachers aspire to participate in systematic inquiries, nurturing educational reforms through their research-based practices.

Globally, the concept of teacher-researcher identity construction has ubiquitously garnered considerable attention (Bao et al., 2024; Burns, 2016; Lu, 2024). In Vietnam, this concept has significantly influenced the CPD activities of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers (Nguyen et al., 2020). While extensive research has documented the teacher-researcher identity development and contextual influences on such development among tertiary lecturers (Ngo et al., 2022; Ngo & Trinh, 2025), limited attention has been paid to how this concept is dramatically negotiated, particularly temporally configured toward the future, among other teacher groups. This study, therefore, aims to address this knowledge gap by illuminating the "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) oriented by Vietnamese Generation-Z (henceforth called Gen-Z) EFL teachers upon completing Master's graduation theses in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The relevance of this study within the Vietnamese context is profound, particularly in light of the nation's ongoing efforts to elevate the quality of English language education. As expectations for teachers to assume a dual role as both teachers and teacher-researchers continue to rise, engaging in research, especially through Master's theses, provides teachers with the critical platforms to reflect on their teaching practices and envision their future professional practices, thereby aligning them with evolving policy demands for educational innovation and quality improvement.

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Literature Review

Teacher-Researcher Identity Development

The concept of identity has no universally agreed-upon conceptualization (Beijaard et al., 2000). Furthermore, it is challenging to conceptualize this construct because of its dynamism, complexity, multiplicity, and discontinuity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Borg, 2009). Fundamentally, it refers to the people's overall self-image and understanding that they enact their perspectives concerning who they are and what roles they assume within a social and cultural setting (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). This indicates that in different professions or fields, this construct is differently defined or continuously redefined depending upon each individual's worldviews. In education, identity is commonly referred to teachers' professional identity, referring to "a certain kind of person " (Gee, 2001, p. 99), "someone who teaches" (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 315), and how each teacher constructs her or his beliefs on what it means to be a teacher in situated communities (Yuan & Burns, 2017). As Kelchtermans (1993) asserted, teachers' identity entails "a system of knowledge and beliefs concerning "teaching" as a professional activity" (p. 447). As a result, it is more likely to be "formed within, but then also out of, the narratives and stories that form the "fabric" of teachers' lives" (Mockler, 2011, p. 519). Critically, Phan et al. (2025) reevaluated teachers' identity as entailing how teachers regard themselves as change agents who are "critical and innovative in their institution and inform pedagogical implications to other teachers" (p. 1783) of other institutions alongside exclusively being knowledge providers and transmitters (Lu & Zhang, 2024; Yadollahpour & Tajeddin, 2025).

In relation to the classification of teachers' professional identities in CPD, teacher-researcher identity is listed as one of the most critical selves (Nana & Jing, 2017; Yu, 2022). This identity is defined as the extent to which teachers regard themselves as teacher-researchers and those who are committed to a specific research paradigm (Lu & Yoon, 2024). With the purpose of "holistic academic" (McKinley, 2022, p. 7) in education, each teacher is professionally expected to incorporate research into their academic practices and be capable of not only "educating the future workforce" but also "generating knowledge" (Shams, 2019, p. 621). In recent decades, such identity has been extended beyond the population of tertiary lecturers to include all other teacher groups, irrespective of teaching roles and institutions (Nguyen & Hall, 2017). This movement is expected to facilitate teachers to be change agents, ultimately contributing to the development of the entire educational system of a nation. In the field of TEFL, the existing body of literature has pinpointed the interconnections between teaching and research, both of which collectively enhance learners' learning experiences and

academic performances and teachers' pedagogical enhancements and professional prestige (Taylor, 2017). As EFL teachers conduct research and self-reflect on their research-related experiences, they possibly construct, reconstruct, deconstruct, negotiate, or even dissolve their teacher-researcher identity (Ren & Pan, 2025; Vandamme, 2017; Weise et al., 2020; Wu, 2022). In the current study, teacher-researcher identity is locally conceptualized as an element of the professional identity of Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers who completed a Master's graduation thesis in a localized context of the Mekong Delta region.

Interestingly, teacher-researcher identity is not only temporally configured toward the past and the present but also oriented to the future. Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) introduced the concept of "reflection-for-action" (p. 1936) along with reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) in teachers' professional learning. This kind of reflection is in relation to what and how teachers plan to act professionally after self-reflecting on academic practices. Specifically, upon thoughtful self-reflection on the past and present, teachers envision themselves "with a view toward the future: to imagine the kind of teacher they want to become, and to use their formative years as a means to project a designated sense of self as a teacher" (Urzúa & Vásquez, 2008, p. 1944). Arguably, EFL teachers' teacher-researcher identity development is an ongoing process of intellectualization and possible reconstruction of the sense of professional selves, which are configured in three components (i.e., past, present, and future) (see Figure 1), wherein envisioned selves guide the current professional decisions.
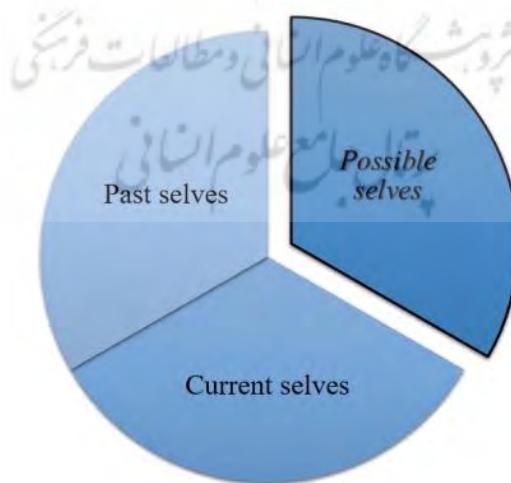

Figure 1. Three Core Selves in Teachers' Professional Identity

International research has offered critical insights into how EFL teachers develop their teacher-researcher identity in diverse educational settings. In Finland, Kaasila et al. (2021) examined the shift in teacher-researcher identity through participation in research-oriented training, noting how initial doubts evolved into a more harmonious integration of teaching and research. Bao et al. (2024) tracked the identity development of Chinese Ph.D. candidates, identifying four distinct identity trajectories and stressing the increasing link between critical inquiries and CPD. Lu (2024) used autobiographical narrative inquiry to document her personal and professional journey from a novice struggling with her identity to a resilient teacher-researcher. Her research shed light on the vital role of self-reflection and emotional resilience in navigating this process. Likewise, Mason et al. (2024) illustrated how an EFL lecturer's identity as a researcher was influenced by lived experiences, with mindfulness serving as a contributor in maintaining emotional well-being. In Vietnam, Le and Pham (2024) conducted an auto-ethnographic study of a university lecturer attempting to balance his academic responsibilities with his role as a cultural mediator. Their study highlighted the emotional struggles that arose from aligning institutional expectations with personal values, revealing vulnerabilities and a sense of pride in the journey of CPD.

