



“I BELIEVE RELATIONSHIPS MATTER EVERYWHERE” THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIPS WELL-BEING IN INTERCULTURAL THEMATIC-TELECOLLABORATION

Almas Khoirun Nisa^{a*}, Nur Arifah Drajati^b

^a English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta Indonesia

^b English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta Indonesia

*Corresponding author: Jl. Ir. Sutami No.36, Jebres, Kec. Jebres, Kota Surakarta, Jawa Tengah 57126, Indonesia. almasnissa18@student.uns.ac.id.

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abstract

Relationships among students and teachers are important in a learning environment since teachers and students are the main components of learning activities. Telecollaboration attempts to connect language learners to native speakers in the online environment to facilitate their intercultural learning. As online learning activities need to pay attention to the relationship between the teacher and learner, this study investigates the impact of the relationship well-being that occurs in the telecollaboration program on the pre-service teacher's future career. An autobiographical narrative inquiry was used in this study for an in-depth discussion of the critical incidents that happened in this program aimed to give the pre-service teachers insight for developing their professional identity in their future careers for the betterment of EFL education. Data were collected through the pre-service teacher's diaries and artifacts in the form of photos during the telecollaboration program. Various issues of critical incidents are discussed including positive relationships and negative relationships reflected in the pre-service teacher's future career that turn into adaptive reflection. This study has future implications for pre or in-service EFL teachers and directions for future research to pay more attention to the well-being of all aspects of education.

INTRODUCTION

Relationships between students and teachers are important in a learning environment (Shepard et al. 2022). Since relationships become a part of well-being, the promotion of student well-being has gained significant traction in recent times, and educational institutions across the globe have recognized its extensive advantages (Joing et al., 2020). According to Govorova et al. (2020), student well-being is a prerequisite for academic success and a crucial result of education in the twenty-first century. One of the main pillars of wellbeing is social relationships (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). According to Seligman (2011), Closeness and connection with family, friends, or coworkers are aspects of relationships. All effective relationships are accompanied by positive sentiments, involvement, significance, or accomplishment. Attempts to connect language learners to native speakers in the online environment have been made using different models for over two decades now, and have been termed virtual connections, teletandem, globally networked learning, telecollaboration, or more recently, virtual exchange (Dooly and O'Dowd 2018). In an intercultural thematic-telecollaboration class of language learners, the students gather in geographically distant locations through online communication

(O'Dowd, 2011). Therefore, social relationships between EFL learners as part of their well-being are important for teachers who moderate such activities to understand.

Recent years have witnessed research on the effectiveness of telecollaboration for facilitating EFL students in developing intercultural competence (Leinkaitis et al. 2019, Liu et al. 2023) and separate research about relationships well-being between students and teachers in an educational context (Falk et al. 2022, Shephard et al. 2023). We can see that telecollaboration and intercultural communication skills are closely associated when we consider the two components that it builds, one of which is to encourage students to use the internet as a way to acquire intercultural competence. By engaging in telecollaboration to facilitate the students' needs in language learning, students can enhance their intercultural competency while advancing their study of a target foreign language. Unfortunately, there's no research was found that looked for relationship well-being in intercultural thematic-telecollaboration. In the concern of the importance of relationship well-being in an educational context, in this autobiographical research, the author aims to narrate the author's reflection on how the relationship well-being experienced in intercultural thematic-telecollaboration impacts the author's future career as a pre-service teacher.

According to Seligman (2011), well-being is defined as a subjective measure of happiness and life satisfaction, and engagement is the subjective measure of being absorbed in a task. Well-being is considered with five elements that are Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment or Achievement which are directly collapsed with the term PERMA. Well-being is High PERMA is considered to be a state of optimal well-being, which is termed 'flourishing' (Seligman, 2012). Based on Mercer & Gregersen's (2020) teacher well-being theory, the teaching and learning environment holds a significant influence on well-being. Teachers typically experience greater positivity when things are going well at work as opposed to when things are more challenging. Our sense of well-being is influenced by a variety of personal and professional characteristics as well as environmental elements, most notably how we perceive our surroundings. Well-being is more than just the antithesis of stress, just as health is not only the opposite of illness (Holmes, 2005). This means that looking beyond stress-reduction strategies to include ways to cultivate an appreciation for the frequent "uplifts" that come with working day in and day out, as well as ways to focus on life's blessings, is crucial for improving well-being (Kanner et al., 1981). For pre-service teachers, the term well-being is not far from the teachers' well-being itself since pre-service teachers are in the preparation stage to be teachers in the future.

