




An Ecological Inquiry into Transnational English Language Teachers' Emotional Vulnerability and Agency

By MOSTAFA NAZARI , Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong and JABER KAMALI, School of Languages, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Turkey

ABSTRACT: In this study, we propose an ecological model of teacher agency and emotional vulnerability that draws on epistemological roots of these two constructs to capture historico-personal, socio-organizational, and prospective levels of teacher professionalism. We then ontologically apply the model to exploring transnational language teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability in the context of Turkey. Framing the study within a narrative inquiry methodology, we collected data from open-ended questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews. Data analyses revealed that the teachers' personal emotions, embodied agencies, and vulnerabilities were profoundly shaped by individual histories, contextual discourses, and sociocultural particularities. The findings unpack novel dimensions of teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability, attesting to their interconnection, especially within the context of transnationalism. We conclude the study with implications for teacher educators to reduce the pressure on transnational teachers and render their agencies as rooted in effective professional growth, rather than being defined by excessive vulnerabilities that in turn restrict teacher agencies.

Keywords: teacher agency, emotional vulnerability, vulnerability, teacher emotions, ecological perspective

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research has extensively explored how contextual power, interpersonal relationships, sociocultural discourses, and educational practices shape teachers' emotion and identity construction (Agudo, 2018; Barcelos *et al.*, 2022; Benesch, 2017; Gkonou *et al.*, 2020). A central line of research has been how such contextualities of teaching are likely to put teachers in a vulnerable position by negatively shaping their emotional sense-making processes and challenging their internal feelings to view their status in professional jeopardy (e.g., Gao, 2008; Song, 2016, 2022; Yüce *et al.*, 2024). This growing body of research on emotional vulnerability of language teachers is increasingly connecting the concept to personal and contextual factors that define teachers' professional performances and identification processes (e.g., Gao, 2008; Lasky, 2005; Zembylas, 2002). However, despite the growing recognition that emotional vulnerability can significantly influence teachers' professional performances

and the associated sense-making processes (e.g., Alsup, 2018; Yip, 2023), little is known about how emotional vulnerability shapes teachers' agencies, a significant dimension of teachers' meaning-making processes and professional memberships (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, 2019).

Moreover, in recent years and with specific attention to teachers' international collaborations, the issue of transnationalism has received growing institutional and empirical attention. In their paper, Yazan *et al.* (2023) define transnational teachers as those 'who have crossed the national borders physically and ideologically, maintain relationships in multiple countries, languages, and cultures, and engage in transnational spaces' (p. 142), which is also the case with our focal participants in this study. Over the past decades, tourism and international relations have contributed to the growth of multicultural and multinational collaborations in Turkey. In particular, English has gained a more central status in the transnational connectivity of Turkey with the rest of the world (Aygün Oğur and Baycan, 2023). This expanded international collaboration has also influenced Turkish higher education in that more universities were established and English education was deemed as significant for students' and teachers' professional and educational growth. According to Ustuk and Yazan (2022), 'English [in Turkey] is viewed as an essential qualification to be eligible for high-caliber jobs and for the country to become a prominent power in the international economy' (p. 8). With the increased emphasis on English language, many transnational teachers and students have moved to Turkey for educational purposes. Previous research from the Turkish context (e.g., Kamali and Nazari, 2023, Ustuk and Yazan, 2022; Yüce *et al.*, 2024) has shown that teachers working in this context – be it local or transnational – face a myriad of challenges related to adaptability to the sociocultural atmosphere, issues of discrimination and injustice, heavy workload, and low payment. These factors render this context suitable for exploring English language teachers' vulnerability and agency, especially among transnational teachers.

However, few studies have explored the emotional vulnerability and agency of transnational teachers. One significant justification for such research is that both vulnerability and agency are considered processes inextricably connected to contextual policies and cultures (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Kelchtermans, 1999, 2008; Priestley *et al.*, 2015), yet how they feature in transnational teachers' work is open to scrutiny in order to unpack the way transnationalism shapes teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability. The present study aims to explore this under-researched topic in the Turkish context through an ecological inquiry (see Priestley *et al.*, 2015). In this sense, we propose an ecological model of emotional vulnerability and agency that draws on the literature and shows the layers of intersections between these two constructs, and then use the model to explore transnational teachers' professionalism. Thus, the study is significant because it adds to the literature on the three constructs by exploring their

intersections and provides practical implications for teacher educators to facilitate transnational teachers' professional work and inclusion within local contexts.

(Transnational) Language Teachers' Emotional Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a state in which an individual can easily be affected by their surroundings, often negatively. Lasky (2005) defines emotional vulnerability as a 'multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience [and] a state of being that can be influenced by the way people perceive their present situation as it interacts with their identity, beliefs, values, and sense of competence' (p. 901). As is evident from this definition, emotional vulnerability is highly dependent on contextual discourses and policies, conditions that are likely to put teachers in a vulnerable situation of experiencing tensions and a wide range of emotional conflicts. Such a conceptualization resonates well with Zembylas's (2002) understanding of how teachers' emotional vulnerability occurs when there is a divide between 'what they try to feel' and 'what they actually feel' (p. 196). In this study, we conceptualize the 'try to feel' and 'actually feel' through the lens of agency and do so in the context of transnationalism, as we explain later.

