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# Vietnamese millennial teachers' career identity during and after the transition to work

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## ABSTRACT

This article, using identity-agency and positioning theory, studies millennial university teachers' (MUTs) experiences during and after the graduate transition to work (GTW). The teachers reported their reflection on their pre-entrance into the labour market, the first few years as early career teachers, their current performance at work, and their future projection of their career development. The MUTs encountered professional and socialization challenges during the GTW due to their deliberate self-positioning, other positioning and forced self-positioning, but they enacted their identity-agency and continuously worked on their career identity through repositioning. The findings also highlight specific traits of Millennials, such as adaptability, embracement of work-life balance, self-development, and self-driven career.

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Identity-agency; positioning;  
millennial teachers; Vietnam;  
career identity

## Introduction

As one of the “unmistakably important” contributors to labour market success (Bowlus & Wong, 2020, p. 1), the graduate transition to work (GTW) is described as a process through which a “reshaping of identity” (Nicholson & Arnold, 1991, p. 414) occurs. The transition from higher education to the workplace is a distinct experience, “characterised by differences naturally inherent to the individual and to the surrounding micro and macro contexts” (Monteiro et al., 2021, p. 166). Involving a range of personal, professional and organizational challenges, this process is further complicated by the unpredictability of the socio-economic landscapes in the past decades. As emerging adults graduate and enter the workforce, they initiate the first of what could be many career transitions, each demanding different levels of coping skills and adaptability as time progresses (Murphy et al., 2010). Similar to what has been stipulated in the literature, GTW in this study refers to the starting point of a journey in building one's career (De Vos et al., 2019) that involves the sequences of career experiences reflecting an individual's movement within their context over time (Blokker et al., 2023). While

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much literature explores the importance of career identity in career development, the link between work experience and career identity exploration is less well known (Boyle, 2022). In the field of teacher education particularly, the concept of identity is more complex and dynamic as career identity is continually produced and reproduced at every turn of social interaction, forming a polysemic product of experiences and practices with multiple meanings rather than a stable, unified identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Early career teachers' experiences are likely to challenge and perhaps change their initial motivations, short-term and longer-term commitments, and identities. However, most of the extant studies have only focused on the first-year experiences, or the GTW period, as if the construction of their career identities is "complete at that point, when it is clearly unlikely to be the case" (J. Hong et al., 2018, p. 250). In that sense, there is a lack of knowledge about how teachers' identities change *after* the GTW.

The cohort whose GTW experiences in the field of teaching are fairly recent and unexplored are millennial teachers, including millennial university teachers (MUTs). In this paper, we focus on MUTs because this cohort constitutes the majority of the newly hired and currently in-service teachers (H. Hong et al., 2022). Among the studies that have been conducted on MUTs, more attention has been paid on the work-life balance and professional learning experiences of millennial preservice teachers rather than millennial in-service teachers (Lovely, 2012; Makinen et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2020). Moreover, these studies are done mostly in the context of Western countries such as England (Parfitt, 2020), Finland (Makinen et al., 2018), or the US (Clark & Byrnes, 2015), with the exception of Tang et al. (2020) and our recent work (Phan et al., 2023), which calls for more research of this kind in non-Western societies. By recruiting MUTs who had varying numbers of years of teaching experience (4–9 years), we aim to investigate how the teachers reflected on the changes in their career identity *during* and *after* the GTW, and how the generational traits factored in these changes in light of identity-agency and positioning theory. We focus on MUTs because this cohort constitutes the majority of the newly hired and currently in-service teachers (H. Hong et al., 2022). According to Parfitt (2020), the retention of novice teachers, many of whom are millennials, has emerged as a continuing challenge in a number of countries. Among the first that takes into account distinctive generation characteristics in investigating in-service teachers' GTW experiences and career identity development in Vietnam, this study hopefully will provide implications that can be used for staff recruitment and retention purposes of institutions, and also to inform policies and initiatives relevant to teacher professional development.

The paper continues with a literature review on particular traits of millennial teachers, career identity development, and Vietnamese university teachers' transition to work, followed by the presentation of the conceptual framework and research methodology. The themes coded by the six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) will be discussed prior to a conclusion about the importance of identity-agency enactment for the GTW of MUTs.