Positive relationship-building fundamentals include empathy, respect, trust, responsiveness, communication, and collaboration or cooperation, which are all largely derived from socio-emotional skills (Mercer, 2020). Based on Mercer (2020), teacher well-being in positive relationships includes how establishing rapport with students, beginning from an interpersonal viewpoint while also considering the multicultural aspects of interactions. Teachers also consider how interpersonal interactions will ultimately affect the climate of the entire class, and they look at how to encourage healthy group dynamics and the importance of cooperative and cooperative activities. Other connections, such as those with coworkers, the head teacher or director of studies, other individuals in the workplace, school-related authorities, and the larger community, can also have a significant impact on one's professional well-being. In this case, teachers stress the need to employ efficient communication techniques in all interactions within the workplace and outside of it.

For more than 20 years, efforts have been made to pair language learners with native speakers in an online setting using various models. These attempts have gone by various names, including virtual connections, teletandem, globally networked learning, telecollaboration, and,

more recently, virtual exchange (Dooly and O'Dowd 2018). According to Belz's (2003) definition of telecollaboration is the type of online intercultural contact that takes place between learners and both native and non-native speakers of the target language. It is the word used to describe online intercultural dialogue among language speakers (Belz, 2003). This telecollaboration activity now can be easily conducted by using Zoom meetings. To support the development of (1) foreign language (FL) linguistic competence and (2) intercultural competence, telecollaboration entails employing Internet communication technologies by internationally dispersed language students in institutionalized settings (Belz, 2003, p. 68). We can observe that there is a strong correlation between telecollaboration and intercultural communication competence by examining the two components of telecollaboration, one of which is to encourage students to use the Internet as a means of developing intercultural competence. Students can use telecollaboration as an exercise to hone their intercultural competency while assisting with the study of their target foreign language.

Based on numerous studies, the goal of using telecollaboration in the study of intercultural competence by applying a variety of online programs with native and non-native speakers of other languages is to help students develop their intercultural competence (Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019), become tolerant of cultural ambiguities (Jin & Erben, 2007), and respect other cultures, improve their attitudes and perceptions towards other cultures (Yeh & Heng, 2022), respect cultural differences (Vu, 2022), improve their motivation (Liaw, 2019), and engage in the authentic telecollaboration (Wu et al., 2020). Thus, telecollaboration allows English learners to maximize their language learning experience.

According to Schön (1983), teacher reflection has gained widespread acceptance and application in the literature on teacher education, and for this reason, reflection is the main strategy in teacher development programs (Jaegar, 2013). The practice of reflection through analyzing critical incidents by more than describing the critical incident experience itself can be beneficial for teacher learning (Calandra et al. 2009; Griffin 2003; Naidu and Oliver 1999). One of the instruments to promote teacher's reflection using critical incidents is written using diaries. From their diaries, a pre-service teacher can increase their capacity of orientation towards growth and inquiry, from thinker to alter thinker (Griffin, 2003). Therefore, when the pre-service teacher encounters a critical incident experienced in the teaching and learning process, pre-service teachers then reflect by linking it to their beliefs and knowledge in order to develop their knowledge, pre-service teacher can increase their understanding in learning and teaching abilities teaching practices or their future career as a teacher.

In this study, the researcher found the critical incident as long as she participated in an intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program. She reflected on the critical incident experienced in her relationships with the university facilitator, other participants, and her surroundings based on Mercer's, 2020 theory of well-being that a good relationship contains good empathy, respect, trust, responsiveness, communication, and cooperation. By seeking the relationship well-being in the intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program, pre-service teachers can put the critical incidents that occur in the program and reflect the negative and positive experiences to shaping the pre-service teacher's identity (Kılıç and Cinkara, 2020) since critical incidents play an important role in constructing teacher identity (Sisson, 2016). Highlighting the critical incidents can help to develop the professional identity of a pre-service teacher.