Although the existing body of literature has substantially examined EFL teachers' teacher-researcher identity development, a significant knowledge gap in understanding this identity, particularly oriented toward the future and constructed by Gen-Z EFL teachers, is noticed. Gen-Z, those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, represents a population affected by rapid technological advancements, globalized communication, and shifting socio-cultural landscapes (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018). Members of this generation demonstrate high levels of value-driven engagement and a strong aspiration for authenticity and critical contribution in professional domains. In the field of education, Gen-Z teachers bring unique dispositions toward learning, teaching, and knowledge construction, further seeking autonomy, emotional fulfillment, and alignment between personal values and institutional practices (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). By studying this specific population within the under-researched context of Vietnam's Mekong Delta, the study captures how localized conditions interact with generational traits to nurture their negotiations of teacher-researcher identity. This study, therefore, is academically significant as it illuminates how teacher-researcher identity is imagined, contested, and emotionally invested in by a new generation of language teachers navigating possible selves at the intersection of thesis conducting and professional emergence.

ELT Graduate Education in Vietnam

Graduate education in Vietnam has witnessed significant growth over the last decades, thereby reflecting the country's commitment to professionalizing its workforce and enhancing academic competencies in alignment with international integration and globalization (Nguyen et al., 2020). Initially modeled after the French educational system, Vietnam's graduate programs shifted to a Soviet-inspired structure starting in the 1960s in the North and after 1976 in the South (Kelly, 2000). However, under the increasing influences of Western academic and socio-economic models, Vietnam transitioned to a competency-based graduate education system. Master's programs have incorporated a blend of research- and practice-based orientations. These programs generally last for two years, combining formal coursework with the completion of a graduation thesis that must be formally defended before an evaluation committee of teacher educators (Kelly, 2000).

Among various graduate programs, those concentrated on English Language Teaching (henceforth abbreviated as ELT) are conceived among the most important priorities for preparing EFL teachers to meet national and international academic standards. Launched by leading teacher education institutions, these programs are expected to equip students with a comprehensive set of theoretical, methodological, and practical skills. The curriculum covers crucial areas such as second language acquisition, language teaching methodologies, curriculum and syllabus design, material development, testing and assessment, continuous professional development, and notably, educational research within the TEFL field (Nguyen & Hall, 2017; Nguyen & Vu, 2020). A notable feature of these programs is their emphasis on developing students' research competencies, essential for addressing contemporary ELT challenges and solving local educational issues through empirical research. Furthermore, they aspire to cultivate reflective teacher-researchers within their socio-cultural contexts, being capable of driving critical innovation, ensuring sustainable development, and making greater contributions to the field discourse.

Possible Selves Theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986**)**

Possible Selves Theory (henceforth abbreviated as PST) is utilized as the sole theoretical framework to unpack the qualitative data collected for the current study. Coined by Markus and Nurius (1986), this theory provides an explanation of the significance and dynamics of individuals' selves-based and future-oriented concept construction. Such construction of possible selves is associated with "how individuals think about their potential and about their future" (p. 954), encompassing their envisioned accountability, including their hopes,

aspirations, must-to-do endeavors, fears, and possible threats that they anticipate in the long or short term. While individuals are capable of envisioning countless and different future versions of themselves, it is crucial to recognize that these envisioned selves are grounded in their present self-conceptions. Furthermore, "knowing what they hope and fear should refine this understanding because possible selves are not applied as frames after experience; rather, they are used in the ongoing constitution of experience" (Markus, 2006, p. 12). In other words, one's anticipated selves stem from individually significant hopes and fears, which are under the influence of unique social, cultural, and environmental contexts. As a result, possible selves can be regarded as the interpretations and presentations of the past and present selves to include those of the future selves.

Concerning relationships between PST and teachers' identity development, scholarly work has shed light on how the theory guided previous studies with a specific framework (see Figure 2). Drawing from a narrative approach to identity, which views selfhood as constructed through the stories, individuals recall and retell about their past, present, and imagined future (McAdams, 2017). Within teacher education and training programs, especially graduate education, teachers narrate their identities through their perceptions of teaching and learning, forming evolving self-concepts that resonate with their experiences, emotions, and beliefs. PST adds a future-oriented dimension to this identity work. In this sense, possible selves serve as mirrors and maps as they reflect the self as it currently stands and chart pathways toward who one may become. When teachers envision a successful professional self, they are guided by their hoped-for selves, those idealized versions that represent personal aspirations and dreams. In parallel, ought-to-be selves emerge from perceived external demands shaping the teacher's sense of obligation and professional responsibility. Last but not least, feared selves encapsulate the versions of self which teachers are most anxious to avoid, occasionally stemming from insecurity, fiascoes, or negative past experiences (Oyserman & James, 2015). Understanding these possible self dimensions serves to comprehend teachers' intrapersonal objectives and interpersonal activities, which collectively nurture their current professional decisions, intrinsic motivations for longevity, and sustainability in the teaching profession.
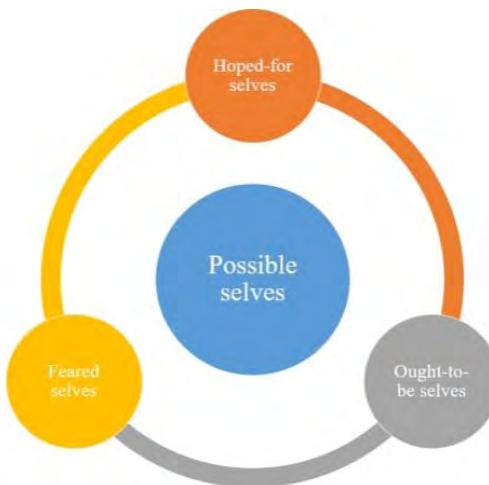
Figure 2. Facets of Possible Selves in Teachers' Professional Identity

