

# Teachers Are Also Human: Exploring Generation Z Language Teachers' Perceptions of the Teaching Profession

Vu Tran-Thanh  
TERECONET, Vietnam

## Correspondence

Email: [vutranthanh.ed@gmail.com](mailto:vutranthanh.ed@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The teaching profession is facing unprecedented challenges, marked by a decline in status and authority alongside increased responsibilities and expectations. At the same time, individuals born into generation Z are emerging as a significant part of the global teaching workforce. They are often described as a group whose experiences are shaped by concerns and crises, as well as competence and awareness. The emergence of this cohort potentially introduces considerable complexity to the teaching profession due to the distinct characteristics of Generation Z. In this context, this paper adopts an interpretivist perspective to explore the views of Vietnamese Generation Z language teachers regarding the language teaching profession. Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from eight Generation Z English language teachers in Vietnam. The results indicate that these teachers perceive teaching as an educational service, expecting high-quality teaching while believing that respect for teachers should be earned, not automatically granted. They also support a view departing from traditional values, acknowledging work-life balance and arguing for a clear separation between personal and professional life. Recommendations for both future research and practical implications are also made.

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## Introduction

Globally, teaching is a complex and multifaceted profession that has been the subject of considerable debate regarding its role, status, identity, standards, and future. For one thing, teachers are expected to master an immense and complex body of constantly evolving knowledge and skills, along with their application (Buchanan,

2020). For another, teaching is closely connected to demand for public good and the exercise of power within society (Livingstone et al., 2012). Therefore, debates regarding its standards and practices normally extend beyond the professional realm to the broader societal sphere, involving various stakeholders (Flores, 2016). More specifically, the teaching profession is currently facing highly intricately issues regarding its social status, roles, and authority amidst constantly changing and contrasting values. Research has shown that teachers' social status is declining globally, accompanied by their contested authority and conflicting roles (Buchanan, 2020; MacBeath, 2012; Monteiro, 2015).

Amidst these unprecedented shifts, the teaching profession has witnessed the emergence of a new cohort of teachers with distinctive perspectives that would have critical potential impact on the abovementioned professional aspects. More specifically, individuals belonging to a generation commonly referred to as Generation Z have begun entering the teaching profession (Carter, 2018). While there is no consensus regarding the exact timeframe of this generation, for the purposes of this study, Generation Z (henceforth Gen Z) is defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, acknowledging the variation that exists among scholars. These individuals are typically characterised by their digital competence, pragmatic and conservative financial management, heightened anxieties, greater concern for privacy and personal values, as well as noticeable creativity (Gentina, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Carter (2018) suggested that these unique features influence not only how Gen Z individuals live but also how they perceive their working lives, including the teaching profession. Additionally, they tend to be less interested in teaching as a career while holding expectations that go beyond financial earnings, encompassing job meaning, work environment, and opportunities for advancement (Booker et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2023). In the coming decades, Gen Z will become the core of the teaching workforce, significantly shaping not only the profession's core values and practices, but also its future direction.

Research in teacher education, however, has not sufficiently examined this new generation of educators, thereby overlooking the generational progression within the teaching workforce. While generationalism can result in oversimplified stereotypes regarding generational differences (Rudolph et al., 2021), there is evidence that generation functions as a social force in professional practice (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). As the central teaching force and leaders of the near future, Gen Z teachers require a comprehensive understanding of how they perceive and practise the profession. Such knowledge is crucial not only to instructional practices, policy-making, and teacher education programmes but also to the broader educational landscapes.

To address this gap, the current study explores how Gen Z language teachers in Vietnam perceive the teaching profession in terms of social status, roles, and authority—three of the most important domains in teacher identity and professionalism (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010). The study adopts an interpretivist approach to examine this issue, grounding the experiences of Gen Z language teachers in the specific educational context of Vietnam, a nation where rapid societal transformations are clashing with traditions and deep-seated values. This paper argues that, amid societal shifts and advancements, Gen Z teachers actively make significant contributions to the teaching profession, not only as a new workforce but also by challenging traditional values and hierarchical structures as well as introducing new career-related conceptualisations and expectations. These contributions influence not only how the teaching profession is practised, but also how it is valued and standardised.