METHOD

The researcher employed a qualitative narrative inquiry method since a perspective can offer an alternative view on understanding the various relationships arising from intercultural

thematic-telecollaboration. This study used autobiographical narrative, a type of narrative inquiry method, as its research design, where the researcher examined personal experiences relevant to the research topic and shared the researcher's own stories (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). The primary data for this research comprises retold fragments of the researcher's own experiences in participating in an intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program hosted by one of the universities in Hong Kong, making the core data autobiographical writing.

Data analysis involves categorizing, describing, and synthesizing information, as outlined by Wiersma (1991). The data under consideration pertains to the experiences of pre-service teachers in intercultural telecollaboration learning. Thematic analysis, following the model proposed by Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (2014, p. 74-77), was employed to scrutinize the narrative data. This approach encompasses activities such as repeated data reading, coding and categorization of data extracts, and recognition of thematic headings. Utilizing thematic analysis through multiple case studies, the researcher could compare narratives, identify shared themes, and highlight individual differences in the dataset.

The main participant was the researcher herself who is a 21-year-old undergraduate female student of the English Education Department. In the study, the researcher had learned English for more than ten years, beginning when she was seven years old. The researcher has already learned English with intercultural competence using technology through both informal and formal education. In formal education, the researcher had learned through school lessons and materials on the English language as sites of learning through different kinds of learning strategies from her English teachers in the classroom.

Managing subjectivity in the collection and analysis of data, which primarily consists of the researcher's memory and interpretation, is a significant issue of autobiographical narrative inquiry (Chang, 2008, Freeman, 2007). In this regard, I had in-depth conversations with my college friends who were also on the path with me from joining my university online classes until participating in this intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program. I also revisited research journals when I engaged in various research projects related to relationships well-being and telecollaboration activities. I polished and changed the story till it was ready for analysis. "An ongoing dialogue between collecting data, writing, and analysis" was maintained throughout the iterative process (Holliday, 2010, p. 102). The numerous data sources used to stimulate my memory, the critical conversation with outsiders, and the continuous introspective self-talk reduced subjectivity as a methodological constraint and improved the analytical rigor.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I share my experiences with building relationships while participating in telecollaboration activities. I blended these experiences with my time in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic before I joined the telecollaboration activity. Then, I reflect on these relationship experiences and consider how they might impact my future career as a pre-service teacher. This part of the narrative aims to reveal the connections between my telecollaboration experiences and their potential influence on my developing professional identity and goals in the field of education. I also discuss relationship well-being based on the framework of Mercer and Gregersen (2020) that I experienced in participating in intercultural thematic-telecollaboration that I divide into two parts: positive relationships and negative relationships.

Participating in Intercultural Thematic-telecollaboration

My experience in joining the intercultural thematic-telecollaboration began on January 23, 2022, and lasted until February 20, 2022. I participated in this telecollaboration program for approximately one month, facilitated by one of the universities in Hong Kong. Participants in this program came from various countries with different mother languages. Despite that, we were unified by the use of English in this program.

My activities during this program were carried out online. Participant communication with the host university/university facilitator was done through email. The university facilitator utilized the Flip website as an asynchronous platform for weekly discussions where participants uploaded video opinions based on instructions and Zoom meetings synchronous discussions once at the end of the program. Similar to my previous online class during the pandemic, where all communication mostly used WhatsApp group chat to communicate synchronously/asynchronously with the lecturers or friends, group discussion, preparation before the synchronous activity, then used GoogleMeet/Zoom Meeting to do learning.

At the beginning of this intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program, the university facilitator asked the participants to join a Zoom meeting orientation where the host university explained the activities participants would be involved in. They also facilitated the recorded Zoom orientation for all participants through email to maintain good communication if some participants could not attend the Zoom meeting. This helped me so well then because unfortunately, I could not attend the Zoom orientation meeting.

From the Zoom orientation, the university facilitator navigated the participants through email to join the Flip website to enter the asynchronous discussion section with the assigned group. The university facilitator provided clear instructions on joining the Flip website, either through direct explanation in Zoom or through written instructions sent via email. From the way I follow the instructions, I feel that the university facilitator has prepared this program so well to maintain the university facilitator's communication with all the participants.