## Literature review

Millennials (Generation Y or Gen Y) are generally categorized as those born between 1980 and 2000. Like other generational labels, the term millennials refers to a cohort of population who may have shared experiences and a common worldview generated in their formative time (Corsten, 1999). In prior literature, this cohort is often described as being engaged in boundaryless (Laird et al., 2015) and protean careers (Broadbridge et al., 2007), as well as having strong intrinsic motivations (Queiri et al., 2014). They tend to have a high level of adaptability, mobility, and self-driven career management based on self-awareness (Hoyer, 2020). Maxwell and Broadbridge (2017) find that Millennials specifically look for job enjoyment at both their career entry and long term career stages. In teacher education, Millennials are referred to as “a new cohort of global citizens and digital natives” (H. Hong et al., 2022, p. 410), who are more open to diversity and inclined to appreciate and accept differences (Clark & Byrnes, 2015; Rodriguez & Hallman, 2013). Kuron et al. (2015) suggest that Millennials keep their work values relatively stable over the GTW.

Millennial teachers are portrayed as distinct from teachers of earlier generations (Lovely, 2012). A distinguishing feature of the millennial generation is their technological fluency which impacts their distinct approach to life and their understandings regarding work (Parfitt, 2020). Specifically, they are found to view work as less central to their lives and value leisure more compared to previous generations. They strive harder for work-life balance and seek more freedom in their work (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge et al., 2010). Nonetheless, in Hoyer’s (2020) comment, the added implications of boundaryless and protean careers for continual career identity development are yet to be explored in the GTW process of Millennials.

The concept of identity varies among different contexts and study subjects and consequently open to diverse interpretation. Taking a Vygotskian approach which considers human action as the beginning for identity, Zembylas (2003) explains that “identity formation involves an encounter between individual choices and cultural tools employed in a particular institutional context” (p. 220). Identities, from a socio-cultural perspective, can be understood as “social and cultural products through which a person identifies the self-in-activity and learns, through the mediation of cultural resources, to manage or organise himself or herself in the name of an identity” (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 114). Erikson (1968, cited in Meijers, 1998) refers to identity as “the wholeness to be achieved” which emphasizes the “progressive continuity” between one’s self-conception and his perception of how others see in oneself (p. 196). This definition is then clarified by Marcia (1980) when the concept of “identity status” is proposed as an “I-structure” focusing on an individual’s self-constructed skills, experiences, opinions and endeavours. According to the scar’s identity status model (Marcia, 1980), identity development is determined by two variables, namely commitment and exploration. While the former illustrates the possibility that certain career, gender, and political values and norms direct one’s behaviour, the latter refers to one’s ability to break the reference boundary to

determine his own identity. Identity commitments are important to individuals' well-being and emotional adjustment since they help to retain stability in career choices and satisfaction with work (Stringer & Kelperman, 2013). However, an identity status cannot be formulated without the specific environment in which individuals' principles are validated. Alternatively speaking, the identity status is shaped during the process of individuals' choices of special norms and values that shape the behaviours while exploring the environment (Marcia, 1980; Praskova et al., 2015).

Considering the self, career identity is defined as "a developing structure of self-concepts" (Meijers, 1998, p. 200) with reference to an individual's self-perception of his/her career role in the future, which suggests that career identity values personal working positions and voices (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Nevertheless, from LaPointe (2010)'s perspective, the interaction with others in the working environment plays an indispensable role in constructing a career identity. Career identity development has consequently emerged as a result of a collaborative process that involves the reflective capability in interacting and negotiating with regards to particular time, place, and positions (Cohen, 2006; Porfeli et al., 2013).

For a thorough investigation into teacher identity and agency in Vietnam, it is important to understand the socio-cultural context of the country where the Confucian imprints can be seen in different aspects of life, including the education system. Specifically, because of the emphasis on "first morality, second knowledge" (*tiền h a l f hậu h a vãn*) in Confucian doctrine, Article of the Education Law (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2005) clearly states that a teacher must possess "good moral, mental and ideological qualifications". The identity of a teacher in Vietnamese culture, accordingly, is not only the provider of knowledge and skills, but also a role model in terms of morality. The Confucian values are also shown in the greater respect that must be paid to people of higher status which is determined by age and social or organizational positions (Truong, 2013, as cited in Nguyen & Pham, 2021). Therefore, the transitioning process of Vietnamese MUTs in higher education institutions involves their navigation of the social and organization cultures within the larger Vietnamese society context and their continued (re)positioning to make sense of their identity and agency, which will be explained in the subsequent section.