Kelchtermans (1999) argued that emotional vulnerability is rooted in socio-historical contextualities that shape teachers' sense-making processes. From this perspective, he later (Kelchtermans, 2009) conceptualized emotional vulnerability through three lenses of external policies, cultures, and discourses creating tensions for teachers' professional performances, the teachers' lack of confidence in their effective performances due to the circulating discourses, and the manifesting factors that largely shape teachers' lack of effective performance. The amalgamation of these three factors 'provides a way of linking the wide range of emotional responses within the teaching experience' (Song, 2022, p. 2) to the external contextualities that constrain teachers in their effective performances, a perspective that closely resonates with agency, as explained below.

The literature suggests that emotional vulnerability is highly contingent upon contextual particularities. One such context is transnational teachers' professional work. Transnational teachers are now prevalent in many educational systems (see WHO, U. N. I. C. E. F, 2023), and experience a host of professional challenges, including personal socialization, inclusion within educational systems, navigating sociocultural shocks, and sustaining their motivation (e.g., Mora Vázquez and Trejo Guzmán, 2023; Sánchez-Martín, 2022; Yip, 2023). Furthermore, recent research on language teachers' emotional vulnerability (e.g., Kamali and Nazari, 2023; Meihami and Esmaili, 2024; Nejadghanbar *et al.*, 2024; Song, 2016, 2022, 2023; Yüce *et al.*, 2024) and transnational teachers (and their emotional vulnerability) (e.g., Cutri and Whiting, 2015; Fairley, 2023; Liu and Li, 2023; Uitto *et al.*, 2016; Yazan *et al.*, 2023) shows that emotional vulnerability is a highly complex experience

that could become exacerbated by contextual intensifiers, especially in transnational contexts and by, as is our focus here, transnational teachers.

Language Teacher Agency and Emotion

Over the past decades, agency and emotion have received increasing attention, especially in language education (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Miller *et al.*, 2018; Tao and Gao, 2021). Although teacher agency has been conceptualized through different sociocognitive, ecological, sociocultural, and positioning perspectives (e.g., Buchanan, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Priestley *et al.*, 2015; Tao and Gao, 2021), 'researchers agree that agency involves doing things in the world' (Miller *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). From its definition as teachers' 'conscious efforts to resist feelings of powerlessness and negativity experienced as a by-product of the [environmental] conditions' (Ollerhead, 2010, p. 607), to their 'capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on their world' (Rogers and Wetzel, 2013, p. 63), to their 'capacity to influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect one's work' (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate, 2016, p. 319), and to 'a language teacher's intentional authority to make choices and act accordingly in his or her local context' (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p. 15), agency has been tightly connected to teachers' efforts to bring about change through informed decision-making.

Kayi-Aydar (2019) 'argue[d] that LTA [language teacher agency] is best understood through an exploration of an identity, agency and emotions triangle' (p. 18). In this study, we focus on the agency and emotion of transnational teachers and exclude an identity lens because of space limitations. Emotions have been viewed as key constructs in the way teachers navigate their professionalism. As a construct that lies in the interface between personal and professional/sociocultural factors, emotion has gained increasing attention in current discussions of teaching and teacher education (e.g., Barcelos *et al.*, 2022; Benesch, 2017; Nazari and Karimpour, 2023; Schutz *et al.*, 2018; Zembylas, 2003). Furthermore, emotions have been viewed from different universalist, cognitive, sociocultural, and poststructural standpoints (for a complete discussion see Benesch, 2017), perspectives that have defined the waxes and wanes of emotion research based on personal sense-making, interpersonal communications, and sociopolitical forces. In this study, we situate emotion within a vulnerability sphere, seeking the internal-external dimensions of emotional vulnerability based on the literature, and linking such vulnerabilities to the teachers' agency (see Figure 1).

In recent years, research on the emotion and agency of teachers has also grown. For example, Benesch (2018) reported on how 13 US teachers were able to draw on their agency to resist institutional demands that constrained their positive emotion work. Additionally, Miller and Gkonou (2018) reported on how US and UK teachers could transform their emotion labor into emotional reward through enacting a pedagogy of care that had roots in their agency