Adopted in this study, PST functions as a compass to shed light on how Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers imagined and envisioned their possible selves after completing a Master's graduation thesis. The theory values the influences of teachers' current self-conceptions on their aspirations, obligations, and fears regarding future selves, comprising hoped-for selves, ought-to-be selves, and feared selves. For these teachers, the thesis process acted as a critical turning point wherein they negotiated their teacher-researcher identity, particularly envisioning future selves. Hoped-for selves are influenced by academic achievements and aspirations, while ought-to-be selves reflect societal and institutional pressures. Feared selves, linked to insecurity or failure, can motivate academic resilience and ignite intrinsic motivation to continue conducting further research.

Drawing from PST, this study aimed to answer the following question: How do Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers envision their hoped-for, ought-to-be, and feared possible selves after conducting a Master's graduation thesis?

Methodology

Research Design

The narrative inquiry approach was chosen to explore possible selves envisioned by Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers after they had completed a Master's graduation thesis. As Holland et al. (1998) observed, narratives not only serve to communicate one's identity development to others but also enlighten how she or he perceives and affirms her or his own sense of professional selves. Creswell (2007, 2012) highlighted the value of this method in uncovering a person's lived experiences by collecting and interpreting personal stories. In this context, the narrative inquiry allowed for a deeper understanding of how different selves

were enacted in teachers' teacher-researcher identity, particularly those configuring toward the future, providing insights into the individual, social, and professional dimensions of their lived experiences. Narrative inquiry was regarded as particularly well-suited for this small-scale study since it prioritizes depth over breadth. In particular, this approach values the richness and complexity of individual experiences. With a limited number of participants, it enables an in-depth exploration of each teacher's evolving sense of self, allowing the researcher to attend closely to the nuances of their stories, meanings, and identity trajectories. This method further embraces the idea that identity is personal and socially constructed, making it ideal for understanding how two Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL teachers navigated their teacher-researcher selves after completing a thesis.

Research Context

This study was deployed at a public university situated in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The researched Master's program is a research-based one entitled "Principles and Methods of English Language Education" (translated into Vietnamese as Lý luận và phương pháp dạy học bộ môn tiếng Anh). This program is meticulously designated to equip graduate students with a foundational and extensive range of knowledge in theoretical frameworks and advanced educational research methodologies. The program's curriculum encompasses a total of 60 academic credits, subdivided into 15 hours of professional lectures, 45 hours of hands-on application, and 45 hours of independent learning per credit. Among these, 27 credits are devoted to cultivating students' research competencies, including a substantial 15-credit thesis, 29 credits focus on the deepening of ELT-specialized knowledge, and 4 credits are dedicated to a philosophical knowledge foundation. Upon graduates' thesis completion, they are academically expected to demonstrate a comprehensive set of learning outcomes in relation to specific knowledge, competencies, and values, all of which align well with the dynamic requirements of modernized education and global citizenship in the 21st century (Le & Trinh, 2021). After fulfilling all the coursework requirements, each student must undertake an independent research project as their graduation thesis, academically supervised by one or two teacher educators. The final thesis is rigorously evaluated through a 30-minute thesis defense presentation before a panel of five distinguished academic experts and teacher educators, with evaluation criteria encompassing thesis quality (5 points), organization and structure (2 points), presentation delivery (2 points), and the potential for scholarly publication (1 point).

Participant Selection and Demographics

To recruit participants for this narrative inquiry, the purposeful sampling technique, among popular non-probability sampling techniques, was thoughtfully utilized. Theoretically, the technique serves to select participants with specific experiences, values, perspectives, and information demographics who are likely to provide rich, phenomenon-relevant, and insightful data to address the research question. In this study, selected participants should meet four criteria to become primary participants. The first criterion was that participants should agree to partake in this study voluntarily. The second criterion was that they should be members of Gen-Z communities. The third was that they should be graduates from the research context. The last criterion was that during their academic years, they should have completed one more formal research study beyond their Master's graduation thesis.

As part of the sampling process, a demographic questionnaire was initially distributed to 11 potential participants. The questionnaire was designed to collect preliminary data regarding their identity, academic background, and research experiences. Based on their responses, three individuals fully met the four predetermined selection criteria and were initially selected for participation in a trio-narrative inquiry design. However, following the first-round interviews, one participant withdrew from the study due to personal reasons, leaving two participants who remained fully engaged. Therefore, Ngọc and Bích (pseudonyms) were selected as the primary participants. Their lived experiences and reflective narratives offered rich insights into how early-career Vietnamese EFL teachers envision their possible selves and negotiate their emerging teacher-researcher identities in the graduate studies.

Participant 1: Ngọc

Ngọc is a female teacher in her mid-twenties who had been teaching English as a foreign language for four years when the data for this study were collected. Raised in a middle-class family in the Mekong Delta, she was introduced to English at the age of six when her mother enrolled her in an English language center. This early exposure to the language laid a foundation for her language skills, which were further nurtured during her K-12 schooling in an English-specialized class. Besides, these formative years significantly boosted her self-efficacy in English and ignited her passion for teaching the language.

Ngọc graduated from the research context in 2020 with a Bachelor's degree in English Teacher Education. After graduation, she started teaching at an English Center. Her teaching philosophy was personally ingrained in the concept of "teaching from the heart". She

believed that teaching should be a dynamic and interactive process wherein teachers acted as classroom facilitators who were better able to support learners in improving their English knowledge and communicative competencies. In 2022, Ngọc continued her academic journey by enrolling in a Master's program in the research context. During her Master's studies, she considered herself an active member of her CPD unit, contributing to discussions on best practices in teaching and research. Her research interests were teachers' CPD, influenced by a seasoned lecturer-researcher with over 25 years of research experience. Ngọc completed her qualitative Master's thesis in 2024. This thesis journey helped her integrate an academic research identity into her professional identities and trajectories, further enhancing her professional growth and occupational prestige. Critically, her thesis experiences exemplified the profound impact that supervisorship and research had on a young teacher's career development, and how research could shape teaching practices.

