

“Nothing Lasts Forever”: Stories of Teacher Agency and Identity Construction in a TEFL Setting during a Time of Crisis

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 6 Mar 2025 Last revised: 23 Jul 2026 Accepted: 24 Jul 2026 Available online: 7 Aug 2026 Keywords: Teacher agency Identity construction Professional identity Numinous agency Pedagogical practices	Previous studies on teacher agency have largely overlooked its manifestation in professional practices and its connection to professional identity construction, specifically how they are at play during crises. A narrative inquiry was conducted to address this gap and understand teacher agency as manifested in a female teacher's English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction and how it played roles in constructing her professional identity during the times of crisis, i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing the design allowed for the construction of stories about her, which was made possible by doing a narrative analysis of data gathered through observations of remote instruction, reflective journals, in-depth interviews, and the examinations of relevant instructional documents. The stories portray the interplay of inquisitive, deliberative, responsive, moral, and recognitive agency in her day-to-day pedagogical practices. A new facet was recognized and thus incorporated into the stories, i.e., numinous agency, which means having and displaying a deep spiritual connection, on which the teacher participant based most of her pedagogical decisions and professional identity work. Evidence of her numinous agency is her “nothing lasts forever” stance toward the pandemic and seeing it as momentum for cultivating her professional capital to serve her students better. The stories suggest that teacher education programs and professional learning incorporate topics on professional identity construction, teacher agency, and its facets, including numinous agency. We invite future researchers to investigate whether numinous agency also manifests in teachers' pedagogical practices and identity construction work in different educational and cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers around the globe had to unexpectedly switch their mode of instruction from in-person to remote teaching. Their past teacher education and development program might have yet to truly prepare them for such a sudden transition (Farrell, 2021; Yuan & Liu, 2024). However, research literature suggests that teachers

displayed resilience in adjusting their instruction and supporting remote learning. The findings were significant as they made available the stories of teacher's challenging experiences. Nevertheless, the existing empirical studies did not seem to touch upon how teacher agency was at play during the critical time in their profession. Meanwhile, the literature shows the importance of teacher agency in constructing professional identity (Sisson, 2016). The present study fills this gap in the literature by exploring agency-identity relations and their manifestation in the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and identity work during the pandemic.

At the outset of the study, and primarily because we viewed the pandemic as a critical incident that shaped teachers' growing professional identity, the ecological perspective of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006) was employed as an analytical lens. It places agency not as a "capacity or possession of the individual, but as something that is achieved in particular (transactional) situations" (p. 27). Priestley et al. (2015) also lent a support, "...[the perspective] helps us to understand how humans are able to be reflexive and creative, acting counter to societal constraints, but also how individuals are enabled and constrained by their social and material environments" (p. 3). In light of these views, the pandemic was regarded as a transactional arena where teachers increase or attain a certain degree of agency through interacting with and responding to their contexts and their challenges, pressures, as well as possibilities. As its core, teachers' agency matters in the construction of their professional identity.

Our probe into the literature shows that the closeness of agency-identity relationships has not been portrayed clearly. Previous researchers also did not utilize the ecological perspectives as part of their theoretical frameworks. Thus, using these perspectives, the present study fills the void in the literature.

The experiences, stories, and voices of female teachers were invaluable to examine, specifically Indonesians, for the following reasons. First, they have been at the forefront of our education system long before the pandemic; they comprise 70% of the total population of teachers. Second, their significant roles in the education system were mainly virtuously driven. Third, most women in Indonesia are likely in charge of most domestic responsibilities, and during the pandemic, they were the primary educators at home. Studying them is thus crucial, given the complex challenges they face in enacting roles embedded in their multiple identities. In navigating these challenges, their agency becomes central to the ongoing construction of their professional identity.

A narrative inquiry was therefore carried out to understand teacher agency as manifested in a female teacher's English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction and how it played roles in constructing her professional identity during the pandemic. These purposes were then translated into five Research Questions (RQs) to guide the inquiry: 1) How did an Indonesian female EFL teacher enact agency in her pedagogical practices during the COVID-19 pandemic? 2) What facets of agency manifest in her EFL instruction and professional practices during the pandemic? 3) How do the recognized facets of agency play roles in constructing her identity as a professional EFL teacher during the pandemic? 4) What can we tell about the relationship between the facets of her agency? 5) Which facet of teacher agency serves as the foundational and integrative element that connects the other facets?

Presented in this article are stories that depict the female teacher's strong sense of agency, which was evidenced by her displaying multiple facets of agency, how they manifested in her EFL instruction, and how they intertwined and made a delicate string of capacities in her for making optimal learning and effective teaching happen despite times of crisis. The string of capacities shaped the construction of her growing identity as a professional teacher during the pandemic. The female teacher was in a perpetual dynamic mode of action, reflection, and close interaction with her Creator, the cultures, and contexts surrounding her pedagogies. We argue that the female teacher's deep spiritual connection, termed numinous agency, shaped her growing agency and was the base of her other facets of agency as a professional EFL teacher during, if not prior to and beyond, the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In-service teachers' practice during the pandemic

Most studies in the area, which were carried out mainly through quantitative methods, departed from the problems teachers faced regarding using digital technologies in their emergency remote teaching (ERT). The findings demonstrated that in-service teachers who previously had e-learning experience, received training in distance education, and spent more time online were readier and had higher self-efficacy for e-learning (Cahapay & Anoba, 2021; Chou & Chou, 2021; Çınar et al., 2021; Farkhani et al., 2022; König, 2020; Yasemin et al., 2021). Additionally, previous researchers suggested that attention be given to teachers' burnout, technostress, and other online-related stress as they were invisible and latent.

To inform post-pandemic teacher education, researchers in this area call for studies that document and examine barriers encountered by in-service teachers during their ERT, their pedagogical knowledge, and instructions adopted for effective ERT given their varied needs. Furthermore, since detailed portraits of ERT are scant, researchers advocate for school-based studies on ERT, including synchronous online teaching, and studies that utilize interviews to gain in-depth information about teachers' experiences during the pandemic (e.g., Yasemin et al., 2021).