### Literature Review

#### *The Teaching Profession: Status, Role, and Authority*

Among the various aspects of the teaching profession, this section discusses three of its most crucial elements: social status, role, and authority. These elements, according to Livingstone et al. (2012), collectively shape teaching professionalism, influencing a wide spectrum ranging from teacher recruitment and retention to the quality of education delivered and the overall future of the profession. In terms of social status, the teaching profession is experiencing a decline in social recognition worldwide despite being one of most historically significant professions (Monteiro, 2015). For example, Richardson and Watt (2016) found that teaching is often perceived as an easy job, characterised by low entry standards, historical domination by women, short workdays, and suitability for balancing with family responsibilities. Even in some Asian contexts such as China or Vietnam, where the profession has traditionally earned respect and high status, these issues are increasingly recognised (Gu, 2018; Tran-Thanh, 2024). As a result, appreciation and respect for the teaching profession are declining, while frustration and lack of morale are increasing on a global scale (Kraft & Lyon, 2024; Vail, 2024). Additionally, such a low status critically affects teachers' wellbeing, making them more vulnerable to stress and health-related issues (Nwoko et al., 2025). In comparison with more traditional professions such as medicine or law, teaching has struggled to maintain and uphold its professionalism (Monteiro, 2015). While professionals in other classical fields are more autonomous in areas such as self-governance, entry, and standards, teachers are primarily managed in a top-down manner with limited control over factors directly influencing their professionalism (Buchanan, 2020). Despite this declining status, teachers are still expected to shoulder significant social expectations such as educating future generations, disseminating governing ideologies, upholding social morale, and

contributing to the public good (Buchanan, 2020; MacBeath, 2012). These responsibilities are traditionally embedded in the profession, where teachers act as knowledge-holders, moral models, change-makers, social advocates, institutional leaders, among others (Murray, 2016; Peterson & Arthur, 2020). Such roles, however, are often conflicting, jeopardising not only teachers' professional practices but also personal aspects. For example, a teacher who believes in a student-centred pedagogy may feel conflicted when required to adhere to a rigid, test-driven curriculum that prioritises rote memorisation over critical thinking. Similarly, being positioned as knowledge-holders may restrict teachers from engaging with technologies such as artificial intelligence, which could in fact enhance learning facilitation (Wang et al., 2023). These conflicting roles, both individually and collectively, place teachers in complex situations where confusion may outweigh agency, restricting their authority and contributing to identity crises (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Amidst such intricacies of roles and status, teachers—who traditionally held considerable authority in their classrooms—are now required to negotiate control and discretion not only with all stakeholders (Antonelli & Livingstone, 2012; Tran-Thanh, 2024). Typically, the conventional role of teachers as classroom leaders enables them to make decisions on all aspects of classroom progression and activity, including learning facilitation, behaviour management, assessment, and professional knowledge development (Bullock, 2016; Praetorius & Charalambous, 2023). Increasingly democratic and inclusive classrooms, which give students more voice and authority in decision-making, are reshaping this landscape (Patrick & Badley, 2022). On this matter, McLaughlin and Burnaford (2007) argued that teaching should focus on learners and their learning, positioning them as responsible agents in the process while fostering a more democratic teacher-student relationship. While this shift is a promising sign that learning has become more learner-centred, it also demands a transformation of teachers' traditional authority into a more collaborative model. Moreover, this negotiation of authority is externally influenced by institutional and governmental policy, professional bodies, accountability regimes, and societal or parental pressures (Buchanan, 2020; Toom & Husu, 2018). In other words, what teachers can and cannot do in their classrooms is shaped not only by lesson dynamics, pedagogy, and teacher-student relationships, but also by educational policy, societal expectations, parental influence, and leadership decisions. Scholars such as Tarc (2012) and Livingstone and Antonelli (2012) noted that these complexities have led to a transformation and reconceptualisation of teacher authority, where interaction, participation, and engagement are prioritised over control.