Participant 2: Bích

Bích is a female teacher in her early twenties, having been teaching English for three years when her demographics were collected for the current study. She worked with a diverse group of learners, including pre-schoolers, teenagers, high schoolers who were prepared for the national exam, and adult learners preparing for the Test of English for International Communication (abbreviated as TOEIC). She was raised in a middle-class family wherein education was heavily emphasized. Her parents encouraged her interests in English, which contributed to her engagement in learning the language at the age of twelve and subsequently becoming an ELT-majored student.

Bích graduated from the research context in 2022 with a degree in English Teacher Education. During her undergraduate studies, she conducted her first-ever research by completing a 10-credit thesis. Thanks to this endeavor, she viewed teaching as a critical art that could be enhanced through the lens of research. This approach helped her become a highly effective and well-liked teacher at a public English center of a tertiary institution, where she started her professional career. Also in 2022, Bích continued her academic journey by pursuing a Master's degree, alongside her close friend, Ngọc. Her Master's thesis adopted a qualitative approach to studying a writing instructional technique. Such an approach allowed Bích to examine her roles as a traditional language teacher and an emerging teacher-researcher in a critical manner, deepening her understanding of how research was more likely to enhance teaching practices. After completing her thesis in 2024, she was able to refine her teaching strategies on writing instruction while also contributing to the broader academic

knowledge. Her experiences provided rich insights into how young language teachers balanced their professional roles and how reflective practices contributed to their development as holistic teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were deployed to explore the development of Ngọc's and Bích's possible selves after they had completed their qualitative Master's graduation theses. This approach was chosen for three main reasons. Firstly, as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) mentioned, this type of interviewing provides its effectiveness in capturing individuals' lived experiences and thereby examines their identity development. Secondly, such interviews prioritize their flexibility, allowing the researcher to adapt the interview based on the participants' responses (Clandinin et al., 2000). Finally, they encourage the creation, co-creation, and re-creation of narratives within the inquiry process (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Prior to the official interviews, Ngọc and Bích had been informed of the research purposes in detail. Their personal information was kept confidential and used solely for the current study. Interviews were conducted during the 2024-2025 academic year in two rounds. These interviews followed a semi-structured, narrative-based protocol, addressing key areas concerning their hoped-for, ought-to-be, and feared selves guided by Markus and Nurius's (1986) PST as the theoretical framework of the current study. The first round of interviews centered on the participants' envisioned hoped-for and ought-to-be teacher-researcher identities following the completion of their Master's theses. Subsequently, the second round probed into their feared selves, uncovering the types of teacher-researchers that they consciously sought to avoid becoming. These interviews were entirely conducted in Vietnamese to ensure an in-depth and more precise information exchange. The first-round interviews lasted 80 minutes with Ngọc and 76 minutes with Bích, while the second-round interviews lasted 60 and 61 minutes, respectively. The interviews were recorded with a portable device with their permission. The audio files were transcribed in Vietnamese, and the transcripts were then translated into English and cross-checked by two English interpreters.

Alongside main interviews with two primary participants, two additional interviews were conducted with two outsider participants, pseudonymized Thành and Công, two Master's peers of Ngọc and Bích, respectively. These interviews were included to strengthen the validity of the data through methodological triangulation. Both individuals were selected by the primary participants for their close involvement in their thesis journeys and their

potential to provide insightful reflections on their possible selves. The inclusion of these external perspectives allowed the researcher to cross-check narrative elements and detect any discrepancies or congruencies. The interview protocols with Thành and Công focused on their observations of the primary participants' growth as teacher-researcher and who they expect Ngọc and Bích to be in the future. The interview with Thành lasted for 40 minutes, while the one with Công lasted for 43 minutes. Both interviews were deployed in Vietnamese, recorded with consent, transcribed, and later translated into English, verified by the same two interpreters for subsequent analysis.

The data collected from semi-structured interviews with Ngọc, Bích, Thành, and Công were analyzed through the adapted thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) (see Figure 3). Thematic analysis was chosen to analyze each case as it allows for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, providing flexibility in interpreting the participants' lived experiences and the development of their possible selves.
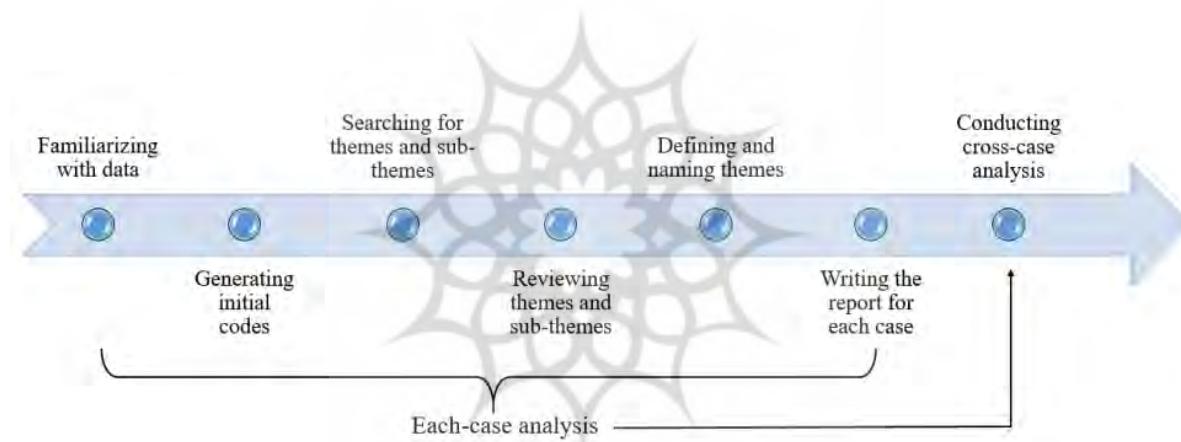

Figure 3. Thematic Analysis Process Adapted from Guest et al. (2012)

In each case, the researcher read and reread the transcripts of the primary participants and outsider participants in order to gain a deep understanding of lived experiences, particularly their possible selves, thereby noting initial ideas and reflections on the data. In the second phase, the researcher systematically worked through the transcripts and generated initial codes that were closely aligned with the research question. These codes were generated to align with the key areas mentioned in the interview protocols regarding each participant's hoped-for, ought-to-be, and feared selves. The third phase involved grouping the initial codes into potential themes and sub-themes. These themes and sub-themes were formulated by examining the recurring patterns and relationships between the codes. Several key themes emerged, which were essential in understanding the development of Ngọc's and Bích's

possible selves after completing their qualitative Master's graduation theses. After identifying the initial themes and their sub-themes, the researcher reviewed and refined them to ensure that they accurately represented the data in the fourth phase. This involved checking the consistency of each theme across the transcripts and ensuring that the themes were distinct, coherent, and meaningful. In the fifth step, each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its core meaning. The sixth phase of the thematic analysis involved writing up the findings for each case's possible selves, presenting each theme with illustrative quotes from the interviews.