Teacher agency and the pandemic

Studies in this area have been considered by researchers as indispensable for several reasons, collectively highlighting the situational and contextual nature of teacher agency and how it was affected by the ecological landscape during the pandemic. First, the pandemic revealed and exacerbated deep inequities and social disparity (Fu & Clarke, 2022). Second, teachers were one of the front-line responders during times of crisis (Campbell, 2020; Chaaban et al., 2021). These researchers problematized how students in many educational contexts lost access to teachers and schooling and how teachers had to continue providing students with learning opportunities. Their agency was central; however, social structures surrounding them could either enable or constrain it. Third, scant attention was given to teachers' agentic choices and actions in responding to the new pedagogical circumstances during the global pandemic (Gong et al., 2021).

Existing studies examined the manifestations of in-service teachers' agency during the transition from in-person to remote instruction. Specifically, these studies looked at: 1) the enactment and development of agency (Campbell, 2020; Chaaban et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021), 2) the congruency of teachers' pedagogical beliefs about their roles and agency (Gao & Cui, 2022), 3) factors that support or constrain teacher agency (Chaaban et al., 2021), and 4) the kind of agency that unfolds during the transition (Heikkilä & Mankki, 2023). Qualitative research was the primary approach in these studies, with case study design being the most commonly utilized. The present study addresses this methodological gap by employing narrative inquiry to provide a better understanding of teacher agency in practice during a time of crisis.

Collectively, the studies highlighted above revealed contrasting findings regarding teachers and their agency, with encouraging outcomes being outweighed by less favorable ones, and demonstrated how teacher agency was built through social practice and in response to contextual needs. The pandemic gave both space and opportunity for teachers and school leaders to act with an increasing sense of agency (Campbell, 2020). In Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco, teachers displayed their agency by sharing technological tools and discussing ways for improvement (Chaaban et al., 2021). The new collegial cultures of sharing and helping molded by the pandemic boosted teacher agency (Heikkilä & Mankki, 2023). In terms of instruction, although lecture-based learning predominated during the pandemic, there were teachers who made efforts to use interactive teaching methods, showcasing adaptability. Overall, teachers "enacted agency not only to develop technological knowledge regarding online teaching and learning, but also to build up pedagogical competence to address learners' preferences and needs in a new educational setting" (Gong et al., 2021, p. 92).

What appeared to be fewer encouraging findings was the disclosure of the realities of teachers' competencies, such as limited technological skills and inability to interact synchronously with students (Chaaban et al., 2021). Additionally, factors constraining teachers' well-being and agency include workload, time management, and insufficient support from educational leaders. Farrell (2021) calls for more studies that engage teachers in reflective practice on pandemic pedagogy by constructively looking at their experiences. Along the same lines, previous studies have recommended examining how agency is enacted within a particular period of time to deepen understanding of the teacher agency-identity relationship and the contextual forces that shape it (e.g., Dhammarungruang & Wudthayagorn, 2021).

The construction of teacher professional identity during the times of crisis

Problems that drove studies in the area included limited knowledge about how teachers made meaning of their pandemic experiences and their reactions, its impacts on teachers' identities (Gelir, 2023), and the transitions in teachers' identities from in-person to online instruction (Yuan & Liu, 2024). Overall, their findings suggest how pedagogical and cultural contexts, including pandemic circumstances, shape the construction of teacher's professional identity. Their practiced identities emerged as both reflections and outcomes of their ongoing negotiation of their professional identities. Therefore, during uncertain times, educational leaders ought to attend to the kinds of support teachers need for their identity construction, which, in turn, can enhance students' learning. Studies in this line of inquiry were context-specific and stemmed from the pressing problems. Consequently, their calls for future studies

seemed divergent—a knowledge gap. One call, however, deserves our attention, i.e., the need to examine teachers’ pedagogical practice to gain more insight into how their identities are formed in practice (Yuan & Liu, 2024).

Spirituality and professional identity construction in difficult times

There was a positive association between teachers’ spirituality and their perseverance through difficult times. Religion supported teacher participants in Almayez’s (2022) study in dealing with professional burnout, frustration, lack of recognition and appreciation from their institutions, job instability, and changeability. Similarly, during the pandemic, faculty members involved in Ardito et al.’s (2022) study found spirituality helpful for personal meaning-making, deepening sense of purpose related to work, and preventing and coping with burnout, managing work and family conflict, and lessening negative emotional experience. Based on their findings, researchers in this area recommend future studies to deepen the exploration of the intersection between teachers’ religious, spiritual, and professional identities, addressing the nuanced challenges and opportunities this nexus presents. Teacher education programs need to evolve to value the “teacher-as-person,” integrating religious and spiritual identities into their frameworks. This requires shifting beyond the traditional focus on theoretical and technical teaching dimensions toward a more holistic model that embraces personal and spiritual aspects of teaching due to their “formative influences” (Almayez, 2022, p. 12) on the construction of teachers’ professional identity.

Research gaps

Considering previous researchers’ recommendations (e.g., Almayez, 2022; Dhammarungruang & Wudthayagorn, 2021; Yasemin et al., 2021; Yuan & Liu, 2024), the present study mapped out the manifestation of teacher agency in in-service teachers’ pedagogical practices during the pandemic. How teacher agency played roles in constructing a teacher’s professional identity was also examined to draw a realistic picture of teacher agency in practice with particular attention to the sociocultural and historical contexts surrounding it and how teacher professional identity was shaped in practice.