“The host university gave us the first task for the week through email. They asked participants to upload videos sharing their opinions on fast fashion in their respective countries. I feel like the instructions from the host university are pretty straightforward, even though it's just through email (not in person), so we don't need to ask for more detailed information.”

DR.1.1

On the Flip website, two total discussions will be separated into four-week activities. At the very first discussion, the participants were asked to post an introductory video that also contained several answered questions about our own homeland culture with the chosen theme from the university facilitator. I felt confident and trusted myself when I wanted to make the video task because, in the previous semester, I had taken grammar and speaking classes that helped me to build my communication skills after practicing with my college friends in that class. My friends used to give each other feedback when we were in the practicing section or doing our group tasks even though the classes were held online during the pandemic. It helped me to build my confidence in participating in this intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program.

“Luckily, I had studied sentence building and pronunciation practice as well as speaking skills in the previous semester, so I felt confident in my abilities. There's no doubt about not feeling self-confident. I can do that.”

DR.1.2

In the second week's discussion, the mentor in my Flip discussion section asked us through email the participants to watch and respond or reply with a video of at least one other participant's video from our different country to make sure the participants gained another country's perspective. I felt excited with my confidence to finally start my asynchronous communication with other participants. Despite my excitement to reply to other's videos, I have had bad experiences. There's no response or reply to my video. I did not discuss this in this section. I was happy to reply to a participant video, but the video's owner also did not respond to my comment. I felt so terrible because I even noticed that some videos have more than one comment and they have a good discussion.

"I expected that someone would watch my video and respond to it, but it turned zero. There's no response to my video. I'm a bit sad because it makes me not have any feedback from others even though I saw a video that has two responses."

DR.2.1

It is quite a contrast with my experience in my previous online class. At that time I felt that even though the class I was taking was held online, my communication with the lecturer and my friends was good. Even though there are several obstacles such as slow response when discussing group assignments with friends, these communication problems can be resolved well, and good communication can be built again. However, in the second week of implementing this telecollaboration, when communication problems arose, I could not make more efforts to improve communication because communication was carried out asynchronously.

In the third week's discussion, the participants were asked to post a new video again about the answered questions from the university facilitator as the starting point of the video discussion making. As I had no response from my last video, I tried to make my video this week more fascinating. I researched to answer the questions, I arranged my opinion in a clear way as what I experienced in my speaking class before with the hope there would be at least one response to my video in the next week's discussion.

"A bit sad about my expectations last week, I wish this week would be better. I got an email notification again about the third-week activity! I'm so excited to see what will happen next to my video. Is there anyone who will reply or not?"

DR.3.1

Unfortunately, in the last week's asynchronous discussion, I experienced the same thing as before. My video ended up with no response or comments.

"Despite posting a video, I received no response, not even from my mentor. Even, I saw a video that got six replies."

DR.4.1

Aside from my poor communication experiences, I observed that participants who left comments on other videos treated others with respect, although some of them had opposing views. Participants are easy to comprehend and speak English well. The owner of the video also responded courteously and well to questions from the responses or comments.

"However, even though I didn't get feedback, I could see the discussions carried out by other participants in the Flip discussion. The participants respect each other's opinions. They responded to each other's videos politely even though I saw that some of them had different opinions."

DR.4.2

In the fourth week of the intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program, after the asynchronous discussion on Flip was done, we attended the Zoom meeting for synchronous discussion on 20 February 2023. In this synchronous discussion, there will be a speaker who delivers their material first then the participants will divide into several breakout groups to discuss. We started the Zoom Meeting at 20.30 WIB because we needed to adjust to the morning time where the speaker lives in Philadelphia.

“I kept wondering at first, why the discussion was held almost midnight in China. Is it will be effective? But then they explained the reasons for scheduling the Zoom Meeting, and it turned out that the time had been adjusted to suit the speaker who was in Philadelphia. Well, this is my first time experiencing time contrast that so contract like this. This kind of thing describes the essence of Zoom meetings. This emphasizes the need for mutual respect regarding time zones. As participants, we must position ourselves with curiosity about what the speaker is saying and a genuine need for his or her knowledge. Therefore, respecting the speaker, including their time zone, is an important aspect of our engagement.”