In Vietnam, previous studies tend to examine the challenges that teachers encounter and the impact of professional development activities during their first years of service. For example, Le (2022) pays attention to the difficulties of novice lecturers in fulfilling their research assignment, Linh et al. (2020) focus on the influence of teaching practicum on novice lecturers' classroom management skills, and Phan and Pham (2022) investigate how a mentoring programme facilitated the transition of beginning teachers in a higher education institution in Vietnam. This means extant literature has been concentrating more on teachers' professional performance or teaching practices within the classroom contexts, rather than seeing the GTW period as a process that involves more personal dimensions. In this paper, we follow Hooley et al. (2023) call by shifting the focus away from necessary preparations for GTW or the outcomes of GTW. Instead, we give prominence to the perceptions, emotions, and attitudes of teachers about their career

identity and identity-agency development during the actual transition and several years into their career.

### **Theoretical framework: identity-agency and positioning theory**

Identity-agency is employed in extant literature to investigate how early career teachers navigate their entry into the teaching profession (Cobb, 2022; Cobb et al., 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). Identity-agency is understood as a type of agency that mediates an individual's experience with their wider environment (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). In other words, teachers will defend, negotiate or transform their identities (internal sense of self) in accordance with how they are influenced by and how they navigate the surrounding environment (external influences within their workplace). During the transition period, some studies suggest that teachers with a weaker sense of teacher identity may have fewer agentic tools (Cobb et al., 2018) to mediate the conflicts between their emerging identities and the established workplace culture within their new place of employment (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). In contrast, teachers with a strong sense of teacher “self” are resilient, motivated, and reflective, and perceive themselves to have resources to respond to and rise above the pressure and challenges (Cobb et al., 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018).

This paper is further theoretically informed by positioning theory, meaning that the identity-agency of MUTs is examined through their process of positioning themselves in relation to people and communities with whom they interact and artefacts within discursive practices (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, 2012; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Van Langenhove, 2017). Positioning theory is concerned with “the discursive processes by which people were ascribed, took up, refused, contested, and so on the rights and duties they found themselves with in the local social world” (Harré, 2012, p. 195). Specifically, when individuals find their initial positioning being challenged, it is possible that they will be inclined to repositioning. This repositioning process provides space for people to make changes, and their agency is shown in the new positions they create for themselves. Additionally, positioning theory highlights different ways the norms in the society are constructed. In this paper, in order to analyse the Vietnamese MUTs' identity-agency revealed through their positioning and repositioning, the authors employ four analytical tools from positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), including deliberate self-positioning, other positioning, forced self-positioning, and repositioning.

*Deliberate self-positioning* is when an individual takes on a particular stance to achieve a particular goal, which in this case is the transition from being a student teacher to a teacher during GTW. *Other positioning* happens when taking a position leads to positioning the other person in a correlative way. The positioning theory has been a popular framework in studying teacher identity and agency (for instance Arvaja, 2016; Huang & Wang, 2024) since it effectively illuminates how the personal and professional self of the teachers are represented, enacted and constructed through constant interactional positioning with respect to others. The theory underlines the construction of identity as an ongoing process in which individuals are active agents in recognizing and reflecting their identities in the social context. In this study, the positioning theory will be applied to analyse MUTs' agency in relation to their other-



positioning of different actors such as leaders, senior colleagues, or students. Specifically, *forced self-positioning* means that an individual performs an act as required or expected by different social factors and social forces. In this study, forced self-positioning will facilitate the analysis of how MUTs position themselves in the ways they think are required by the institutional structure and power hierarchy in their workplace. Finally, *repositioning* indicates the adoption of a new position after garnering previous experiences. Thus, MUTs' identity-agency can be revealed through how they think they are expected to respond to the structure and how they personally want to respond. Positioning theory complements the identity-agency concept to unpack the what, the why, and the how of Vietnamese MUTs' actions and response to the reality of entering the teaching profession, and thus their career identity development.

## Methodology

This study applied a qualitative methodology in the phenomenological approach, focusing on participants' perceptions to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experience (Kafle, 2011). In this study, we seek to answer the questions: (1) How was the MUTs' career identity developed during and after the GTW?, and (2) How did they enact their agency to engineer their career as university teachers?

The participants were 14 Vietnamese MUTs teaching English as a foreign language in a public university in Vietnam and they were recruited through the authors' personal networks and individual referrals. As such, the recruitment process outlined the voluntary nature of the participation. All the participants chose to be interviewed online and in Vietnamese. Before each interview, we reminded the teachers of the purpose of the study and their rights to decline to answer any questions and stop the interview at any time. Their consent was also obtained at this point. The interviews were audio-recorded and each lasted around 30 minutes. Table 1 provides demographic information of the participants.