The call from previous researchers for a collaboration of reflection and meaning-making with in-service teachers (e.g., Farrell, 2021) was also addressed through the narrative inquiry to inform both the theory and practice of post-pandemic education. Most importantly, as educators, the present study deepens our critical awareness of how we can exercise agency to reshape our views and actions, while continuing the ongoing collective pursuit of social justice through educational change.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Drawing on Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, the present study examined the reciprocal relationship between social structures and individual agency. The theory aligns with Holland et al.’s (1998) concepts of identity and agency in cultural worlds, which assert that “identities are lived in and through activity and must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice”

(p. 5), emphasizing agency's roles in identity construction. Extending these ideas to education, Biesta and Tedder (2007) offer an ecological understanding of agency, framing it as the "result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations" (p. 137). These perspectives underscore the situational and contextual nature of agency. Through our study, we sought to understand how a teacher adapted to and transformed her ecological landscape during the pandemic, highlighting the dynamic interaction between her agency and broader social structures. Together, the theories illuminate that agency is not innate but shaped by ongoing interactions with one's environment.

In understanding professional identity construction, the present study aligned itself with previous researchers who see agency as its key element. Hence, teachers with agency are vigorous individuals who shape and transform their world and are active in their professional learning, which is what's supposed to be a lifetime journey, in their practices and in using their professional identity to make sense of themselves as teachers.

The focused contexts of our study were the COVID-19 pandemic and the education transformation in Indonesia via the Emancipated Learning and the Emancipated Curriculum. Emancipated Learning is a recent policy reform in Indonesia's education system. The reform, initiated in 2019, emphasizes teacher competence, independence, freedom, and ability to teach based on student needs, and aims to delegate more autonomy to teachers and schools for enhanced student-centered learning. The overarching objective of this reform is to transform Indonesia's education system for the 21st century, to be more student-centered, and to promote lifelong learning¹. Within this broader reform, the Emancipated Curriculum became a major policy instrument. It was designed to give schools and teachers more flexibility in organizing learning according to students' needs, local contexts, and school capacities².

Both the policy and the curriculum occurred in tandem and, in our study, were situated as critical incidents (see Sisson, 2016) experienced by our research participant. During the pandemic, teachers faced sociocultural constraints in enacting their identities. Their voices, unfortunately, were not well-documented. Hence, Sisson's work served as another framework to understand how critical incidents and voices significant to agency and identity construction.

As our review of previous studies revealed, teacher agency is an under-explored field. The literature also indicates a call for a clear conceptualization of teacher agency. Therefore, Molla and Nolan's (2020) five facets of teacher agency were employed to locate the facets of the teacher participant's professional practice and make sense of their roles in professional identity construction. The facets include: 1) inquisitive agency ("have the specialist knowledge and skills required in the profession", 2) deliberative agency ("being able to critically reflect

¹ For a more detailed description of the Emancipated Learning policy, see Khairina, N., Yarrow, N., Cilliers, J., & Dini, I. (2023). Improving teachers and school leadership in Indonesia: Impact evaluation of Guru Penggerak Program at the primary level. World Bank.

² For a closer examination of the Emancipated Curriculum, see the Regulation of the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Number 12 of 2024 on Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, and Secondary Education.

on one's practices and on theories and assumptions that inform the practices"), 3) recognitive agency ("valued and respected for their professional work"), 4) responsive agency ("readiness to respond creatively and knowledgeable to situated and emergent problems"), and 5) moral agency ("exercise sound judgement, and display ethical behaviour") (pp. 6–11). Using them as an analytical lens, we contribute to the conversation on teacher agency during critical incidents.

Although spirituality theories were not part of the study's initial theoretical frameworks, they were employed toward the end of the inquiry. The theories were utilized to better understand a new facet of teacher agency propositioned in this article, namely numinous agency, which means having and displaying a strong spiritual connection. We aligned with de Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) who defined spirituality as "one's striving for and experience of connection with the essence of life, which encompasses three main dimensions: connectedness with oneself, connectedness with others and nature, and connectedness with the transcendent" (p. 142). We also found Oxhandler and Pargament's (2014) definition of spirituality helpful for its linkage to professional identity: "Spirituality is one's belief in a higher power or deity that offers a sense of transcendence and purpose and may align with one's professional identity and sense of vocational calling" (p. 307). These concepts align with agency and identity theories explicated earlier since they all underscore how interaction between self and others shapes humans' capacities, including their agency. Most importantly, adding the theories to the existing theoretical frameworks helped us to make a connection between agency, identity, and spirituality.

METHOD AND DESIGN

A qualitative method, specifically narrative inquiry, was employed for the present study's design. Narratives allow researchers to reveal points of tension rooted in the personal, experiential, and concrete (Rodriguez & Polat, 2012). They emphasized that narratives can encourage teachers to engage in "borderland discourses" (p. 364), in which they can meta-cognitively negotiate conflicts between their personal and professional selves, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. The present study's aim was to understand and interpret the teacher participant's experiences in enacting her professional identity during the times of crisis and the meanings she assigned to them. While we were aware of how the pandemic had compounded systemic issues and injustices, our study did not expose and address them. Hence, our study does not fall into the category of critical narrative inquiry.

As we—the authors—continuously seek meaning in what we do as language teacher educators and researchers, we selected narrative inquiry because of its affordances for identity construction. Together with the research participant, we engaged in the collaborative meaning-making activities that were essential to constructing our professional identities (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021).

Narrative inquiry allowed us to construct stories based on our data in at least three phases. First, our participant's experiences and voices were shared during and throughout the data collection phase. Second, stories were constructed as we were analyzing the data. We also

shared the stories with multiple communities of inquiries, such as with the audiences of our conference presentation and with graduate students. In the process, we did some reconstruction to present sound answers to the research questions. Third, we continued the reconstruction while writing this article and doing member checks with our teacher participant. Since stories were our units of analysis not the individual teacher involved, other designs of qualitative research such as case study did not serve our inquiry.

Criteria for selecting teacher participant

The decision to purposively involve in-service teachers as our participant was based on the following reasons. First, over the past ten years, research on EFL teacher education in Indonesia has been dominated by ones with student teachers as the participants.