Taken together, these complexities position teachers in a context where expectations are high, while recognition and autonomy are not only limited but increasingly challenged. Teachers are afforded little power or privilege—whether over pedagogy,

school leadership, or their professional development – yet they are expected to make significant contributions to societal progress. Situated in this way, teachers often feel unacknowledged as professionals while operating within a paradoxical and frequently stressful environment, especially when they are simultaneously seen as both the problem and the solution to educational shortcomings.

### *Gen Z as an Emerging Teaching Force*

The oldest members of Generation Z as defined in this study, born in 1997, have now completed the early stage of their teaching career – marking the emergence of a new generational workforce in schools worldwide. Viewed through the lens of generational difference, Gen Z individuals demonstrate distinctive characteristics that, being future educators, would significantly shape their perceptions of the teaching profession.

Generally, Gen Z are described as digital natives, a socially concerned generation with heightened awareness of global issues, and a socially diverse group with broad-ranging online connections. Born and raised during the rapid expansion of the internet, Gen Z are digitally literate and adept at navigating the online world for networking and services, often considering devices such as laptops and mobile phones integral to daily life (Gentina, 2020). Additionally, Booker et al. (2024) noted that these individuals tend to be more concerned about societal change and may require greater mental health support. Expanding on this point, Carter (2018) argued that Gen Z have come of age in a world shaped by ongoing global crises and uncertainties – such as war, climate change, terrorism, and economic recession. Moreover, due to the internet, these issues have been widely disseminated, often in biased or exaggerated forms (Andersen et al., 2024). As such, their heightened concern is accompanied by a stronger sense of social responsibility and commitment to contributing to the greater good (Lluís et al., 2024). In terms of relationships, Gen Z maintain diverse social networks online, which may prompt them to acknowledge and engage with a wider range of perspectives and specific lived experiences (Gentina, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

In the context of work, Gen Z are often characterised by their desire for purpose, work-life balance, engagement with real-world problems, and a commitment to fairness and equality in the workplace. Booker et al. (2024) suggested that Gen Z, shaped by contemporary global issues, tend to view work not merely as a means of survival, but as a way of living and making meaningful change. Accordingly, this new workforce values fair treatment based on contribution rather than hidden or systemic biases and often advocate for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as guiding principles in their professional environments (Eng & Kohsuwan, 2025).

Although caution has been raised against uncritically applying generational stereotypes—a practice referred to as generationalism (Rauvola et al., 2019)—generational characteristics that reflect specific social shifts and values should not be completely dismissed but rather investigated reflexively (Kwiecińska et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2021). In this light, Gen Z, as an emerging teaching force, potentially bring crucial perspectives, values, work styles, and contributions to the teaching profession (Booker et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2023).

In a broader sense, scholars such as Buchanan (2020) or Nwoko et al. (2025) have found that the teaching profession—while heavily shaped by contextual factors—is also influenced by teachers’ perceptions, making its dynamics a site of negotiation rather than a one-directional outcome of top-down influences. At the same time, a teacher’s emotions, wellbeing, and job satisfaction are also significantly shaped by their perception of the profession. For example, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) and Dreer (2023) argued that adopting a particular view of teaching enables teachers to better manage crises, meet demands, cultivate relationships, and cope with burnout and stress. In this view, teachers are positioned as active agents who shape their own professional realities.