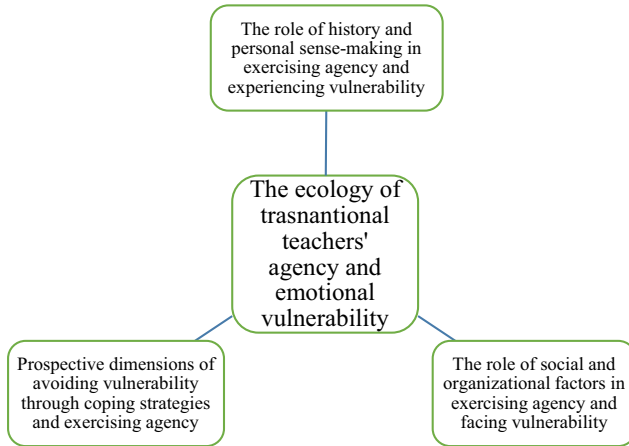


Figure 1. The ecology of transnational teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency

potentials. In a more recent study, Tao *et al.* (2024) collected data from 12 teachers through three rounds of interviews regarding the teachers' emotion and agency in response to online education. The findings revealed that the versatile emotional fluctuations of the teachers were highly important in their agency to respond well to online teaching. Collectively, the literature on emotion and agency of teachers is increasing, yet little is known about the relation between emotion and agency in the context of transnational teachers' experiences, hence our focus here on language teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency.

To explore transnational teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency, this study draws on an ecological perspective of agency (van Lier, 2011). Biesta and Tedder (2006) define teacher agency as 'teachers' capacity to critically shape their responses to challenging situations' (p. 11). In this study, 'challenging situations' is operationally defined as the context of transnationalism, which has been recurrently shown to pose on teachers emotional and identification challenges (e.g., Fairley, 2023; Kamali and Nazari, 2023; Yazan *et al.*, 2023) and is conceptualized as the form of embodied agency that van Lier (2008, 2011) described. Furthermore, an ecological perspective views teacher agency as the 'outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions' (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p. 29). Iterational dimensions refer to teachers' histories and biographies, which in this study feature as teachers' histories as immigrating to the target context for teaching purposes, a point that could also serve as a source of emotional vulnerability and shaping their agentic actions, especially in terms of socializing into the new context. The practical-evaluative dimension consists of sociocultural and affordance-related particularities of the teaching context, a point that is one of the major sources of emotional vulnerability and tensions for transnational teachers (e.g., Fairley,

2023). Finally, the projective dimension includes the prospective perceptions and goal-settings that teachers envision, which are quite likely to happen to transnational teachers when they face sociocultural shocks that may influence their agencies in terms of investing in their teaching and future selves.

As this conceptualization reveals, transnational teachers are likely to face personal and professional fluctuations that can significantly influence their agencies and emotional vulnerabilities. Additionally, emotional vulnerability has been described not only as a personal experience, but one that is closely connected to organizational and sociocultural contextualities (e.g., Kelchtermans, 2009; Lasky, 2005), a perspective that perfectly matches with an ecological perspective of agency. In this study, we explore the role of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors in transnational teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability. Figure 1 shows this conceptualization. The figure depicts first, teachers' histories and personal understandings play a key role in their ability to handle emotional vulnerability and exercise agency in the new context. Second, it highlights that sociocultural and organizational factors are important in facilitating or impeding the way teachers face emotional vulnerability or exercise agency. The third notes how teachers navigate their current emotional vulnerabilities, through coping strategies, for future action and better exercising agency.

Through contextualizing and examining the components of Figure 1 the study reported here sought to provide meaningful insights regarding the experiences of transnational English language teachers. The study was guided by the following question:

How does transnationalism influence English language teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency at personal, institutional, and sociocultural levels?

2. METHOD

Context and Participants

In this study, we focus on teachers who immigrated to Turkey with their own sociocultural backgrounds and histories, a context that rendered exploring transnationalism worthy of attention. The study participants were all transnational teachers who taught English at a school of languages within a university in Istanbul, Turkey where the second researcher works. The school aims to prepare students in a one-year preparatory program to enter their faculties (e.g., law, management, psychology, sociology, education, etc.) whose medium of instruction is English. There are two reasons for having transnational teachers in this school. First, Turkey has become an emergent multilingual context because of its geopolitical significance that facilitates the recruitment of transnational teachers from diverse backgrounds (Arsal, 2019). Second, to ensure the quality of teachers in the school, the university consistently seeks highly qualified teachers irrespective of their nationality. The teachers were from

Table 1. Demographic information of the transnational teachers

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education	Years of teaching	Continent of origin ¹	Teaching qualifications
T1	Female	40	B.A. (English Literature)	15	Europe	Local Teacher Training Course
T2	Female	40	M.A. (ELT)	16	Europe	Cambridge CELTA & DELTA
T3	Male	39	M.A. (TESOL)	12	Europe	Local Teacher Training Course
T4	Male	28	M.A. (Management)	7	Asia	Cambridge CELTA
T5	Female	51	Ph.D. (TEFL)	22	Asia	Cambridge DELTA
T6	Male	34	M.A. (English Literature)	10	Asia	Local Teacher Training Course
T7	Female	52	M.A. (Education)	22	North America	Local Teacher Training Course
T8	Female	42	M.A. (TEFL)	14	Asia	Cambridge CELTA & DELTA
T9	Male	40	M.A. (TEFL)	15	Asia	Cambridge CELTA & DELTA
T10	Male	32	M.A. (Applied Linguistics)	5	Europe	Cambridge CELTA

different geographical settings, including Germany, the UK, Bosnia, the US, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and India. We intentionally selected the teachers from different geographical backgrounds in line with the theoretical framework of the study in order to unpack how history comes to shape the teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency. The teachers had on average five years of teaching experience, with their credentials being BA, MA, and PhD as well as education and management (see Table 1). Before starting the study, the teachers' approval was obtained in line with ethical expectations and requirements.