The researchers conducted an one-on-one interview with each teacher and transcribed each interview verbatim. The teachers were asked in the interview to reflect on their experiences at various points in their teaching career, including some reflection before they entered the labour market, the first few years as early career teachers, and their current and future projection of their career. The authors followed a six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) to thematically code the interview data. Figure 1 visualizes this process.

Phase 1: We started with familiarizing with the data through transcribing and data organizing.

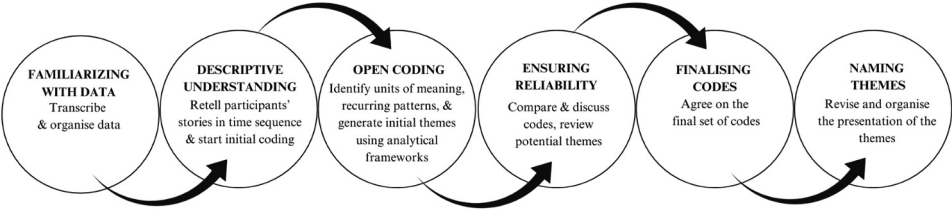
Phase 2: In the second phase of analysis, we focused on descriptive understanding via retelling participants' stories in a time sequence, such as "while learning at university", "first teaching position", and "mentoring period", and we started initial coding.

Phase 3: We open coded the data, aimed at identifying units of meaning arising from each interview separately, followed by identifying recurring patterns to generate initial themes. We focused on the words, phrases, content, and contexts at this coding phase such as "teaching in an English centre", "high school", "anxious", "unfair", or "confused". We also applied the analytical framework (positioning theory and identity-agency



Participants’ information.

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Qualification	Years of teaching experience	Undergraduate major	First workplace upon graduation	Current workplace
An	Female	MA	9 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Lan	Female	MA	5 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Thu	Female	MA	5 years	English language teacher education	Private secondary school	University
Tam	Female	MA	5 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Thanh	Female	MA	6 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Tuan	Male	MA	6 years	English linguistics	Private educational organization	University
Hong	Male	MA	4 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Phuong	Female	MA	5 years	English linguistics	Private educational organization	University
Van	Female	MA	9 years	English interpretation and translation	University	College
Hang	Female	BA	9 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Nga	Female	MA	9 years	English language teacher education	University	University
Hoan	Female	MA	9 years	English translation and interpretation	University	University
Thuong	Female	BA	8 years	English translation and interpretation	University	Private educational organization
Hai	Male	MA	6 years	English linguistics	University	University



Thematic analysis process.

Coding examples.

Codes	Translated interview script	Theoretical foundation
the age factor power distance maturity	I was a fresh graduate and I taught second-year students. I was a bit shy, because they were just a few years younger than me, three years younger. I was confident of my pedagogical and linguistics language competence. But I was a bit pressured, because now I was a teacher. I had to do something to create a teacher-student distance. I had to be mature so that students would respect me.	age factor in positioning forced-positioning agency enactment
satisfaction of work environment comfort zone other engagement/ activities personal pursuits	I think the environment in my workplace is really good, good colleagues, hard-working students, not too competitive, not too much control. But now it is too good. It's like a comfort zone. If I don't step out of this comfort zone, I'm afraid I'll stop growing . . . I want to be more active. So I am engaged with other activities. I produce podcasts, or organise children's study camps. These activities are what I enjoy doing . . . I need development, I need to be more active, I need to meet more people, I want to be more open. That's my personal desire, so I don't blame my work environment or colleagues. I just want to follow my own development trajectory. If this workplace can't provide what I want, I have to find a new environment.	seeking challenges protean career technological engagement agency enactment agency enactment

theory) and the literature of millennial traits and career identity in this open coding process. Table 2 provides some examples of the codes and categories.

Phase 4: To ensure the reliability, we compared our analytic codes, discussed, and reached an agreement on our understanding of the data and the codes, and reviewed potential themes.

Phase 5: We then agreed on the set of codes, including the MUTs' emotional and professional experiences during their GTW, new learning from the GTW, their socialization into the work environment, their application of their teacher training into their teaching practice, their professional challenges and needs, and their constant career identity reconfiguration.

Phase 6: We then revised and named the themes which will be presented in the next section.

While the six phases are organized in a logical sequential order, we moved back and forth through the phases as much as necessary since thematic analysis is a process that evolves as the researcher navigates different phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the next section, we present the themes and our analysis of data.