However, research into Gen Z teachers’ perceptions of the profession remains extremely limited. The few existing studies focus primarily on their interest in teaching, along with strategies for recruitment and support targeting them as the upcoming teacher generation (Booker et al., 2024; Carter, 2018; Smith et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need for deeper exploration of how Gen Z teachers view key dimensions of the profession. Building on the previous discussions and to address this gap, the current study aims to respond to the following research question: *“How do Generation Z teachers perceive the status, role, and authority of the teaching profession?”*

### **Methodology**

This study followed an interpretivist paradigm which focuses on the depth and richness of data rather than making generalisation (Brinkmann, 2017). In other words, it acknowledges the diversity in how Gen Z teachers perceive the teaching profession, aiming to uncover the various constructs of their perceptions. Therefore, it placed more emphasis on sample quality rather than quantity (Flick, 2021), employing qualitative semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool with eight Gen Z Vietnamese language teachers.

### *Context*

This research adopts Vietnam as a representative case, where the population is relatively young and education is rapidly transforming towards a freer market (Tran-

Thanh, 2025; World Bank et al., 2016). At the same time, the status of the teaching profession in this country is broadly comparable to that in other contexts. In particular, the standing of education, teachers, and the teaching profession has traditionally been high (Đào, 2022; Trần, 2023). Sayings such as “Không thầy đố mày làm nên” (literally translated as “You cannot do anything without a teacher”) or “Một chữ cũng là thầy, nửa chữ cũng thầy” (“Whether it is a full letter or half a letter, it is the teacher who gives it to you”) are considered moral standard upholding the tradition. However, such a status has been declining in recent years, which Dương (2011) and Tran-Thanh (2024) attributed to the changing landscape of not only education but also economic and society. In particular, education in Vietnam has been going through a “socialisation” process, which has gradually turned it into a market (Tran & Do, 2024). The teaching career, therefore, has been accepting new definitions as well as professional standards. This situation has created a crucial site for this study where public perception of the teaching profession is changing considerably.

### *Participant Recruitment*

The participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. Recruitment criteria included being a Vietnamese national and a language teacher born between 1997 and 2004. I posted a call for participants in some social media groups for Vietnamese language teachers. Twenty potential participants contacted me expressing their interest, and fifteen appropriate ones were shortlisted. This report includes the data from eight participants due to the obtainment of thematic saturation.

All eight participants, three females and five males, were born between 1998 and 2003 and held a BA in language education. Furthermore, at the time of this study, they were teaching English as a foreign language to diverse groups of students, ranging from teenagers to adults and from elementary to advanced levels. The letter ‘P’ is used as an abbreviation for ‘Participant’ throughout this paper.

The ethical aspects of this study, including the participant recruitment process and data management procedures, were reviewed and approved by the institutional review board.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

This study employed semi-structured interviews to collect data. The interview questions were grounded on the conceptualisation of teacher status, role, and authority (Buchanan, 2020; MacBeath, 2012; Monteiro, 2015). In particular, the questions aimed to explore how the participants perceived teaching roles and responsibilities, defined the core values of the profession, and managed relationships with students. The questions were piloted with one female Gen Z language teacher

whose follow-up comments helped improve with phrasing, the relationship between role and authority, as well as the contribution of professional development. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as per the participant's consent for research purposes, including analysis and publication under anonymisation.

The interviews were analysed following a six-step thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In particular, the transcripts were re-read multiple times for data familiarisation before initial codes were made. Then, the codes were clustered and the themes were generated, reviewed, and identified. Another analyst was invited to work on the data to ensure trustworthiness. Discussions over the findings were made rather than calculating inter-rater reliability to avoid quantifying qualitative data.

### Results

#### *"Beyond just language or teaching"*

The participants' perceptions of professional responsibilities are characterised by a learner-centred approach to teaching, attention to students' psychology, and a preference for more informal interaction with students in the classroom.

An overarching theme regarding their teacher roles and teaching styles is that these language teachers viewed their job as primarily learner-centred, demonstrated through roles such as *"learning facilitator"* (P1, P2, P3, P5, and P6) or *"instructor rather than knowledge provider"* (P4, P7, and P8), rather than simply as presenters of knowledge. Notably, P2, P6, and P7 also mentioned that they would *"contextually do different roles,"* meaning they would act differently as required in a certain circumstance, as long as the students learned effectively.