Research Design

In order to explore the transnational teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability, we adopted a narrative inquiry research design because it facilitates capturing teachers' agency through stories that teachers share (e.g., Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Kayi-Aydar, 2019) and is useful in capturing the teachers' views of their emotional vulnerabilities (e.g., Fairley, 2023; Nazari *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, narrative inquiry unpacks how teachers' sense-making of their current situations relate to their own histories and backgrounds (Barkhuizen, 2016), a perspective that closely related to the purposes we sought in this study regarding the role of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors in

transnational teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability. Since narrative inquiry concentrates on how individuals perceive the role of contextual issues in their professional performances and developments (Barkhuizen and Consoli, 2021), the three data collection methods discussed below fitted this research design vis-à-vis unpacking how context featured in the transnational teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency.

Data Collection

In line with the above research design, we collected data from three sources and in three stages. At the first stage, we aimed to explore the types of contextual issues that influence transnational teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency. Thus, we designed an open-ended questionnaire that asked the teachers to list some of the major contextual issues that complicate their effective instruction and position them in a vulnerable situation. These observations complied with the theoretical stance shown in Figure 1. The teachers were asked to write their responses in English and hand them to the second researcher.

At the second stage of the study, we asked the teachers to complete a narrative frame that aimed to collect their concrete experiences when they experienced emotional vulnerability and their agency was influenced by transnationalism. Narrative frames are grids of story-telling that guide teachers in sharing one of their concrete experiences (Barkhuizen and Wette, 2008). The narrative frame was particularly helpful in the context of this study because the study followed a theoretical perspective that aimed at examining teachers' history and personal sense-making of emotional vulnerability and agency in the context of working as a transnational teacher, foci that closely relate to the methodological rigor of narrative frames (see Kayi-Aydar, 2021). With this in mind, we asked the teachers to share a narrative that showed their experiences of emotional vulnerability and agency as transnational teachers. The teachers completed the frames in English.

At the third stage of the study, we invited the teachers to participate in semi-structured interviews. Since the teachers had already shared the contextual factors shaping their emotional vulnerabilities and agencies as well as the narrative frames, we wanted to expand on these two sources and delve deeper into their experiences through interviews. This procedural step served as the triangulation dimension of the study. The interview questions involved a) how they feel as a transnational teacher, b) how and whether personal issues influence their perceptions of transnational work as well as their emotions and ability to teach effectively, c) how institutional factors shape their vulnerabilities and agencies as transnational teachers, d) how working in the new context as a transnational teacher influenced their emotions and agencies as effective teachers, and e) how they managed the arising challenges and emotional

tensions when facing contextual hurdles. The interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted on average 30 minutes.

Researcher Positionality

The positionality of researchers plays a key role in the way they make sense of the research process because it shows how their history and present empirical engagement shape the conduction of a study (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). In this study, both of us are transnational teachers who have been exposed to the implications of transnationalism for our identity development and emotion work. We have also both been exposed to different types of vulnerabilities that have influenced our professional growth and agencies. Thus, we assumed that this issue would be a fitting purpose for research. This reflexivity was mixed with the complexities of work in Turkey, which led to the conduction of this study. In this sense, the first researcher designed the study and helped the second researcher with operationalizing the study and collecting the data. The second researcher, based in Turkey, collected the data and together with the first researcher analyzed the data. The second researcher was able to establish a close relationship with the teachers because he knew them well and this issue provided a safe environment where data could be collected and the teachers could unpack their responses. This researcher also obtained the teachers' approval for participation and in line with the institutional review board policies, had obtained the institutional agreement to conduct the study.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis was guided by content analysis (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Since we had defined the broad categories of Figure 1 based on the literature, a content analysis perspective enabled us to unpack how the three areas of ecology featured in the teachers' data, which is a point of differentiation between content analysis and other inductive approaches like thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, we first defined the ecology of transnational teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency as the broader level of focus to the study. Then, we decomposed this conceptualization into three historico-personal, socio-organizational, and prospective dimensions, capturing all of the components of teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability, as shown in Figure 1. This method of analysis helped us keep a refined and neat track of the teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability based on both the literature and the emerging data.

We started with coding the data. Here, we engaged in reading the data in order to develop effective codes that could be subsumed under the three categories. Per data source (i.e., narrative frames and interviews), these codes were developed by assigning names to them and then including or excluding the codes based on their representativeness. For example, when a code had less

representation among the other codes, it was excluded because it could little capture the teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency. This kind of inclusion/exclusion could help us better portray the dominant and more fundamental issues that could influence transnational teachers' vulnerabilities and agencies. We then developed two codes per category as representing the teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency. It must be mentioned that the data from the questionnaires were included into the other two sources to support better interpreting them. In analyzing the data, we engaged in peer discussion to enhance the trustworthiness of the analyses and increase the accuracy of interpretations. In what follows, these categories and codes are presented.