Second, the existing studies on Indonesian EFL in-service teachers appeared not to focus heavily on their competencies as certified teachers. Meanwhile, studies in this area are significant to understand why certification programs have not yet escalated teachers' instruction quality and why the impact of the certification program on students' learning was in question.

Third, active learning pedagogy is a ministerial mandate and thus emphasized by the Emancipated Learning and the Emancipated Curriculum. Recall that the policy and the curriculum aim to develop students' characters and competencies and fuel education transformation. TEFL is no exception. The field has long adopted Communicative Language Teaching and a Genre-based Approach to teaching the language; both underscore active learning. Regardless of its affordances for EFL learning, most in-service teachers have not yet mastered and implemented this pedagogy, which is why their EFL learners have not yet taken active roles in their learning.

Similarly, the use of ICT in the learning process has been a ministerial mandate since 2016. Additionally, the National Literacy Movement, which was launched in 2020, required the incorporation of digital literacies in formal education. Nonetheless, there were concerns regarding teachers' readiness to integrate ICT into their instruction, and students wished that their teachers gave them extra guidance for using technologies and increasing their digital literacies (Lammers & Astuti, 2021).

Informed by the research literature as described above, the following criteria were used to select the present study's teacher participant: 1) in-service EFL teacher, 2) certified, 3) enacted pedagogical mandates in her instruction, i.e., active learning, ICT, and digital literacies, for optimizing students' learning. One female teacher (recall why we focused on a teacher with this gender) met all of these criteria. She taught at a public non-faith based high school in a regency in Central Java, Indonesia. When we informed her about the study and that she met the criteria, she willingly agreed to participate—informed consent. Through her involvement in the research and the meaning-making collaboration with us, she hoped to look at her practices critically and gain insights for enhancement. Stories told in this article were about her, named *Nirmala* (a pseudonym). Her demographic data were interwoven in the Findings section.

Data collection methods

The data were gathered in 2021—post-pandemic stage—through observations of Nirmala’s ERTs in a classroom of eleventh graders, reflective journals, in-depth interviews, and analysis of instructional documents relevant to the occurring stories. To look at her pedagogical practices, Nirmala’s ERT was observed four times in which she employed project-based learning (PjBL for short, a method within active learning pedagogies) with an anthology of students’ poems in English as the target outcome.

Nirmala’s praxis and tacit understanding of her pedagogy were examined through a reflective journal she wrote after each of the observed ERTs. Similarly, an in-depth interview (40–60 minutes) was carried out after each observed ERT. The interview questions were prepared beforehand, but the list expanded as we engaged with and analyzed data from ERT videos, field notes written during each observation, and relevant instructional documents shared via Google Drive, and WhatsApp messages. The themes constructed from the data analysis were also used as part of the interview materials. Due to physical distancing regulations, all interviews were carried out via a video conference platform, which was then transcribed, resulting in 87 pages to analyze.

Data analysis

In a narrative inquiry, analyzing data means constructing the story or doing storytelling—narrative analysis (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). Following their advocacy, and guided by our theoretical frameworks and research questions, we approached the coding process with sensitizing ideas about the phenomenon under investigation, including the view of agency as an attainment rather than an innate trait. Categories were assembled (e.g., groups of data to support each facet of teacher agency), themes were recognized (e.g., phrases and sentences that best reflect each of the facets), and the configuration of the connection between categories and themes was created in relation to each research question. From these processes, stories (i.e., presentation of findings) were constructed iteratively through member checking and discussions with communities of inquiry about Nirmala’s strong sense of agency (RQ #1), facets of her agency and their manifestation in her instruction and professional practices (RQ #2), the ways their interconnectedness shaped her professional identity construction (RQ #3), the relationship between her facets of agency (RQ #4), and a foundational and integrative element within teacher agency (RQ #5).

Due to the pandemic and post-pandemic circumstances and adjustments (work and life) made along the way, which were unavoidable, it took three years to complete the construction of the stories presented in the next section. Despite all that, the findings remained robust since we (the researchers and the participant) extended the meaning-making conversations beyond the scheduled dates for data collection. Nirmala stayed committed and took part in the three years needed to construct the stories of her agency as a professional English teacher by being available whenever the authors reached out to her for clarification, confirmation, and requests for additional data. Additionally, Author1 wrote analytic memos throughout the study that enabled her to navigate the complexity of the gathered qualitative data, the

messiness of data analysis, and the analytical decisions related to the stories developed from the analysis process. Hence, the analytic memos were also parts of our data, as Saldaña (2013) put it: “.... memos are data; and as such they, too, can be coded, categorized....” (p. 42).

FINDINGS

In what follows, we present the findings of our narrative inquiry, which illustrate how Nirmala exhibited a strong sense of agency through the display and interplay of five facets of agency in her pedagogical and professional practices. These facets along with their roles in shaping her professional identity, are explored in detail. Additionally, we conceptualize a sixth facet, termed numinous agency, characterized by a profound spiritual connection that serves as the foundational and integrative element that connects the other facets of teacher agency. Figure 1 visualizes the relationship of these six facets.

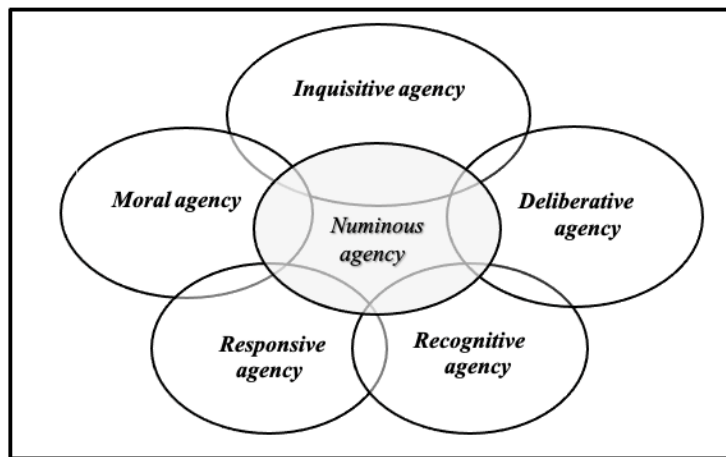


Figure 1 Numinous agency as the foundational and integrative element that connects the other facets of teacher agency

Built throughout and elaborated in greater detail at the end of this section, Nirmala’s numinous agency was the basis of most, if not all, of her pedagogical decisions and professional practices.