Findings

The self-positioning of MUTs led to their enactment of identity-agency, which was shown in the way they dressed or presented themselves in front of their students during their first years at work. Some of their reflections are below.

I was a fresh graduate and I taught second-year students. I was a bit shy, because they were just a few years younger than me, three years younger. I was confident of my pedagogical and linguistics language competence. But I was a bit pressured, because now I was a teacher. I had to do something to create a teacher-student distance. I had to be mature so that students would respect me. (Lan)

I tended to make myself look older than I actually was. I curled my hair, I often wore a chemise shirt with straight pants. I did so because I was not much older than my students. (An)

I still remember the night before my very first teaching day, I rushed to a shop to buy shirts and pants that could make me look serious and mature. I wanted to look older so that the students wouldn't doubt my capacity. (Thuong)

The interview excerpts reveal how the MUTs positioned themselves as “young” and “inexperienced” teachers, which rendered their choice of “dressing smart” to gain students’ trust. The minimal age difference between the MUTs and their students was a social factor that led to their forced self-positioning as “mature” or “serious” teachers to meet up to the expectations of an ideal self as a university teacher as in Lan’s emphasis. It was also evident how the culture of seniority in Vietnam was embedded in the participants’ perspective of their own positioning, impacting what they deemed as appropriate professional physical appearance.

This ideal self, in fact, both contributed to their deliberate self-positioning and caused the tensions and disappointment they felt afterwards. According to positioning theory, each position is often associated with a set of rights, duties and/or obligations (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). However, when all the MUTs started their teaching career, they were unaware of the ensuing work-related responsibilities. They felt “overwhelmed” by the amount of work that they were assigned to do, including test preparation, test design, curriculum planning, teaching material compilation, and multiple administrative duties. Although all the teachers saw teaching as the career they wanted to pursue, they entered the field with a self-positioning as “inexperienced”, “naïve” teachers who had “unrealistic expectations” and “unrealistic assumption of the teaching job”.

When I first graduated, I think I had some unrealistic expectations. I thought as a teacher, I would be very inspirational. (An)

I thought what was most important in a lesson was joy, so I tried to be fun, I tried to include as many games in a lesson as possible. (Thuong)

I was under much self-pressure to cover all the lesson objectives stated in the lesson plan while attempting to create student interaction and engagement during the lesson. (Thanh)

The interview excerpts highlighted the dilemmas caused by a disjuncture between their ideal self that the participants imagined they would become, and their real self in a new environment – an actual classroom during the GTW phase (Beech, 2017). Other participants recalled an “entry shock” when they first started their teaching career. Hong, for instance, commented on the disconnection that he felt between the teacher preparation programme and his early teaching experiences, which he referred to as “ecological realities”.

In light of positioning theory, traditions, norms and rules (Van Langenhove, 2017) are structural factors that determine expectations of individual duties and actions. According to positioning theory, positioning often occurs in a certain context characterized by sets of rights and duties situated in socio-culturally specific systems that can both enable or

hinder what can be done in a given situation (Van Langenhove, 2017). In this study, the specific systems of the MUTs' workplace and the interrelated forces represent the discursive processes by which the MUTs were ascribed with expected duties (Harré, 2012, p. 195). There existed a paradox in how the MUTs were positioned in their work context. On the one hand, they were positioned as "young", meaning inexperienced teachers who needed mentoring and training to improve their performance at work. On the other hand, they were assigned to undertake multiple tasks at a time with limited guidance and support since they were expected to be "capable". These duties, in Hai's explanation, were supposed to be done by "young teachers", because senior teachers "had already gone through this period". An was unhappy with how "everything was tasked to beginning teachers" and how they were assumed to be "free of family responsibilities [because we didn't get married yet] and were always available. We were taken for granted". Tuan who was chosen to be the Secretary of the Faculty's Youth Union believed non-teaching duties should be departmentalized instead of adding up to the young teachers' responsibilities.

I was really confused because there is a lot of paperwork and I've never dealt with them before. [...] I tried to minimise the involvement to focus on my teaching, but at times there was no one else, the task just had to be done.