Findings

The analysis of the data showed three categories in relation to the transnational language teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency (Figure 2).

Historico-Personal Level

The subcategories in the historico-personal level showed that these layers impose a specific form of agency on transnational teachers in resisting or

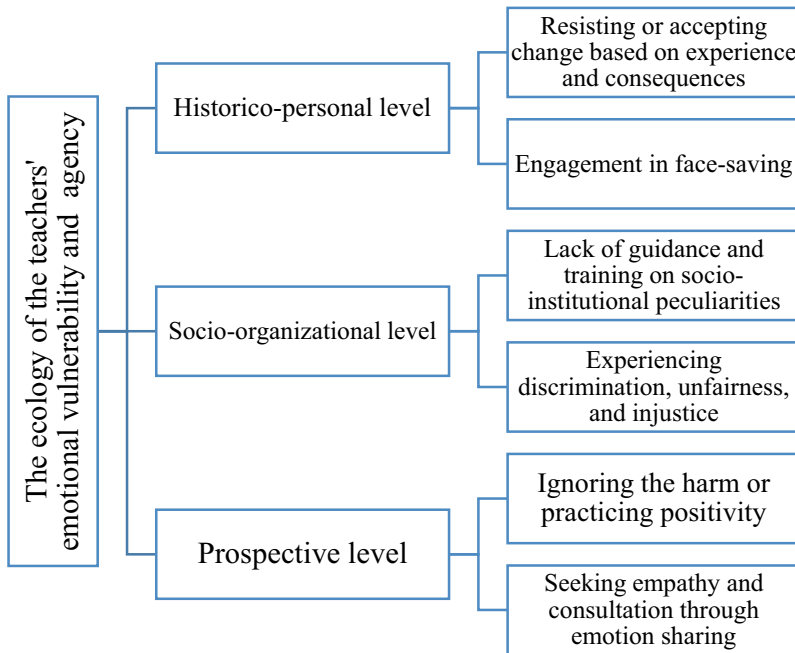


Figure 2. Transnational language teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency

accepting the changes and being engaged in saving their faces, which collectively put them in different forms of emotional vulnerability.

Resisting or Accepting Change based on Experience and Consequences

While some of the participating teachers argued that their experiences as transnational teachers and the negative (or positive) emotions they experienced during this career did not impact their way of teaching or even living (their sense of agency) (Yazan *et al.*, 2023), others claimed that these experiences and the associated consequences became incentives for their personal change, resulting in various forms of emotional vulnerability and tensions for them. For instance, T3 stated that he did not change his appearance due to the organization's demands on shaving for religious reasons. He went on to discuss that a woman had asked him to shave off his beard and that she could provide him many job opportunities, to which he stated he had replied 'What about not to pray?' (T3, interview), evidencing resistance to change his beliefs for his career. T1 also discussed how she resisted change by simply ignoring the comments she got from her students. She said:

When students evaluated a teacher, there was this question about whether the teacher only used English in class ... even today, let alone when I first came, I didn't know Turkish, it really bothered me to see low points on that question because there was no way I could use Turkish in class. That used to put me down ... however, it affected me temporarily but then I focused on the positives because there weren't many of those. [negative comments] (T1, interview)

According to this teacher, she was not influenced by unfair negative comments because she did not receive a lot of them.

Conversely, there were teachers who welcomed transnationalism based on their personal experiences (Kamali and Nazari, 2023), as a form of resisting their emotional vulnerability in order to enhance their agency. For example, T8, in discussing how she changed during her career as a language teacher in Turkey, argued that she started liking people regardless of their beliefs and culture. She pinpointed that 'I had a different idea of religious people when I first came to this university ... but I see these people are nice and there is no reason not to like them. Now, I really like them which helps me find more friends and feel more connected to my students' (T8, interview). The extract shows a change in her belief which informs the sense of agency in the teacher on the ground that she wants to communicate more with them and share ideas in order to control her vulnerabilities in the new context. T8, elsewhere in the interview, also argued that she has learned simple techniques to overcome her anger in the face of life difficulties such as counting to 10 or breathing some fresh air. T10, on the same note, argued that he was initially very negative about being in a foreign country and disliked the word 'yabancı' used to refer to foreigners. However, he feels

now 'comfortable working in a multicultural context filled with foreigners who share the same goal and purpose which is education' (T10, interview). This point delineates how the duration of residence in a multilingual context could help teachers accept the change, make an agentive move toward their well-being by enjoying the working environment and mitigate the ensuing emotional vulnerability.