In this data analysis process, the researcher utilized narrative inquiry to convey the depth of the participants' emotional experiences and reflections, integrating the voices of Ngọc, Bích, and those of the external participants (Thành and Công) to provide a rich, multi-perspective account. Therefore, the final phase of the data analysis process, the adapted phase, was to conduct cross-case analysis to compare and contrast their lived experiences, thereby shedding light on the convergences and divergences of possible selves enacted in their teacher-researcher identity. In brief, through this adapted thematic analysis, the study aimed to uncover how the participants envisioned their future selves in the context of professional trajectories, offering a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences during thesis completion.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Regarding ethical considerations, the study ensured the privacy and confidentiality of four participants. Written consent was obtained, and participants were fully informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without entailing consequences. Data were securely stored, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

To ensure trustworthiness, various validation methods were applied, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Fraenkel et al., 2012). In this study, credibility was ensured through member checking, wherein interview transcripts were sent back to four participants for their follow-up validation. Additionally, data triangulation was utilized by gathering data from multiple sources, enriching the depth and reliability of the findings. Secondly, transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research design, procedures, and results. This allowed potential readers to assess whether findings could be applicable to their educational contexts, considering potential contextual differences. Besides, dependability was established through the implementation of the peer-reviewing technique. Manuscript drafts were sent to a supervisor and peer-reviewed regularly

throughout the study, ensuring consistency over time. Finally, confirmability was ensured by citing direct quotes from the interviews. This approach served to maintain objectivity and ensured that the findings were grounded in the data, rather than influenced by the researcher's personal interpretation.

Findings

Through thematic and cross-case analysis on Ngọc's and Bích's data, their teacher-researcher identity, particularly their possible selves envisioned after conducting a Master's graduation thesis, was revealed. This section reports the findings concerning such a concept in each case and ends with convergences and divergences in their lived experiences of predicting the upcoming.

Ngọc's Envision

I Hoped to Be a Ph.D. Student

Ngọc's aspiration to pursue a Ph.D. originated from her desire to grow individually, intellectually, and professionally. From her point of view, a Ph.D. was considered an opportunity to dive into critical educational issues and explore complex ideas internationally. It represented the next step in her journey toward becoming a reflective, knowledgeable teacher-researcher.

She expressed,

Of course! I am not a follower of credentialism. I tried to push myself to think critically and challenge the way we approach research. […] A Ph.D. would allow me to explore new research that challenges what I know, dig deeper into the issues I am passionate about, and maybe help me become a teacher who can inspire others with a more informed perspective. (Ngọc, first-round interview)

Furthermore, Ngọc herself conceptualized studying abroad as a thought-provoking and knowledge-generating opportunity to gain exposure to diverse academic traditions and research methodologies. She was eager to engage with scholars from different parts of the world, believing that this exposure would help her grow as a researcher.

She happily added,

Studying abroad is a chance to step outside the familiar and immerse myself in a global environment. I think I will be able to meet some professors and researchers from various backgrounds, exchange ideas, and experience firsthand how different cultures approach education. This experience will enhance my

research skills and help me become a more open-minded thinker, someone who is not afraid to question existing practices. (Ngọc, first-round interview)

For Ngọc, pursuing a Ph.D. was a way to develop the tools and knowledge needed to make a real impact in the field of education. It referred to becoming a forward-thinking teacher-researcher who could bring new perspectives to teaching and learning. Ngọc's potentials were also recognized by Thành.

He shared his thoughts on Ngọc's academic future,

From the perspective of a friend, I think she has the ability to continue her further education. She loves research genuinely. For Ph.D.-level education, I think she could manage it. However, as a friend, I think she should consider it carefully in terms of time to study. She is very young. (Thành, interview with outsider participant)

To Ngọc, pursuing a Ph.D. was seen as a purposeful step toward becoming a reflective, globally aware teacher-researcher. It represented her desire to grow intellectually and make meaningful contributions to education through critical inquiry and international engagement.

I Was Expected to Teach Educational Research

While Ngọc dreamed of studying abroad, her commitment to Vietnam and its educational development remained committed. She wanted to return to her homeland, bringing with her the knowledge and experience she would have gained to make a meaningful contribution to the local education system. Her connection to Vietnam was deep, as she felt a strong sense of duty to use her skills to inspire the next generations of teachers.

She shared,

Coming back to Vietnam is something I've always known I'll do. I love Vietnam. I want to give back to it by improving its education system. I believe that the experiences I gain abroad will allow me to inspire young teachers and show them, you know, how research can make a difference in learners' learning. (Ngọc, first-round interview)

She emphasized her passion for teaching educational research, believing that it was crucial for future educators to learn how to conduct meaningful research.
She recalled her lived experiences,

My goal is to teach research in Vietnam. I think my family and someone else expect me to do so. It is important that I help young teachers develop the skills to teach and research that can improve the quality of education. Research is a

powerful tool that can help teachers understand what works and what does not work in the classroom. It is something I want to pass on to the next generation. (Ngọc, first-round interview)

She further gave an explanation of how she was expected,

I think I am expected to be the kind of teacher who inspires students to think critically about the world around them and challenges them to explore new ways of approaching education. (Ngọc, first-round interview)

Ngọc's vision of teaching educational research was a reflection of her belief that research should be regarded as an indispensable part of teaching. Her ambition to return to Vietnam to teach young educators how to engage with research was central to her career goals.