DR.4.3

The speakers delivered their material in a very interactive and communicative manner. She often gives the audience short questions that randomly selected participants must answer. This kind of communication makes the situation in the Zoom discussion more focused, and the communication is well maintained. Participants will always pay attention to the content of the material presented by the speaker. When the speaker appointed participants to answer or ask questions randomly, the participants' responses were also good. Participants immediately answer either directly or by writing answers in the comments section in the Zoom.

In the first discussion session in the Zoom meeting, we randomly grouped and were asked to introduce ourselves one by one in the breakout room. There were seven participants in my breakout room expectedly to make a communication. However, none of the participants started to speak until the breakout room was done. I also felt lost in my confidence as it was my first time after a long time talking with a foreigner.

“I entered my breakout room with 7 other participants from different countries. No participant is turning on their camera, which makes me immediately turn off my camera too. Silence. There's no communication in our breakout room. There no one would start the conversation. Even though I'm excited about the conversation experience, I'm scared to start, and I think so too with another. So, we keep silent for 5 minutes until the breakout room is done.”

DR.4.4

However, the speaker did a great job delivering the content during the material delivery session, despite my experiences with poor communication, limited reactivity, and self-doubt. To build effective communication with the participants, she also included them. The way the participants responded to the speaker was also really good. The participants responded rather actively when the speaker introduced the game, and when the presenter asked multiple questions, I felt my confidence returning because a few of us attempted to respond as well, despite our initial shyness and the moderator's encouraging words.

In the second discussion session after the material was delivered by the speaker, we were placed into random breakout rooms again to start the discussion regarding the material delivered by discussing together the questions given by the moderator. Gladly, my breakout room was so active. There were several of my college friends in my breakout room which made me feel my confidence again. There is just one participant from the Philippines. She also has a good

response in our breakout room. I felt there was a good collaboration in the breakout room. We actively exchanged opinions from personal perspectives and the culture of our respective countries.

“Surprisingly there are plenty of names that I know from my university, we are dominating the breakout room. There is just one name participant from the Philippines. We have quite fun discussing time for about 8 minutes. I'm not afraid to tell my answer because there are a lot of my friends that I already know in my breakout room this time. We actively exchanged opinions and one participant from the Philippines also did not hesitate to join the discussion. Finally, I experienced discussions with participants from other countries, even though it was only between 2 countries, I was satisfied that I was able to gain new experiences.”

DR.4.5

After the discussion session, we returned to the main room. The moderator asks a few people to summarize the topics they discussed in their group's break room as the Zoom conference concludes. Although one of the participants elected to present the findings of her conversation in the breakout area, I could still sympathize with her because her speaking was not yet fluid. When expressing the outcomes of her discussion in English, she stumbled a lot. The moderator, however, comforted her, gave her confidence, and indicated that it was acceptable to deliver it slowly. I experience her emotions. Acquiring and employing a language that is not our native tongue in public settings is a challenging task.

Finally, even though I'm sure the host program has carefully scheduled the activities, there still might be some uncontrollable issues in the real world. That was, however, made possible by the participants' motivation, which may have been the primary source of this program's success. The host institution provided us with a questionnaire to fill out after the intercultural thematic-telecollaboration program was over, asking us to list the experiences we had received and our ideas for future projects. Additionally, a certificate is given to each participant who completed 60% of the exercise.

The social relationships that I experienced in the context of my online learning experiences and university studies include cooperation among students when working on group projects; empathy among students; students' respect for the lecturers; students' trust; students' responsiveness; and students' communication with each other in line with the relationships well-being theory from Mercer & Gregersen (2020). There are connections among the six components of social relationships. Good communication is characterized by respect, trust, and empathy between the communicators. Good communication also fosters responsiveness and cooperation.

As the host university provides us with the finest communication and responsiveness of the information program, I had positive connections on Flip and Zoom during my participation in the intercultural thematic telecollaboration. In my last Zoom discussion, there was good cooperation as there was good communication and responsiveness in my breakout room. There is encouragement from a comfortable situation because there are many of the known names there. There is also respect for each participant in giving each other opinions and respect from the participants to the speaker regarding the different time zones. Empathy between the participants when there is a participant who is not fluent in English is also present.