Engagement in Saving face²

Data analysis showed that emotional vulnerability can influence teachers' agency, causing them to at times lose face in various institutional relationships. In this vein, some of the teachers sought and found remedies to save face to better exercise their agency. To do so, they hid their identity, manipulated that, or feigned it (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Sánchez-Martín, 2022). T3, in the interview, argued that he changed his name to Max (pseudonym) to hide his real identity since his nationality was not very well-reputed in Turkey. T7, also, argued that she 'was like a color' (T7, interview) to her organization because of her native accent, suggesting that she stood out and was often judged based on her accent rather than her professional abilities. She said:

It didn't affect me as a teacher, but it affected me as a person; it didn't really affect the way I am teaching or for example, I teach less or not putting as much effort as I normally would; it just affects you as a human being." (T1, interview)

She also lamented that she sometimes changed and faked her accent 'to escape from being in the showcase' (T7, interview) in that she wanted to be recognized for her dedication, hard work, and talent, rather than for her place of birth, which was beyond her control. The extracts suggest that efforts to save face as a result of facing emotional vulnerability can impact one's agency in terms of their personal and institutional efforts. Using different names or faking accents can clearly illustrate how these teachers have adjusted and navigated their identity and agency to better meet their real-life teaching and well-being needs.

Socio-Organizational Level

Analysis of the data suggested that two of the major contributors to the socio-organizational level of teacher agency and emotional vulnerability were a lack of guidance and training and experiencing discrimination.

Lack of Guidance and Training on Socio-Institutional Peculiarities

Professional development, which is continuous and is conducted in both stages of pre- and while working, was found to be a common thread among participating teachers affecting their emotional vulnerability and agency (Ustuk and Yazan, 2022). Therefore, the first factor was lack of guidance and training that propelled the teachers toward unwanted vulnerability, thereby impacting

their sense of agency. One essential aspect of training for new members involves understanding legal issues. In any foreign country, including Turkey, both employees and employers must take specific legal steps to activate a work permit. In this context, one teacher noted in her narrative frame:

In another institution I worked for in Turkey, management had a distinct lack of care to explore [notify the employees about] the requirements and legal issues affecting the foreign staff and I think they knowingly ignored the issue and failed to inform the staff until the very last moment when directed by the rectorate to retain the foreign staff after all. (T2, narrative frame)

It is evident in the extract that the lack of guidance from the managerial position left the teacher in a vulnerable state that affected his agency as well in that the teacher felt miserable and redundant. Likewise, T5, in discussing the solutions to vulnerable states she was in at the beginning and during her career in Turkey, stated that 'we can't be independent from the beginning. We need mentors. Professional development can be a key to success. Providing sufficient training for teachers . . . can make the path clear and then they can expect us to be autonomous' (T5, interview). T2 also expressed that the 'lack of guidance I have received as an international tutor with regards to family residence procedure made me question my ability in helping people I love . . . I started questioning my efficiency for my family' (T2, interview). These extracts highlight the role of training in teachers' agency and how it can predict and prevent emotional vulnerability in the teachers. The extracts reveal that untrained transnational teachers can question their agency regarding different aspects of their life such as family or workplace and experience some negative emotions and vulnerability.

Experiencing Discrimination, Unfairness, and Injustice

Another factor that participants reported influenced teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability was experiencing discriminating behaviors and unfair judgments (Kamali and Nazari, 2023). These were reported as affected teachers' agency in that the teachers reported that they felt stressed as a result. T7 raised the topic of an 'extremely toxic international team of teachers' in her narrative when she was explaining an experience that made her emotionally vulnerable. She complained about how these teachers kept backbiting and spreading rumors about her. She went further expressing that 'it caused an unbearably high and consistent level of stress that affected my health and social life, even outside the workplace' (T7, narrative frame). She held what she viewed as poor and defective management accountable for 'unhealthy competition, personal bias, and prejudice in the team' which 'prevented communication and resulted in constant psychological pressure, fear of mistakes, and insecurity in a large group of teachers' (T7, narrative frame). Her reaction to this unfair working environment, then, was to leave the workplace. T9, also, maintained that the unfair

behavior of colleagues and managers induced them to question their own abilities which caused the 'loss of necessary self-confidence as teachers' which seems 'more necessary for transnational teachers' (T9, interview) on the ground that they teach foreigners outside their own country. T3, in the same vein, pointed out that the impact of 'sudden requirements' (T3, narrative frame) such as teacher training certificates like CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) for foreign teachers without prior notice added a lot of pressure to his life at that time which. The sudden imposition of needing a CELTA for non-native teachers highlights a systemic injustice rooted in discriminatory practices within educational institutions which unfairly disadvantages non-native teachers by placing an additional barrier to their professional advancement and employment stability.

Prospective Level

The analysis of the data suggests that the prospective level included two dimensions of the teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability that served how teachers can adopt effective coping strategies to deal with the possible impeded agency or excessive vulnerability in the future.