I Feared That My Teacher-Researcher Identity Would Dissolve

Despite her strong academic ambitions, Ngọc faced a significant internal identity conflict. She feared that, upon returning to Vietnam, the demands of teaching would take over and push her research interests to the side. The local educational system, which usually prioritizes teaching responsibilities over research, would make her anxious about the possibility of losing her identity as a lecturer and a lecturer-researcher.

She confessed,

I am constantly worried that when I return, I will be expected to focus entirely on teaching. There's so much pressure to perform in the classroom, you know I will have to prepare lessons, grade papers, manage students. I fear my research side will fade away. Research is a crucial part of who I am. I do not want to lose it just because the system does not always support academic inquiry. (Ngọc, second-round interview)

She further reflected,

The image of being a teacher-researcher is something I have worked hard to build, but I know that when I return, there may be little space for me to continue my research. Teaching is important, but I always see research as part of my identity. (Ngọc, second-round interview)

This fear of losing her teacher-researcher identity was a significant concern as she navigated her future. She understood the practical realities of teaching in Vietnam, yet she subsequently recognized the significance of maintaining her identity as a teacher-researcher. Her struggles to balance these two roles reflected a challenge that some lecturers faced: the

tension between fulfilling the expectations of their teaching roles and staying true to their academic aspirations. Nonetheless, Ngọc remained determined to find a way to preserve both identities, hoping that she could continue to balance her passion for teaching with her love for research.

Bích's Envision

I Hoped to Be an Edu-Business Manager

Bích's career vision was oriented by a unique blend of teaching, learning, and entrepreneurship. Her goal was not simply to run a business but to create an educational space wherein teaching and innovation could thrive together. The idea of starting her own language center emerged from a deep passion for developing a holistic learning environment that would integrate pedagogy with reflective practices.

She explicated,

I am not looking to open a business for the sake of it. My dream is to create a language center where education is the heart of everything I and my team do. I want it to be a place where I can design courses that truly meet the needs of my students, I can try out different teaching methods, and the curriculum is flexible enough to adapt as we learn more. This is not just about teaching English. We teach, research, and do business together. (Bích, first-round interview)

Managing the center was inseparable from her journey as a teacher-researcher. She sought to apply research-based insights from her thesis to understand the learning needs of potential learners to design curricula that were adaptable and context-relevant.

She explained,

Running a language center means that I can create an environment where teachers and learners can learn together. To do that well, I need to understand the context of my community, who my learners are, what motivates them, and what their educational needs are. (Bích, first-round interview)

She further mentioned how research helped her run a business in a better way,

I will also have to analyze the place where the center will operate, what types of classes are needed, what types of financial models will sustain my business, and how to ensure that the center grows. All these decisions will be based on research. (Bích, first-round interview)

This desire to build a research-based business reflected Bích's individual commitment to applying inquiry-driven thinking to enhance education and business. From her perspective,

teaching and business were intrinsically interconnected, with research providing the foundation for every decision she aspired to make.

I Should Do Formal Research at an Institution

While Bích was passionate about her edu-business vision, she signified the continuation of her engagement with research. She knew that the next step in her professional development would eventually involve a return to research. She viewed it as something to pursue later, after she had gathered more experience and established herself in the educational landscape.

She said,

I am focused on building my language center now. I know that formal research will always be an important part of my journey. I want to be a part of educational evolution, contributing to the research that helps shape teaching practices. I think I will eventually go into formal research. (Bích, first-round interview)

She emphasized that she wanted to engage in research that was grounded in real-world educational issues that she was personally passionate about. She explained,

From my heart, I do not want to do research just to tick a box or gain a degree. My goal is to engage in research which connected to my experiences as a teacher and my work in education. I want to explore questions which matter to me, something I see in my daily work with learners and teachers. If OK, later, I would prefer to work for a specific institution where research is valued. (Bích, first-round interview)

This perspective showcased that, whereas Bích was personally committed to her business plans, she still valued the role of formal research in her professional development at an educational institution. She envisioned a future where her entrepreneurial endeavors and academic pursuits could coexist and complement each other.

I Feared That My Teacher-Researcher Identity Would Be Fragmented

Despite her strong commitment to her edu-business vision, Bích wrestled with the pressure that her teacher-researcher identity might become fragmented as she focused more on managing the business side of things. The demands of running a center, with all its practical concerns, seemed to overshadow the intellectual inquiry that had driven her passion for research.

She claimed,

My biggest fear is that, as I focus more on running the language center, I will lose the teacher-researcher part of who I am. There's so much to do in terms of business operations. I do not want my passion for research to fade as I am caught up in the day-to-day management of the center. (Bích, second-round interview)

She recognized that balancing both teaching and entrepreneurship would be challenging. She feared that as she immersed herself in the operational aspects of running a business, her identity as a teacher-researcher would become fragmented, leaving her unable to keep up with her academic pursuits.

She said,

Teaching is a huge part of my life. I love it. I've always seen research as something that complements my teaching. The problem is that managing a business takes a lot of time and energy. I myself feel worried because possibly, I will be forced to prioritize the business rather than other jobs. (Bích, second-round interview)

Bích's fear could refer to internal struggles in trying to reconcile her entrepreneurial aspirations with her academic ambitions. She wanted to stay connected to both sides of her professional identity, but she knew that maintaining that balance would require constant effort. These internal concerns were also acknowledged by external voices,

You know, organizing a center requires much effort of the manager. And in her case, I think in some ways, she will not spend much time on research because of the fact that there are many business things to do. (Công, interview with outsider participant)

In essence, Bích's journey reflected an ongoing tension between her entrepreneurial drive and her research identity. While she remained deeply committed to both, she was keenly aware that sustaining teacher-researcher self amidst the demands of business would be an ongoing struggle that required deliberate balance, resilience, and clarity of purpose.