Reflections as a Pre-service Teacher

In this phase, I as a pre-service EFL teacher engaged in this intercultural thematic-telecollaboration and then turned my attention to reflection. I noticed that there were some critical incidents that I can reflect on to develop my professional pre-service teacher identity. I

realized that online discussion also needs to engage in well-being, especially relationships to maintain communication in the discussion running well. Because this international discussion was conducted online, the participants did not meet each other directly but rather through synchronous and asynchronous relationships, positive and negative communication was established. Even from the negative experiences, I can turn them into critical incidents that can help me shape my future career as an English teacher.

From the low, bad, and poor communication that I experienced in participating in intercultural thematic-telecollaboration, this critical incident gave me motivation to design classroom situations that can prevent negative relationships from occurring in my teaching environment. I can think back on this experience as I prepare to become an English teacher and potentially lead transnational or intercultural thematic telecollaboration activities for my students. Creating activities that are mature and consider building strong relationships with participants is crucial to maximizing the learning opportunities for students or activity participants. Using this to implement activities that maintain the class's well-being is also highly helpful. It is easier to maintain strong relationships with your pupils when there is harmony among educators, learners, and the community at large.

I feel that being a teacher is not an easy job. Teachers might feel tired, but they need to stay still and stand up as the highlight in the classroom. Their responsibilities extend beyond mere instruction, leading the class to stay well, managing the class effectively, and maintaining not just their well-being but also paying attention to the well-being of their students. This tent makes the best learning environment that fosters the most constructive teaching and learning activities.

Positive Relationships

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Negative Relationships

Besides the positive relationships, I had awful experiences with low response rates and poor communication in both Flip and Zoom meetings and conversations. Mentors should be aware of each obstacle that participants encounter while creating activities that ask participants to remark on opinion videos that have been submitted in pairs. Guaranteeing a common discussion experience for all participants helps to sustain connections and promotes overall well-being. Here, the mentor's function may be crucial to preserving the participants' ability to communicate effectively to reduce the participants' speaking anxiety in the discussion section. When participants experience communication difficulties, such as a lack of trust in their ability to

develop communication, mentors can monitor the progress of the conversations and provide guidance.

The insights garnered from this research have practical implications for my ongoing professional development initiative as a pre-service teacher. By experiencing the critical incidents and reflecting to recognize the important role of relationships in joining telecollaboration programs I can give myself opportunities to try to design teaching and learning circumstances that pay attention to the teacher and students' relationships related to well-being in my future career. This reflection on critical incidents I experienced gives me the challenge to design a teaching and learning environment that maintains good communication and cooperation, builds students' empathy and trust towards each other or even with themselves, and brings up a sense of responsiveness and respect to maintain smooth relationships among the students. It can be one of the ways to make better and maximize teaching and learning activities.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have illustrated my narrative experiences from joining my university online classes, participating in intercultural thematic-telecollaboration, and reflection as a pre-service teacher. I experienced both positive and negative relationships in the synchronous Zoom discussion and asynchronous Flip discussion. From that, I critically can reflect on the critical incidents I experienced in my future career as an educator. Understanding my students' relationship well-being in the future can also improve my teaching well-being. Highlighting the critical incidents, my experience in this program can help me to develop my professional identity as a pre-service teacher to be a teacher who needs to pay attention to my well-being with students or even the whole teaching environment and maintain the well-being of my students.

Since the practice of telecollaboration has proven effective in many studies, there are still identified shortcomings that need attention, particularly the necessity for a deeper understanding of aspects of well-being in participants or students when engaging in intercultural thematic-telecollaboration such as the positive emotion they feel when joining the program, the engagement in the telecollaboration program, the meaning that brings from the program, as well the achievement from all of the peoples joining in the telecollaboration program. Future research can further explore this study by employing the different aspects of well-being that involve more than one participant and various research methodologies. Considering that this study focused solely on the researcher, using an autobiographical narrative approach, future research suggested conducting narrative research by using participants so the discussion will broaden and more diverse since this topic is both interesting and complex, involving multiple elements due to its close connection with social issues, and also can help teachers to learn from any critical incidents to develop their teaching activities that may lead to the betterment of education.

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