In more detail, the participants employed a variety of strategies focused on cultivating positive learning experiences beyond mere language instruction. For instance,

*I also tend to use Gen Z or Gen Alpha language with my students – I think it helps make the classroom atmosphere less tense. (P1)*

*I tend to smile a lot and use body language when interacting with my students. Whenever there's an opportunity to praise them, I make sure to take full advantage of it. (P3)*

*I think, well, I've noticed that my students often call me "chị giáo" (sister-teacher). It's probably because my style is quite friendly and approachable. (P4)*

Additionally, these Gen Z language teachers highly prioritised their students' mental health by acting as emotional supporters or consultants. For example, P3 and P7 described:

*Apart from academic matters, I also support students mentally. During their studies, learners often face psychological challenges or have concerns they want to share with me. So, I offer advice whenever they need it. (P3)*

*For example, I had a student whose family was extremely strict about academic performance, but she just couldn't meet those expectations. Every time there was a test, she would get really stressed. So, she would stay behind after class to confide in me and talk about what she was going through. (P7)*

Outside the classroom, the teachers tended to maintain and develop informal relationships with students. Such interactions, however, also offered pedagogical benefits by fostering a deeper understanding of their students' needs and concerns. As they remarked:

*They often invite me to hang out. It feels a bit like being siblings, you know, just spending time together. Honestly, I think it's important – because it doesn't just benefit our connection in the classroom, but in the long run as well. (P2)*

*We normally go out to eat, have coffee, gossip and all sorts of things. Sometimes, they ask me about career choices, like when they're unsure about which path to take. Through all of this, I've gradually come to understand my students better. (P4)*

*I've noticed that, usually, when a student is open with me outside of class, they tend to be much better behaved in the classroom. (P6)*

For learners whose ages are close to their own, some Gen Z teachers were able to develop a kind of friendship. For example, P1, P3, and P5, after their courses concluded, each became friends with a student whom they described as “*shared so much in common.*” Additionally, they considered their out-of-classroom interactions to be a source of learning for both personal and professional development.

*Some students are the kind of people who really work hard in life. When I see them, I feel like I should try harder myself. Some of them get up at 4.00 in the morning to go to work, and sometimes they work until 2 in the afternoon. I really admire how hard they try in life. (P6)*

*Usually, they'll share about their own field – for example, banking. I actually don't know anything about that, so sometimes I really want to listen, just to learn more. It could be useful for my life and my work as well. (P8)*

*"It is similar to doing service, but ..."*

The participants believed that teaching should be considered an educational service with a balanced emphasis on professional ethics. This perspective was evident in how they viewed and negotiated authority with the inclusion of students' voices, reflected on teachers' status, and approached professional development.

In their classrooms, these Gen Z teachers provided space for students' voices by employing negotiation to exercise authority. More specifically, they implemented negotiable classroom regulations and held private conversations with misbehaving students. For example, P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, and P8 mentioned that they regularly co-established classroom regulations with students. P3 and P7 stated that they normally refer to these regulations to *"remind students of their responsibilities,"* while the others would try to *"strictly follow them."* In cases where students broke the rules, private conversations were used to address the situation. As P2 and P8 described:

*Generally, I would meet and remind them of my role – as much as I strive to be friendly and approachable, at the end of the day I'm still their teacher. So, while I treat them with respect, I would hope they would show me the same courtesy in return. (P2)*

*When students misbehave, the first thing I usually do is have a small talk with the students. I try to chat with them to understand them better, because before anything else, I need to find out why they behaved that way. (P8)*

However, it was notable that *"overfriendliness,"* both inside and outside the classroom, significantly affected their exercise of authority, as experienced by P2, P4, and P6. For example, P4 said:

*There's this thing – sometimes, because I'm too friendly, the students can get a bit... well, complacent or lazy. It's not that they're outright lazy, but when I ask them to do something, they tend to joke around first before actually getting on with the task. So, it's not like they immediately take it seriously and start working straightaway. (P4)*

The other participants, though not having experienced such incidents, were cautious and intentionally avoided being *"too friendly,"* attempting to *"maintain a line"* (in the words of P1) that protected their authority.