Convergences and Divergences and in the Possible Selves

Convergences

Personally Developed

Both Ngọc and Bích's visions for professional futures emerged from personal motivations grounded in intellectual curiosity, reflective practice, and a commitment to educational change. Ngọc perceived the pursuit of a Ph.D. not as a credentialing endeavor but a means to

critically interrogate educational paradigms, engage with global academic communities, and cultivate a deeper sense of agency as a teacher-researcher. Likewise, Bích's aspiration to establish an edu-business was framed not exclusively as entrepreneurial ambition, but it referred to a pedagogically informed endeavor stemming from her intrinsic motivation to create a research-informed, learner-centered space. Her commitment to integrating inquiry into curriculum design and instructional practices underscored her belief that research and teaching are mutually reinforcing. In both cases, a teacher-researcher identity was constructed as a personally meaningful and self-directed pursuit.

Institutionally Focused

Both Ngọc and Bích expressed a clear orientation toward institutional engagement as a mechanism for sustaining their teacher-researcher identities in their career trajectories. Ngọc articulated a strong sense of professional responsibility to return to Vietnam and contribute to teacher education through the teaching of educational research. In parallel, Bích acknowledged the enduring significance of formal research institutions in legitimizing and supporting her academic pursuits. While her immediate focus was on building a language center, she anticipated re-engaging with institutional research in the future, particularly within settings that valued practitioner inquiry. They collectively illuminated how teacher-researcher identity was formed and reformed in response to professional norms and societal positioning.

Contextually Dissolved

While Ngọc and Bích's narratives revealed strong commitments to maintaining their dual roles, both expressed profound concerns about the sustainability of such an identity within their anticipated professional contexts. Ngọc feared that the teaching-intensive demands of Vietnamese higher education would marginalize research engagement, thereby eroding the scholarly identity she had carefully constructed. Similarly, Bích anticipated that the managerial responsibilities associated with running a language center might displace the professional space necessary for sustained research-conducting. She was acutely aware that entrepreneurial labor, while pedagogically informed, might continuously overshadow her research-based commitments, possibly resulting in an internal fragmentation of her teacher-researcher identity. Both participants grappled with the precarity of maintaining inquiry-oriented identities in environments where research was possibly sidelined by institutional or operational imperatives.

Divergences

Despite these similarities, the contrasts in their professional pathways revealed significant divergences in how they envisioned their futures. On the one hand, Ngọc's pathway was conceived as fundamentally academic. Her vision of becoming a teacher-researcher was individually tied to her pursuit of a Ph.D., which she defined as the cornerstone of her profession. In stark contrast, Bích's professional aspirations are more grounded in the field of entrepreneurship. Whereas she appreciated educational research, her immediate concentration was on building an English language center, which simultaneously reflected her gained pedagogical insights and her entrepreneurial competencies. She thereby envisioned her ought-to-be future in the field of education as one where practical application took precedence over academic credentials. She believed that the skills and insights she gained from her Master's studies, along with her entrepreneurial acumen, were more likely to enable her to create an educational model that was locally innovative but still research-based.

Discussion

After completing a Master's graduation thesis, Ngọc and Bích envisioned their possible selves in the research-based environment through the hoped-for, the ought-to-be, and the feared. Informed by PST (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the findings elaborated that in the process of teacher-researcher identity development, they reconstructed and envisioned their sense of selves to be personally developed, institutionally focused, and probably at risk of being contextually dissolved (see Figure 4).
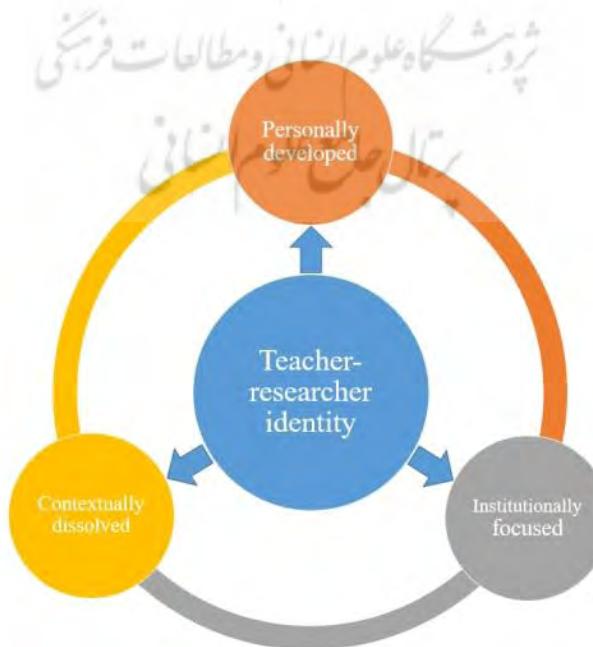

Figure 4. Envisions in Ngọc's and Bích's Possible Selves of Teacher-Researcher Identity

Drawing on PST, the personally developed self of Ngọc and Bích reflected their hoped-for possible selves, which encapsulate individuals' ideal visions of who they wish to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986), functioning as "behavioral blueprints" (Robinson & Davis, 2001, p. 5). In their stories to live by, this envisioned sense of self was profoundly anchored in Vietnamese cultural and moral traditions informed by Confucianism. The principles captured in the maxims of "Tu thân dưỡng tính" (Self-cultivation), "Học để làm người" (Learning to be a human), and "Trách nhiệm xã hội" (Societal accountability) were lived values that permeated their approaches to their theses. For both participants, the process of writing a Master's thesis was framed as a personal yet knowledge-generating journey in which academic labor was regarded as an act of ethical self-formation and a form of contribution to the public good. Their internal drive to conduct research with care and integrity stemmed from a culturally embedded sense of obligation to refine the self and serve others. Markus and Nurius (1986) further emphasized that hoped-for selves are defined as powerful motivators when they are both desirable and perceived as attainable. In this context, such selves were further legitimized by cultural narratives that position education as a pathway to personal dignity, family honor, and communal betterment (Nguyen & Hall, 2017) as they aimed to be a Ph.D. student and an edu-business manager. Accordingly, their hoped-for selves should not be simply perceived as future-oriented images. In fact, it reflected a domestically and culturally saturated identity position that ameliorated their engagement in research and sustained their perseverance amid challenges. This finding aligns with that of Kaasila et al. (2021) and Le and Pham (2024), where teacher-researcher identity is negotiated with personal hopes and ambitions.