Ignoring the Harm or Practicing Positivity

The teachers reported needing to sustain being positive; otherwise, and in line with previous studies, they would face excessive emotional vulnerability and reduced agency (Meihami and Esmaili, 2023). In this respect, T4 argued that 'if I, as a transnational teacher, do not concentrate and even exaggerate the positivity of working as a teacher, I will end up being left alone and have no one to talk to because people hate nagging individuals' (T4, interview). In another extract, T10 maintained that 'a possible way I think I will take in the future is to ignore the behavior and pretend I didn't see to avoid any type of conflict. This can bring peace of mind for me' (T10, interview). Along similar lines, T8 posited that working on our self-confidence may help us overcome vulnerable states and get control of our agency. She raised it in the following extract:

I just came to the conclusion that working on my own mindset and self-confidence can be the best way to solve problems. You know, problems and challenges are always there, I mean we cannot live in a workplace that is infallible. So, I have to work on myself and my mindset to be able to cope with these issues by some strategies such as positivity or something like that. (T8, interview)

As the extract suggests, the teacher contended that the more confident teachers become, the less they are affected by external factors, specifically emotional ones, which means their agency would be maintained and even improved.

Seeking Empathy and Consultation through Emotion-Sharing

This subcategory was one of the most common threads among the participating teachers with seven teachers mentioning it (Yazan *et al.*, 2023). For example, T1, borrowing the metaphor of cocoons, stated that:

... not being closed in those cocoons and sharing your experience with other colleagues is what I will do more in the future, it makes me feel relieved. It's relaxing to see you're not alone and others have also experienced those challenges. They can also offer you some solutions. (T1, interview)

T6 also suggested that he would share his happiness and sadness with his colleagues and friends to 'enhance happiness and alleviate suffering' (T6, narrative frame). Seeking sympathy to alleviate the vulnerability caused by different factors is not the mere purpose of this ecological layer but some teachers sought consultation by sharing their feelings with their coworkers. As a case in point, T6 expressed that:

... it's funny enough, I had this situation [consulting with others] just 15 minutes ago. I was going through some kinds of issue out of school and shared it with someone and that person's wife had the same issue and he had some ideas how I could solve the issue. (T6, interview)

As the extract suggests, sharing or voicing issues could bring some help from others which assisted them in solving the arising problems. Hence, participating teachers noted that they have learned that their agency is influenced by sharing or not sharing their emotional experiences with their colleagues or friends and this can be a trend for them in the future in order to face less emotional vulnerability.

3. DISCUSSION

The above categories reveal novel dimensions of transnational teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability. In this sense, the teachers were faced with various contextual forces that complicated their agencies, yet they also engaged in adopting coping strategies that facilitated their professional growth. These findings were then anchored into the three-pronged conceptualization that we earlier explicated in [Figure 1](#), which are now conceptually presented as [Figure 3](#).

At the historico-personal level, we found that the teachers carried their homeland perceptions and understandings that had already shaped their agencies and causes of emotional vulnerability. In this regard, the teachers' understanding of agency and emotional vulnerability clashed with the existing cultures and discourses. This finding corroborates earlier discussions regarding the transition shocks that transnational teachers may experience (e.g., Fairley, 2023; Kamali and Nazari, 2023; Yazan *et al.*, 2023), which here featured in the teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability, a point that Gao (2008), Kelchtermans (2009), and Song (2016) discussed in relation to the impacts of discourse and power on

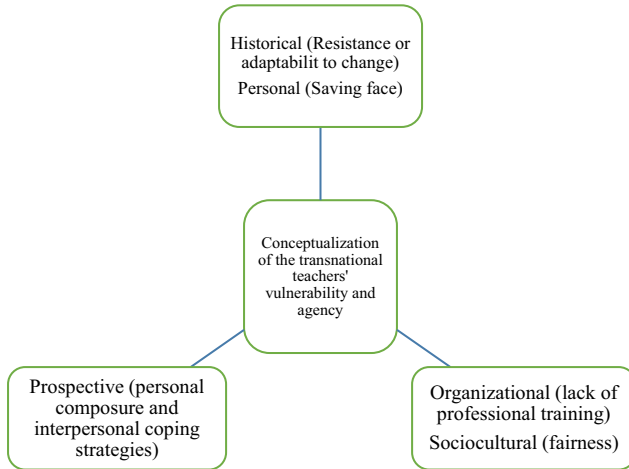


Figure 3. The focal transnational teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency

teachers' vulnerability. However, our findings add to this discussion in two important ways. First, while the teachers showed resistance in response to the circulating discourses and policies, they also resisted their own sense-making processes in order to experience enhanced agency and less emotional vulnerability. This is a novel dimension of resistance as a form of agency (see Tao and Gao, 2021) in that teachers attempt to navigate their professionalism through agentic acts such as changing beliefs and managing their negative emotions. Second, the teachers adopted the coping strategy of hiding or faking their identities to facilitate their both agency and emotional vulnerability. This finding reveals the interconnection among agency, emotional vulnerability, and identity in that teachers attempt to contribute to the betterment of one (i.e., agency) and to the reduction of another (i.e., emotional vulnerability) through the coping strategy of changing their identities. Such an adoption of identity as a coping strategy is a highly novel dimension of teachers' professionalism, which was unpacked in this study.

