

Identity Transformation in Exile: Teacher Agency on the Thai-Myanmar Border

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Abstract

Who becomes a teacher in exile, and what does displacement do to their professional identity? This paper examines how power relations, political rupture, and structural inequality shape teacher identity formation among eighteen Myanmar migrant educators working in Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) in Mae Sot, Thailand. Drawing on Zembylas and Chubbuck's (2018) political approach to teacher identity, we treat professional identity not as a stable professional attribute but as an ongoing, politically constituted process shaped by history, power, and context.

Based on interviews conducted in mid-2024, our study follows three groups displaced by the 2021 military coup: ten former state-system teachers, four university students who became teachers in exile, and four professionals who entered the classroom as volunteers. Attending to emotion, narrative, reflection, and agency as interacting dimensions of identity formation, we show how legal precarity, financial exploitation, and institutional abandonment simultaneously constrain and reconstitute who these teachers can be.

We find that identity formation in exile is neither linear nor uniform. For some, teaching becomes a non-negotiable core self, a way to sustain purpose and resist dispossession. For others, it remains a meaningful but temporary commitment held alongside plans for resettlement or further education. Across all trajectories, participants describe a conscious shift away from rote memorisation toward student-centred approaches, framing this move as both an educational and a political act, a refusal to reproduce the authoritarian logics of the system they left.

We argue that recognising the politicised dimensions of teacher identity is a necessary precondition for effective support. Programmes designed without attending to how power shapes these teachers' professional lives risk addressing symptoms such as income, training, and documentation, while leaving the structural conditions that produce them intact.