Within positioning theory, people's self-positioning and other positioning are influenced by both structural conditions and individual characteristics and attributes (Van Langenhove, 2017). The way the participants self-positioned themselves as beginning teachers lacking experience and other-positioned their colleagues as "superiors", "better", "excellent", or "more experienced" led them to a self-perceived inferior position. An was open about how vulnerable and insecure she was because she felt judged by senior colleagues, which she called out as the "imposter syndrome". Many MUTs also mentioned the "power distance" between them as "inexperienced beginning teachers" and their colleagues whom they other positioned as "experienced teachers". The MUTs tended to avoid the senior colleagues, in fear of being judged by them. To account for this experience, An explained that "we were all shy, we wondered 'is it a good question to ask?'", and Hoan said she did not know how to start when talking to senior teachers. Nga also described her "embarrassment" and "fear" when approaching experienced colleagues, having an impression that "they looked really serious. I was afraid that they did not want us to burden them with silly questions". Thuong further explained that she did not know who to trust with her problems, and she did not want senior colleagues to think less of her or find her less capable than other beginning teachers. Another participant, Hong, even felt that his more experienced colleagues did not show any trust or liking to young teachers and readily rejected anything that was considered "non-conforming to the pre-existing system". He also drew an important lesson in communication, emphasizing on the gap that experience created between him and his senior colleagues.

For example, there might be feedback from other teachers that are not agreeable to you, but you need to accept it first instead of immediately arguing against it. You may think you're right at that moment, but later on, with more experience, things might be different.

In some cases, the positioning of MUTs as "inexperienced teachers" was reasserted by other social actors that forced them to self-position themselves as "inexperienced",

despite their efforts to improve their competences. One exemplary case is Thanh who commented that while normally, beginning teachers in her faculty were engaged in the mentoring programme for the first two years of their teaching career, she remained a mentee for four years.

My teaching practices were said to be not as good as others' without showing any specific evidence by a senior. Plus, she hardly saw me in the administrative room, so she had an impression that I was not enthusiastic enough and that I was reluctant to socialise with other members in the faculty. I was so upset about this unjust decision, but I blamed myself for being too shy to argue my case.

The mentoring programme, while supposed to provide novice teachers like Thanh with professional support, turned into a mechanism against which her teaching performance was assessed as qualified or not. Thanh was uncomfortable because being a mentee, to a certain extent, shook her teacher identity and made her feel underqualified for the job she was employed to do. It also lengthened her transition period, which almost drove her out of the profession. In other words, there existed a power hierarchy that acted as a barrier in MUTs' socialization into their work environment during the GTW. Thanh found it an "unjust decision", since it led to her other positioning of her senior colleague as the "sole" gatekeeper of the profession, and forced self-positioned herself as, again, a novice and inexperienced teacher although she had had four years of experience. In other words, Thanh did not manage to be accepted as an "experienced newcomer" (Gardiner, 2016). However, Thanh blamed no one but herself for not fighting for herself, which could be explained by her forced self-positioning as a protégé who was the lowest in the power rank in her workplace.

The Vietnamese MUTs' ability to exercise identity-agency seems to be a central factor in mediating the above tensions between their constructed identities and the realities of the institution culture during this critical transition period. The participants articulated the importance of constructing their own pedagogical approach through observing and learning from their senior colleagues. The way they were proactive in self-directing their in-service training showed how they utilized their identity-agency to reinforce their identity as a teacher and for their identity as a teacher to be confirmed by others. Some participants acknowledged that the workshops, or mentoring sessions were beneficial because their mentors helped them to improve their pedagogical skills such as time management, lesson planning, instruction giving, or classroom management. However, all of the participants agreed that they were self-reliant and autonomous in their learning. Some quotations below are examples.

The mentoring programme was 10% helpful. I had to learn to manage everything by myself. I read more books to increase my pedagogical knowledge, to be more confident in class. (Nga)

For the first two years, I audited some courses in English language teaching methodologies while working as a teacher. I wanted to explore my own teaching styles, reflected on pedagogical theories, compared between theories and practice. I was very active ... I observed many teachers who I knew were good teachers. (Lan)

I think the most important thing for beginning teachers is being brave to make mistakes. Don't be afraid, teach a class, take in the feedback, get criticised for this and that ... Whatever I'm weak at, I'll work on it and become better. I've observed many new teachers, no one is good right from the beginning. (Tuan)

The teachers demonstrated their agency to engineer their own learning process to be adaptive to the teaching environment and the teaching job. They were proactive in what and how they wanted to enhance their knowledge and skills.