Knowledge acquisition to critical reflection: Inquisitive to deliberative agency

Nirmala, with 25 years of teaching experience, exemplified a strong sense of inquisitive agency through her unrelenting pursuit of professional growth and learning opportunities. After earning her professional EFL teaching certificate in 2009 and her master’s degree in 2014, she continued to seek ways to expand her knowledge. Her inquisitiveness was evident during her time as an exchange teacher in Australia in 2017, where she explored the potential of educational technologies, such as Google Classroom, which became an integral part of her teaching practice. Despite being described by her colleagues as “too ambitious” for her

eagerness to engage in professional learning, she embraced the label as a testament to her drive (In-depth Interview #2).

Before the pandemic, Nirmala's inquisitive agency led her to participate actively in professional learning communities and associations. She attended various international conferences, including two where she met us (the authors): one on ELT in 2016 as a fellow presenter and the other on qualitative research in 2019 as a participant. Driven by her passion for knowledge, she leveraged personal resources to connect with TPACK practitioners and enhance her teaching repertoire. She described this drive as being "so thirsty to learn" (In-depth Interview #3), reflecting her deep commitment to aligning her pedagogical practices with TPACK framework to support her students' English language competencies. She herself increasingly recognized the language as essential for teacher learning in the digital age.

This inquisitiveness seamlessly evolved into deliberative agency as Nirmala reflected on her growing digital literacies and used them to create meaningful learning experiences for her students. For instance, she intentionally sought insights from her students to learn new digital tools and designed innovative instructional strategies, such as presenting materials in diverse and engaging ways. Her plans to utilize instructional documents for research further underscored her reflective and deliberate approach to teaching (In-depth Interview #1).

Nirmala believed that serving students equated to demonstrating dedication and nurturing a love for her profession. She wrote:

I try to increase my potential by adopting good habits as a teacher such as reading, attending events related to knowledge, social and spiritual matters, watching YouTube videos and films that build my realization and gratitude for being a teacher ordained by God. Because being a teacher is not easy, it deals not only with knowledge but also with building students' good feelings about learning and tasks. Good wisdom will be found in our students' hearts. (Reflective Journal #1)

The above quote demonstrates Nirmala's commitment to professional growth, which reflected her inquisitive agency, as she sought new learning opportunities to better her pedagogical practices. This drive, underpinned by her belief in God, showcased the interplay between inquisitive and numinous agencies. For Nirmala, the teacher she became was a product of her determination and faith.

Her inquisitive agency transitioned into deliberative agency. Nirmala recognized that learning alone was insufficient; the measure of her growth was in how she translated her knowledge into creating joyful learning experiences for her students. She saw this as a deliberate act. This progression highlighted her evolving understanding of wisdom as an outcome of reflective and intentional practices.

Nirmala's deliberative agency extended beyond her professional practices to embrace a broader philosophy of teaching. She believed that serving students was a form of devotion to both her profession and her faith, embodying the principles of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's

educational philosophy: “At the front, provide an example; in the middle, build determination; at the back, provide encouragement and direction.” Ki Hadjar Dewantara is recognized as the Father of Indonesian National Education because of his pioneering role in establishing Taman Siswa, an educational movement that challenged colonial elitism and promoted education for indigenous Indonesians. His legacy lies in promoting an education that is liberating, culturally rooted, nationalistic, and humane—an education that respects learners’ freedom while guiding them toward responsibility and love for the nation³.

At the front, provide an example. She viewed herself as a role model for her students. Before her students, she deliberately showed that by constructing imagined identities (a proficient communicator of English and long-life learner) and demonstrating confidence in using digital technologies to inspire them to become confident creators themselves (In-depth Interview #1). Her deliberate inclusion of reflective practices, such as asking students to identify the language skills and dispositions developed through the PjBL (Observed ERT #1, 2, 3), highlighted her focus on fostering her professional growth, students’ positive attitudes toward learning, and quality learning (In-depth Interview #1 and #4).

In the middle, build determination. Nirmala’s inquisitive agency fueled her drive to implement PjBL with a poem anthology as the product. Reflecting on the PjBL’s rationale and process, her roles, and what she instilled in her students (i.e., determination and a sense of purpose), Nirmala said: “Students create their own system because they are the doers. Furthermore, God willing, the experiences gained from the project will last longer than when they do rote learning. In essence, they acquire the concepts by themselves” (In-depth Interview #4).

The above excerpt suggests Nirmala’s understanding of how, through PjBL, her students’ leaning experiences and knowledge acquisition were deepened due to their activeness throughout process. Her inquisitiveness, evident in her PjBL’s planning and implementation, transitioned into deliberative agency as she reflected on the processes, such as comparing active to rote learning, imbued with her belief in God’s presence for guiding the progress.

At the back, provide encouragement and direction. As her agency progressed to a more deliberative phase, Nirmala translated insights from Ki Hadjar Dewantara’s philosophy, especially around providing students with encouragement and direction, into actionable strategies. For instance, she built students’ awareness of the importance of learning by consistently reinforcing its purposes (e.g., the becoming of committed, responsible, and persistent individuals), weaving, and materializing them in her instruction. Her belief that education was about creating a habit of doing good shaped her instructional choices. Deliberately, she encouraged students to identify and push their strengths, guiding them toward achieving their maximum English proficiency (In-depth Interview #4).