Secondly, the institutionally focused self exemplified their ought-to-be possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which represented images of who they believed they should become in order to meet externally imposed standards and fulfill social expectations. According to PST, these selves served a self-regulatory function by guiding motivation in response to perceived obligations. For both, the institutional discourse surrounding academic productivity, research competencies, and formal credentials acted as a powerful frame through which they envisioned their professional trajectories. Within the Vietnamese educational landscape, institutional recognition depends on research engagement and postgraduate qualifications, which function as symbolic capital for career advancement (Trent, 2010). Immersed in such structures, both internalized the belief that being a legitimate teacher in the twenty-first century required the ability to generate, apply, and communicate knowledge through research. In particular, Ngọc's aspiration to return to Vietnam after her

doctoral study reflected a deep-seated patriotism and immense pride in a cultural identity. This vision of self was infused with a sense of obligation to use her knowledge for the common good, shedding light on how the ought-to-be self intersected with hoped-for selves when institutional expectations resonated with personal values. In contrast, Bích oriented her future toward formal research institutions where academic work was structurally embedded. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that, whereas PST asserts that possible selves direct behavior by acting as cognitive bridges between present actions and future trajectories, these selves carry emotional weights at the same time. Bích occasionally experienced pressure and emotional strain in meeting institutional benchmarks, and Ngọc's vision offered a more harmonized alignment between local convictions and international demands. This finding is consistent with Bao et al. (2024) and Lu (2024), who mentioned institutional demands remained a requirement and commitment to educational research.

The contextually dissolved dimension of Ngọc's and Bích's possible selves indicated what "kind of teacher-researcher" they feared to become. Such selves were constructed through reflective responses to perceived institutional fragility and uneven access to research-based environments. Within PST, feared selves develop from anticipations of an undesired future under the influences of sociocultural limitations and systemic uncertainty (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In this study, while Ngọc and Bích's narratives conveyed strong intentions to embrace research as an integral part of their future academic lives, they encountered inner tensions when envisioning the long-term viability of this aspiration within their expected professional landscapes. Ngọc anticipated that the overwhelming teaching demands in provincial institutions might displace her engagement with research, thereby weakening the scholarly identity she had nurtured during her thesis journey. In Bích's case, the managerial nature of running a private language center presented another form of strain. She envisioned an unexpected scenario where administrative obligations and pedagogical entrepreneurship, although meaningful in their own right, might consistently overshadow the time, energy, and cognitive space needed for sustained research engagement.

Both participants found themselves confronting the fragile status of inquiry-oriented selves in contexts shaped more by operational continuity than by knowledge creation. Both participants perceived themselves as committed teachers and newly emerging teacher-researchers, yet they foresaw professional trajectories impacted by heavy teaching duties, fragmented collegial ties, and inconsistent support systems. In such contexts, the feared self functioned as a psychological signal of disconnection wherein their research-based purpose dissolved within institutional inertia. Rather than representing personal inadequacy, these

feared selves signaled structural critiques. Both offered a silent, self-reflective response to conditions where research identity development required more than individual efforts. Through their post-thesis imagination, they articulated the emotional cost of navigating academic life within environments remarked by epistemic precarity, where sustaining a research-based self required academic resilience, resourcefulness, and an influential ecosystem, hereby aligning with Mason et al. (2024).

In brief, Ngọc's and Bích's possible selves represented how they envisioned their future research trajectories based on their current selves after conducting a Master's graduation thesis. Of interest, the hoped-for and ought-to-be selves were embedded in Vietnamese cultural virtues for Vietnamese women, those of "Công, dung, ngôn, hạnh" (Performing family duties, having a good appearance, having proper speech, and displaying proper behaviors). Being nurtured in the Mekong Delta region, where socio-educational conditions are still modest, and belonging to Generation-Z, both critically reinterpreted these values as symbolic resources for envisioning their envisioned selves. Their hoped-for selves embodied "Công" and "Dung" through a well-prepared thesis work and the pursuit of "Vẻ đẹp tri thức" (Beauty of knowledge pursuit), respectively. Furthermore, their ought-to-be selves reflected "Ngôn" and "Hạnh" in striving to develop themselves with academic authority and act with social responsibilities.

Conclusion

This study substantially illuminated how two female Gen-Z Vietnamese EFL graduates constructed their teacher-researcher identities through the interplay of hoped-for, ought-to-be, and feared possible selves. Their narratives revealed identity as a dynamic process embedded with cultural values, institutional expectations, and contextual uncertainties. While aspirations for doing research were committed, tensions arose from structural constraints and imagined futures of disconnection. On applying PST, the study valued the critical dimensions of becoming a teacher-researcher in resource-modest contexts.

The findings from this study offered pedagogical insights relevant to some stakeholders. At the level of individual Master's students, research engagement may become a formative space where they self-reflect on inner values, life experiences, and professional trajectories in post-Master's phases. When they are guided to make sense of who they are and who they may become through inquiry, research becomes a site of identity exploration and meaning-making. At the programmatic level, teacher education and training programs should reposition research as a dialogic, relational, and context-responsive practice. Embedding

supervisorship from practicing teacher-researchers, linking research-related tasks to real classroom challenges, and fostering reflective dialogue across courses can support Master's students in constructing research-based professional selves. At institutional levels, sustaining a teacher-researcher identity calls for a sense of community. On cultivating peer-based research circles, validating emotional dimensions of thesis work, and creating spaces for collective reflection, institutions may foster longevity and belonging.

Limitations and Suggestions

While this study offered rich narrative insights into the identity negotiations toward the future of two Vietnamese Gen-Z EFL graduates, its analytical scope was situated within a small participant group and a single institutional setting. This deliberate methodological focus limited the extent to which conclusions may be extended to wider teaching populations. The narratives themselves emerged through moments of relational co-construction, influenced by participants' personal memories and current emotions. Moreover, the inquiry captured a particular transitional phase, whereas teacher-researcher identities have a tendency to alter through prolonged and shifting professional journeys.

Future research could benefit from longitudinal and multisite designs that explore how teacher-researcher identities transform across time, career stages, and educational environments. Including participants from diverse demographics may reveal contrasting visions of research engagement and professional agency. Another recommendation is that future research should apply intersectional perspectives to uncover how structural conditions configure the possibilities EFL teachers perceive and pursue. Such directions are essential for moving beyond personal aspiration toward a critical understanding of how research-based identities are envisioned, thereby fostered, and maintained within educational systems.

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