The MUTs in this study were proactive in constructing and reconstructing a fluid career identity during and beyond their GTW. First, the MUTs' self-awareness and identity reconfiguration was a result of job dissatisfaction caused by several factors including repetitive teaching routine, limited space for development, unrecognized efforts at work, a lack of long-term career orientation from the institution, and low payment and burnout. An, for example, was unhappy because "my efforts went unnoticed and were taken for granted". Hai recalled that "there were times when I came home from an evening class I taught, I just cried on the way. I didn't know why I cried. Tears just dropped". Another teacher, Thuong, stated that "I noticed there was no more room for development there. I was too busy with teaching and other duties to have time for myself, or to improve myself". Meanwhile, for Tuan, the struggle to acquire the legitimate membership almost resulted in his decision to leave for a better working environment.

After working there for one year, I found it too stressful with all the paperwork and meetings. I wrote a letter of resignation and waited until the end of the semester to turn it in.

In this study, the MUTs, once realizing they lacked opportunities for self-development and skills enhancement at the current workplace, were motivated to seek chances elsewhere. This point corresponds with how in prior literature Millennials are often portrayed to have high expectations of the development of their careers (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010).

In pursuit of meaningfulness and work-life balance that characterized an ideal lifestyle, the participants experienced a career identity crisis, and proactively sought for liminality. Lan's interview excerpt illustrates the point.

I think the environment in my workplace is really good, good colleagues, hard-working students, not too competitive, not too much control. But now it is too good. It's like a comfort zone. If I don't step out of this comfort zone, I'm afraid I'll stop growing ... I want to be more active. So I am engaged with other activities. I produce podcasts, or organise children's study camps. These activities are what I enjoy doing ... I need development, I need to be more active, I need to meet more people, I want to be more open. That's my personal desire, so I don't blame my work environment or colleagues. I just want to follow my own development trajectory. If this workplace can't provide what I want, I have to find a new environment.

Lan's narrative highlights one of the Millennials' common traits – the relentless look for enjoyment and willingness to hop between jobs until they find their true calling (Abrams & von Frank, 2014; Maxwell & Broadbridge, 2017; Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Nicholson (1987) argues that either the individual goes through personal development, meaning

that they change themselves to suit their role, or role development, meaning that they change the role to suit themselves. In this study, the MUTs went through both personal development and role development. As fresh graduates and beginning teachers, they seemed to skew towards role development. As they gained more teaching experience, they oriented towards personal development to seek values and excitement in their work. However, there were times when MUTs found it necessary to re-examine their choice of careers, such as in Lan's and Thuong's interview excerpts below.

After 4–5 years of teaching, I start to find myself being repetitive. That's not development. I'm kinda having a career crisis. I am considering whether I continue teaching or I'll seek a different career path, like media, for instance. (Lan)

I was wondering why I had to work so hard like this. As a teacher, my work never ended. After finishing dinner, I would have to rush for my teaching preparation, or to mark students' papers. I realised my labour was devalued. I had to work a lot but I was paid so low. But if I chose a different job, I could finish work in the office and I could spend time with my family in the evening. (Thuong)

These findings compare favourably with Boyle's (2022) argument that as graduates accumulate more experiences beyond the initial GTW, they continue to learn about themselves, developing their career identities on a recurring basis. This also resonates with Savickas (2012) who considers identity development a perpetual process in which one's identity is repeatedly revised to incorporate new experiences. In this study, the MUTs have been continually pushed to rework their identity and take actions. At first, they struggled with the "inexperienced" teacher identity, seeking external validation and striving for the realization of an ideal teacher. This required the utilization of their identity-agency, which translated into their proactive self-improving efforts. As they acquired more experiences, they were again challenged by the misalignment between the ideal and reality, between their own professional expectations and what the teaching job had to offer, which propelled them into a career identity crisis. This state of crisis has forced the MUTs either to reconsider their choice of career or persist with their own principles and values but in a different setting.

## Discussion

The study demonstrates how the GTW experiences, as "boundary experiences" (Buhler & Allen, 1972), required MUTs to engage in constant reflective self-dialogues to reconcile discontinuities between their ideal and real self. It was challenging for them to become an effective operator in a workplace, or simply advancing from being a newcomer working at the periphery to becoming an experienced participant and accepted member (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Instead, they could be continuously positioned in the periphery and struggled to achieve the legitimacy to become a full member of the community, keeping a liminal position in the profession, as "no longer students, whilst also not yet experienced" (Cleveland et al., 2019, p. 1434). The self-doubt that the MUTs experienced signalled confusion at the early stage of the career, which in turn required their adjustment and encouraged further exploration, self-learning, and socialization with experienced teachers such as their mentors (Maitlis et al., 2013). Their other positioning and forced self-positioning situations (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) show little resistance



from the MUTs, but more of their acceptance and adaptability. Concurrently, the analysis reveals a lack of professional networking and communication between the MUTs and their colleagues, especially senior colleagues.