³ For a fuller account of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, see Inspektorat Jenderal Kemendikdasmen. (2024, October 24). Mengenai lebih dekat Ki Hadjar Dewantara, Bapak Pendidikan Indonesia [A Closer Look at Ki Hadjar Dewantara, the Father of Indonesian Education]. <https://itjen.kemendikdasmen.go.id/web/?p=11523>

“Serving students to the best of my ability”: Responsive agency

Nirmala’s overall responsiveness was directed toward her pedagogical contexts and situations: a) the pandemic, b) the enactment of the Emancipated Learning policy that focused on empowering students to take ownership of their learning, c) the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum that emphasized on students’ character and competencies developed through active learning, d) the National Literacy Movement that centered on building reading and writing habit, and e) digital literacies needed for running the ERTs, optimizing students’ learning, and giving them a meaningful learning experience (In-depth Interview #1).

“Staying productive during the pandemic” was Nirmala’s aspiration (Reflective Journal #2), which was why she employed PjBL with the help of digital technologies, such as Padlet. Through the anthology of poems the classroom community wrote, Nirmala made her aspiration come to life. At the same time, she realized her school agenda for elevating students’ interests in reading and writing, which was her part taking in the literacy movement. The pandemic also strengthened Nirmala’s beliefs in the affordances of digital literacies for maintaining and increasing interaction among students, engaging and optimizing their learning, and constructing her professional identity. Indicating and adding to the instances of her responsive pedagogical decisions and practices, Nirmala stated that using TPACK as her pedagogical framework was mainly for increasing service to students (Reflective Journal #3).

Nirmala appeared to be all out in supporting students’ remote learning. She once lent her laptop to a student who had to share her gadget with her siblings at home. She did this since the number of gadgets the school had (bought using the charity fund pooled from parents) could not cater to all students in need (In-depth Interview #1).

“Understanding and compassion”: Moral agency

Nirmala emphasized that since teachers were professional educators, they should have good pedagogical competencies that enable them to perform their work, including serving students with diverse personalities. She asserted that the key was to understand them with attentiveness to their varied personalities and with compassion (Reflective Journal #1).

When reflecting on how she faced the challenges in implementing PjBL, she said that what made it work was intensifying the communication and using a humanistic approach. She, for example, welcomed students’ WhatsApp chats after school hours for project-related and non-project-related purposes (Reflective Journal #4).

“I am a different teacher”: Recognitive agency

Nirmala was the third winner of the Outstanding Teacher Competition in 2010 in her regency, the grand finalist of the Creative and Innovative Teacher Competition at the provincial level in 2016, and the fourth winner of the same competition in 2017. When discussing her perseverance in constructing her professional identity, she said: “I am a different teacher” (In-depth Interview #2). She wanted students to recognize her as a minimum reference

regarding strong will, activeness, and enthusiasm for (life-long) learning. Among the “gifts” Nirmala received was seeing a parent who shed tears during the school’s open house as he was watching his kid perform on stage. He told Nirmala: “Thank you, Ma’am. It turned out my kid can speak English.” Nirmala was also often invited by her colleagues from schools in neighboring regions or cities to share effective practices, experiences from her classrooms, and knowledge from her professional learning journey (In-depth Interview #1).

“Nothing lasts forever”: Numinous agency

Nirmala brought her spirituality to the classroom and used it to help students to make meanings of the pandemic. She told them: “[Before the pandemic, it’s like], do not play with your phone [for too long], now you’re asked to use your phone [for schooling purposes]. Who arranges all this? God.” (Observed ERT #3)

Nirmala seemed to refer to the fear of addiction to technologies, especially smartphones, that many Indonesian parents showed to their kids and manifested in their constant reminders not to use it excessively (Lammers & Astuti, 2021). She viewed the pandemic’s power in altering parents’ apprehension since the schooling was then run with the help of digital technologies. She reminded students that it was all God’s will.

Her spirituality also manifested in her words of encouragement given to students about learning in general, not merely for achieving English proficiency, reminding them that it was God’s order for human beings. Hence, she thought deeply about the kind of meaning(s) students might get from each of her lessons, asking herself: “Are students getting the wisdom from today’s lesson?” (Reflective Journal #3).

Practicing mindfulness and doing self-talk that goes “nothing lasts forever” (quotation marks used to indicate our attribution to Roderic Thorp’s novel, Maroon 5’s song title, part of Taylor Swift’s lyrics in her song entitled Wildest Dream, part of Guns N’ Roses’ lyrics in their song: November Rain, and Nirmala’s statement in Reflective Journal #3) were some of her ways of responding to the pandemic and challenges it posed, believing that it would come to an end at some point. She described the lessons she gathered from the crises for her professional identity: “It is also God’s way of telling me to grow my potential, social relation, and spirituality.” Reflecting on her continuous commitment to developing her pedagogical competence, she wrote that her hope was for students to gain “hikmah” (an Indonesian term meaning wisdom) that would reside in their hearts and later be translated into practice for their own good and God’s sake (Reflective Journal #3).

DISCUSSION

The stories presented above show multiple factors that shaped Nirmala’s strong sense of agency as a teacher and how it worked for authoring her professional identity (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Giddens, 1984; Holland et al., 1998). Those factors include her sociocultural, historical, institutional, and pedagogical contexts. Nirmala’s agency in implementing PjBL was primarily

driven by these factors and their relationships—ecosystem framework and constructive alignment. Equipped by her ways of seeing the world, personal histories, education, aspirations, and spirituality, Nirmala was a dynamic actor in the ecosystem, learning architecture, and pilot of her journey of becoming a professional English teacher. Her identity was constructed in the acts of doing her work and in overcoming obstacles along the way. With the help of the present narrative inquiry—a social practice, Nirmala conceptualized and made meaning of her professional practices. The cornerstone of all that was her agency as a teacher. Hence, her stories justify what served as our point of departure, i.e., agency is not an innate trait. In what follows, the story of each facet of Nirmala’s agency was discussed along with their relation to the existing studies. The interconnectedness of these facets is made explicit. How her numinous agency is the foundation and what integrates the other facets together is examined next.