At the socio-organizational level, the teachers referred to issues that were primarily discursive and were then extended to the context of education. Lack of attention to teachers' professional growth and familiarity with institutional policies as well as issues of discrimination, unfairness, and injustice reveal the necessity of reconsiderations in the policy and planning of institutional organizations. The key point here is that, as Biesta and Tedder (2007) and Priestley *et al.* (2015) argued, agency is a process that is achieved through interaction with the existing contextual parameters. However, as we see, the context has complicated professional growth for the teachers (see Ustuk and Yazan, 2022), especially in light of their transnational character. Relatedly, Alsup (2018), Song (2022), and Yip (2023) have emphatically noted that the emotional vulnerability of teachers is closely connected with the contextual affordances of those contexts. Here, it can

be seen that not only have such contextual affordances been provided for the teachers inadequately, this low provision has turned out to become a major source of impeding teachers' agency with particular reference to the teachers as transnational educators. That is, exercising agency has been so closely connected to the way issues of discrimination and injustice as well as lack of professional development have permeated the context that they have become intensified for transnational teachers. Perhaps this is among the first studies exposing issues of discrimination and injustice in the context of transnational teachers' agency and emotional vulnerability, yet the findings reveal saddening dimensions of transnational teachers who should be of greater attention to educational decision-makers, due to their personal complexes and professional challenges.

In the face of such personal and professional challenges, the teachers adopted interesting coping strategies to stand against more severe experiences of emotional vulnerability and curtailed agency. In this regard, they engaged in practicing positivity and sharing their emotions. Earlier research has shown that teachers can engage in professional practices (e.g., self-inquiry, reflection, developing communities of practice, and collegial ties) to conquer emotional vulnerability and reduced agency (see Gao, 2008; Kayi-Aydar, 2015, 2019; Kelchtermans, 2009; Song, 2016, 2023), yet our findings situate the focal teachers' coping strategies in the context of co-constitutive dialectics of emotional vulnerability and agency. That is, the teachers' coping strategies, emotional vulnerability, and agency were like a chain whose rings are interconnected with one influencing the others. For example, the teachers' reasoning for practicing positive emotions was rooted in their experiences of facing emotional vulnerability and informed their future agency as effective teachers. Or, their search for sharing emotions and seeking empathy could facilitate their exercising agency and further decrease the possibility of facing emotional vulnerability. These findings, above all, show the nexus between agency and emotional vulnerability as two pinnacles of transnational teachers' professionalism.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the emotional vulnerability and agency of transnational language teachers working in the Turkish context through an ecological perspective. Our model of ecological inquiry, as shown in [Figure 1](#), revealed novel dimensions of the participant teachers' emotional vulnerability and agency that have little been documented in previous research. In this regard, emotional vulnerability and agency operated in a nexus of influence on transnational teachers' professionalism inasmuch as the teachers' personal emotions, identities, embodied agencies, and vulnerabilities were profoundly shaped by individual histories, contextual discourses, and sociocultural particularities. These findings open novel dimensions of transnational teachers' professionalism in specific relation to their agency and emotional vulnerability.

The findings provide clear implications for teacher educators. As the literature has effectively shown (e.g., Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Buchanan, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Priestley *et al.*, 2015), exercising agency hinges upon contextual forms of professional work. As we found, such agency raises dilemmas for transnational teachers, in turn increasing experiences of emotional vulnerability (Lasky, 2005; Song, 2016). That is, transnational teachers should be understood as individuals who are already packed with personal complexes and uncertainties. When they do not receive adequate support from target-domain administrators and decision-makers, they are likely to face more severe forms of vulnerabilities. Thus, teacher educators should be mindful of how to draw on transnational teachers' peculiarities and embed those peculiarities into preparation courses. Such courses could be effective sites of not only practicing instructional issues, but also how to navigate student-related cultures and discourses. Such forms of work in teacher education courses could effectively relieve the pressure on transnational teachers and render their agencies as rooted in effective professional growth, rather than being defined by excessive vulnerability.

The study offers important lines of thinking for future research. One limitation of this study, beyond the low number of participants, was the lack of observing teachers' classes, a point that could effectively unpack how transnational teachers navigate their interactions with students. Furthermore, a careful reading of this paper and its findings reveals that we have constantly discussed the central constructs of the study in relation to the context of transnationalism. We believe that comparative research on transnational and intracultural teachers' agencies and emotional vulnerability would reveal highly fruitful findings. In the end, we also believe that the model we proposed in this study could be used for further exploring emotional vulnerability and agency of teachers in relation to further teacher-related characteristics such as identities, motivations, efficacies, personal beliefs, and wellbeing. We hope that future research can follow this line of research to better understand how teachers, especially transnational ones, experience agency and emotional vulnerability across different geographical contexts.

5. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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

6. ORCID

Mostafa Nazari  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1087-126X>

7. NOTES

¹ Continent rather than country of origin given to preserve anonymity.

² Saving face involves how individuals (here teachers) attempt to project an identity of themselves that aligns with social norms and expectations.

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Correspondence

Mostafa Nazari,

Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Chung Sze Yuen Building, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Email: mostafanazari136969@gmail.com