The findings in this study acknowledge that identity is an ongoing project for MUTs, from their pre-service education to their in-service work (Phan, 2022; Phan et al., 2023). The “identity crisis”, or “career crisis”, to borrow the words of An, Hai and Lan, stemmed from the contradictions they experienced. While they really enjoyed being a teacher when they first entered the profession, they gradually found less joy in their everyday work engagement. It is important to note that the MUTs utilized their Millennial traits such as protean self-drive (Hoyer, 2020) in their GTW period as self-learning opportunities (Phan et al., 2023). The prevalence of boundaryless and protean careers for Millennials (Laird et al., 2015) has profound impacts on their development and redevelopment of career identity. As the levels in teaching experience increased, the MUTs’ self-awareness increased correspondingly. Their experiences, however, revealed their liminality, a state of constantly being in-between identities (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019) but the liminality was “embraced as a positive form of freedom” (Boyle, 2022, p. 80), a chance for the teachers to discover the essence of themselves and at the same time be open to alternative selves (Berzonsky, 2011).

Similar to the millennial pre-service teachers in a study by Tang et al. (2020), meaningfulness (in teaching and in work), financial security, and work-life balance were considered an “ideal lifestyle” for the participants in this study. For the MUTs, work played less of a central role in life compared to leisure and freedom (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge et al., 2010). Flexible career alternatives were available for MUTs to explore possible options (including reconfiguration of career identity, broader education-related professional aspirations, new career pathways) in the process of their teaching practices, (re)setting personal-professional goals, and “constructing relevant professional knowledge for the materialisation of such goals” (Tang et al., 2020, p. 11). We hence argue that the identification of self-development and ideal lifestyle as a distinctive type for the millennial generation teachers brings a new understanding to their career identity as well as long-term professional development.

Theoretically, while researchers have conceptualized the GTW in different ways, for example, as a process of managing different career and organizational boundaries (Santos, 2020), or of socio-cultural learning, this paper contributes to the discussion by offering a different perspective, seeing GTW as an identity-agency making process which requires understanding and constant adjustment of the graduate positioning in relation to others. This approach is helpful in expanding the literature of GTW that involves emotional experiences and feelings. For practical implications, this study advocates for the design and implementation of teacher training programmes, professional development activities, and support networks that embrace the identity-agency enactment of novice teachers. Specifically, the beginning teachers should be made aware of the continual positioning of their identities and empowered to take initiatives to engineer their career paths. Furthermore, when a new generation of teachers enter the workforce, it is essential that institutions take into account the socio-cultural contexts as well as teachers’ generation characteristics to facilitate their transitioning process. It is worth noting that the Millennials (Gen Y) as the participants in this study and Generation

Z workers share a number of characteristics, for instance, the emphasis on work-life balance, supportive working environment and professional development (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). This study, therefore, will be able to offer important insights for the GTW of Gen Z teachers as well as teacher trainers and institutions. Future research can consider Gen Z's characteristics such as the cautious use of technology or the pragmatic and entrepreneurial approach to problem-solving (Carter, 2018) in understanding teacher identity making.

## Conclusion

By employing identity-agency and positioning theory (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), the article unravels Vietnamese MUTs' experiences during and beyond their GTW through their identity-agency enactment and career identity development. Despite limitations such as the use of small, homogeneous samples with similar sociodemographic characteristics and a predominance of female participants, the study contributes to the scholarship in two key ways. First, it provides new insights and empirical findings on the identity-agency of the teachers through analysis of their deliberate self-positioning as a university teacher, as well as their professional development over time through other positioning, forced self-positioning and repositioning. It sheds light on how the MUTs self-positioned and other positioned their colleagues and their career identity development in relation to the structural conditions such as the institution setting. In this regard, positioning theory is utilized to explain how the MUTs' self-positioning and other positioning reveal their interpretations of the corresponding expectations, rights and responsibilities, and how all of these influenced their career identity development. The identity-agency enactment and the positioning theory highlighted how MUTs' personal-professional goals and active learning emerged from their work context. Furthermore, the study illuminates how the generational characteristics of Millennials were featured in Vietnamese MUTs' professional development and identity-agency enactment. In so doing, this study deepens our understanding of generation characteristics when millennial teachers begin and advance in their careers, which points to the importance of generational characteristics in studying teacher identity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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