Inquisitive agency. Nirmala achieved the agency through continuously learning what it took—professional capital—to enact meaningful and effective learning amidst difficult times. Our findings on Nirmala’s inquisitive agency corroborate those of the existing studies (e.g., Çınar et al., 2021) regarding the importance of building teachers’ readiness and self-efficacy for pedagogy in times of crisis. Nevertheless, her professional learning is deemed more transformative for thinking, practice, and learners (Milton & Morgan, 2025), not to mention during challenging episodes when the following aspects of the “inquiry as a way of being” approach are interwoven in her practices, jointly emphasizing how agency and identity are constructed through social practice in the cultural worlds (Holland et al., 1998): “1) some pertinent and focused literature, 2) professional dialogues with colleagues, and 3) learners’ perspectives or experiences” (Milton & Morgan, 2025, p. 1074). While our data had evidence for the occurrence of each of these contextual aspects in Nirmala’s practices, the data were inadequate to claim that she adopted the approach in her professional learning before and during the pandemic.

Deliberative agency. Wisdom was a keyword in Nirmala’s critical reflection on her thoughts and practices. She always wanted to know if students gained wisdom from her lessons, which was made possible by her having and displaying inquisitive agency. Performing, followed by reflection, allowed teacher’s agency to develop (Gong et al., 2021). In essence, Nirmala’s inquisitive agency (such as exploring and later using new digital tools in her instruction) enabled the growth of her deliberative agency. Nevertheless, we did not have the data to address whether essential activities for the growth materialized in her reflective practice before and during the pandemic, i.e., collaborative critical conversations with her colleagues and problematizing practice. Without the two, educational transformation that necessitates the construction of teachers’ professional identity might seem unattainable.

Responsive agency. Nirmala’s effort to retain her professional learning and deliberative, reflective practice was directed to optimize service to students and caring relationships with them. To accommodate effective learning during the pandemic, she considered learners’ differences, which was also done by Macau teachers (Gong et al., 2021). They exercised agency not only by strengthening their technological knowledge of online teaching and learning but also by developing the pedagogical competence needed to respond thoughtfully to learners’ diverse preferences and needs in the emerging educational context. Nirmala’s implementation

of PjBL was a manifestation of responsive agency, exhibiting her strong commitment to the Emancipated Learning policy and the Emancipated Curriculum that underscored student-oriented learning. It also had the characteristics of a responsive curriculum, such as addressing the specificities of students' uncertain and complex situations. As evidenced earlier, with her inquisitive, deliberative, and responsive agency, Nirmala could give life to the curriculum during the pandemic. However, whether her colleagues exhibited similar commitment—collective responsive agency, remained unknown because that was beyond the scope of our data.

Moral agency. Equipped by her inquisitive, deliberative, and responsive agency, Nirmala firmly believed in the value of having good pedagogical competencies to base her instructional decisions, make reasonable judgments, and be ethical in her professional practices. Ethical practices happen in a caring relationship (Tronto, 2001). Hence, in Nirmala's case, the caring classroom and school communities she built contributed to her enacting ethical professional practices.

Considering Biesta and Tedder's (2007) ecological understanding of agency, Nirmala's moral agency in her professional practice cannot be attributed solely to her pedagogical competencies, concepts of professionalism, ethical teaching principles, or her educational platforms, and caring communities. Instead, it likely reflects a combination of these factors and her awareness of the moral potency of her actions—an awareness she might not always articulate deeply or intentionally, as it stems from her being basically a good person.

Recognitive agency. Nirmala's demonstration of the aforementioned facets of agency garnered respect, recognition, and acknowledgment from her school community for her professional contributions. These findings show that merit-based recognition is attainable. Therefore, we support governmental initiatives that formally acknowledge and reward teachers' exemplary practices, as such recognition can strengthen their professional identity and affirm the value of their work. Criticism can serve to recalibrate strategies for agentic work (Lee, 2021). Nirmala's experiences illustrate this well. When faced with criticism from colleagues for her enthusiasm for professional learning, she reframed it not as an obstacle but as an opportunity to refine her agentic pursuits. Had she responded differently, she might not have achieved the recognition described previously.

Numinous agency. Nirmala's strong connection to spirituality—numinous agency—became the foundational and integrative element of her other five interconnected facets of agency. Her displays of these facets of agency were driven by her longing to be connected with something larger than her egos (Palmer, 2003). She demonstrated a profound ability to connect with herself, others—including students and colleagues—and her God, aligning these relationships harmoniously to achieve purpose and essence in both life and her professional journey.

It appeared that Nirmala's numinous agency guided her practice and then fueled her to improve her classroom and thus enact the educational transformation in her pedagogical contexts. Hence, our findings support Dei's (2002) claim regarding the significance of teachers' spirituality for transformative education since it sustains their agency.

Our findings indicated that Nirmala viewed the educational process as an expression of the interaction between her spirituality and professional identity. Her spirituality informed her perspectives, philosophies of education, and responses to the individuals she worked with and for daily. In essence, spirituality is an element of her social action. Our findings validate Mayes et al.'s (2003) study that demonstrated how spirituality made teachers more sensitive to students' needs and make the effort to create a classroom community where they feel accepted. Nirmala also nurtured in students the ability to reflect not only on their learning but also on their situation to act upon it, e.g., using the pandemic as an impetus for meaningful learning. This way, Nirmala "use[d] spirituality as a way of engaging with a wider contextual issue rather than a discrete episode" (p. 337).

Teachers' religious identity—adherence to their faith-based schools' vision and mission—may limit alternative perspectives, thereby constraining professional identity construction (Yumarnamto & Prijambodo, 2020). These authors assert that "strong religious beliefs can be a shield for their reluctance to change" (p. 76). de Jager Meezenbroek et al.'s (2012) distinction between spirituality (i.e., an inner, personal quest for meaning and connectedness) and religiousness (i.e., adherence to specific beliefs, practices, and institutions associated with organized religion) can help clarify the differences between religious identity fleshed out in Yumarnamto and Prijambodo's (2020) study and numinous agency. With an understanding of agency as a key component of identity construction, we contend that teachers with numinous agency (such as one depicted in this article: Nirmala) can transcend religious identities, embrace change, and actively contribute to educational transformation within their contexts.

Our findings on numinous agency extended the literature on facets of agency. Our data, however, did not allow us to say that Nirmala had her numinous agency long before the pandemic. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that, as with other facets, numinous agency cannot be attained overnight. As Molla and Nolan (2020) state, teacher agency is a continuous pursuit of "what they [teachers] value in their practice" (p. 2). They also agree with Biesta and Tedder (2007), who coin agency as the result of "the complex interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural 'factors' as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations" (p. 137). Hence, in Nirmala's case, the formation of her numinous agency could not be attributed merely to her personal beliefs, values, and capacities. Her contexts might have also contributed to it, especially given that most Indonesian social and cultural practices are strongly shaped by the religions lived in and held by its people. Her society most likely treasured Nirmala's strong connection to spirituality. These findings resonate with those of Gelir (2023). He concluded that a teacher's professional identity (i.e., loving and caring for children) was shaped by the larger cultural context, not merely the results of an internal process. Nonetheless, Sisson (2016) underlined the significance of critical incidents to identity and human agency. Hence, it might be that the pandemic, the new educational policy, and the new curriculum, i.e., critical incidents in Nirmala's profession, had contributed to molding her numinous agency.

As the stories portrayed, Nirmala's strong sense of agency was reflected by the manifestation of six interrelated facets in her practices. These facets intertwined and formed a delicate string of capacities in Nirmala that enabled and drove her to perform meaningful practice, take

principled action, and enact change despite times of crisis. Molla and Nolan (2020) suggest that these capacities support professional capabilities that can mediate the construction of professional identity; professional capabilities play a vital role in strengthening professionalism. Hence, Nirmala's display of the six facets of agency formed her professional capabilities, shaping her professional identity. Her strong sense of agency was her power to author her professional identity during and most likely beyond the pandemic.

LIMITATIONS

Although having only one participant, we did not see it as a limitation. Barkhuizen (2022) lends support when he says: "Including only one participant in a study enables a comprehensive, in-depth exploration of the experiences of that participant in relation to the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., the research topic)" (p. 14). In retrospect, having a small number of participant is positively advantageous as it allows us—even as life unfolds with all its complexities—to hold the emerging material in mind as a coherent whole throughout all stages of our research process.

What appeared to be the limitations of the study were related to the data collection process as follows: 1) the teacher participant did not write the reflective journal right after each of the observed ERTs; 2) we found a certain degree of similarities in what she wrote across her reflective journals; 3) due to our circumstances during the pandemic, we could not manage to analyze each of the reflective journals as soon as they were posted by our teacher participant on the shared Google Drive; and 4) all of the interviews were not immediately conducted after each ERT and after the teacher participant shared with us her reflective journals. The period from data collection to analysis appeared to be another limitation since it took us three years to complete the construction of the stories, i.e., our research findings. However, our data and findings were trustworthy since we employed multiple data collection methods—triangulation, carried out member checking throughout the construction of the stories (i.e., data analysis and manuscript writing), presented the constructed themes at an international conference and graduate seminars, and received feedback from our attendees and students—communities of inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Narrative inquiry allows all parties to interact and engage in collaborative meaning-making. The meanings that were collaboratively made out of the stories empowered both parties due to a collective identity construction. Additionally, we (researchers and participant) gained better insights into what counted as professional in teachers' professional identity, i.e., that it was multifaceted with spirituality as the defining, foundational, and integrative element. As Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) put it when discussing the basic requirements for quality research, the ethical collaboration built into the process brings us closer to the teacher participant whose stories are told here. The gathered meanings and insights also enriched our own stories as new narrative inquirers.

The stories about our teacher participant's strong sense of agency were presented with evidence of its manifestations in her EFL instruction and identity construction work. The stories also illustrate how her numinous agency was the base of her other facets of agency: inquisitive, deliberative, responsive, moral, and recognitive. The interconnection of these facets formed her capacities and growing identity as a professional EFL teacher during, if not before and beyond, the pandemic. Thus, the stories presented here, especially the part about numinous agency, give us an understanding of a new and substantial component of teacher agency, which was not told elsewhere. Our research findings contributed to advancing our knowledge of teacher agency as a defining element of professional identity construction. The overall findings of the present narrative inquiry strengthen what researchers in the field have long advocated regarding the central role of teachers in educational transformation. We were inspired by our participant's strong sense of agency despite traces of her solitary struggles reflected in the stories. We remain optimistic about the presence of more teachers like her within our educational contexts. Together, they form the collective agency needed to drive the aspired transformation.

Our findings illuminate how agency (as well as spirituality since the latter affirms the former) is not given and innate; instead, they are attained through practice and interaction with significant others and with our sociocultural-historical contexts. Hence, our findings strengthen the policy and practice involving exemplary teachers to mentor and supervise teacher candidates.

After completing the stories, as the inquirers and storytellers, we are left with the question of why, in our teaching contexts, there are teachers whose words and actions seem to display a strong spirituality, yet they do not appear to enact agency in their daily pedagogical practice and in constructing their professional identities. This is an area worth investigating to know to what extent the two—spirituality and agency—correlate and how to incorporate them in teacher education. Additionally, since Indonesia is a country with the biggest Muslim population in the world, we invite future researchers to investigate whether numinous agency also manifests in the pedagogical practices and identity construction work of teachers in other countries with different educational and cultural contexts. This line of inquiry would contribute to the scholarly conversation on centering spirituality in educational transformation (Dei, 2002; Mayes et al., 2010).

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