At the same time, P3 and P5 remarked that viewing teaching as a service helps to limit what they referred to as *"unreasonable power and position."* In particular, they noted:

*I think whether teaching is a noble profession or not – that's for society to decide, not for us to claim ourselves [...] Just because I'm a teacher doesn't mean I have the right to consider myself above others. So, for me, teaching as a service makes me more aware that I need to teach well to truly earn that respect. (P3)*

*Personally, when I see teaching as a service, I believe learners have the right to assess the quality of that service, and only those who actually provide quality teaching should be considered true educators. (P5)*

Furthermore, these Gen Z teachers appeared to see teacher status as quality-based, believing that a teacher should be treated, including the respect they earn, based on their qualities, including teaching competence and ethics. For example, P5 explained:

*If you teach well, you'll earn more money – that's just how it works. But saying that doesn't mean that people with money have the right to look down on teachers, or anyone else working in the service sector for that matter. What I mean is, teaching should only be "commercialised" to a certain extent. (P5)*

*I think the social standing of teachers is still the same – it really depends on the individual. If you teach well and are dedicated, then you'll be respected. That's what I've seen in my own family and among my friends too. (P8)*

In terms of professional development, a commonality among these Gen Z teachers was a serious attitude, demonstrated in their visions and approaches. As P7, for example, stated, "I feel that every year I need to take about one or two months off to study. There're too many to learn." More specifically, all participants had a clear plan for what they would do and what to learn for professional growth. For example, pursuing an MA was a popular choice among them, while obtaining a Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages was considered by P5, P7, and P8. Additionally, these Gen Z teachers were well aware of various channels for professional development beyond formal training, such as professional learning communities, action research, attending conferences, or engaging in reflective practice.

Notably, interdisciplinary knowledge was identified as an important component for professional development among all participants. As they stated:

*That student of mine is actually a senior manager – he owns a whole chain of very large tailoring shops for suits in Vietnam. He's given me a lot of advice on business and on building my personal image on social media. So I think having knowledge from other fields like that is really important these days, because if you only focus on*

*your own specialism, it's very difficult to survive now – everything moves so quickly.*

(P2)

*Because I've noticed that, to be honest, there's already a lot of focus on STEM, but I do think it's still an area that English teachers could consider. Or, for example, using AI in teaching or applying technology to our lessons – that's already very common now, but overall, it can still be helpful in some ways when it comes to our teaching.*

(P6)

Interestingly, personal branding was considered a professional development approach. However, they were not aiming for a “*business profile*” (P1's words) but rather an “*authentic teacher image*” (P3). As P3 and P4 elaborated:

*I don't see personal branding as showing off – it's more about sharing what you genuinely have to offer, your real teaching quality. That's also a way to help you stay committed to the profession.* (P3)

*I think we should make use of social media, like Facebook, to build an image of a teacher who's not involved in controversies – the kind of image we want our students, their parents, and society to see.* (P4)

“*Teachers are also humans.*”

Considerably, these Gen Z language teachers all underscored the importance of wellbeing and maintaining a separate private life, where teachers are treated no differently from other individuals. “*Teachers are also humans, not stones. They have feelings and feel tired,*” was a statement made by P4 and shared by the others.

P2 and P4 mentioned their “*rebellious life*” – going to bars, posting bikini photos on social networking sites, or having tattoos – as examples of the importance of teachers having a private life without teacher-related images or responsibilities. Echoing this idea, the other participants also expressed similar views. As P1 and P5 stated:

*I feel that, as long as teachers behave properly and act professionally at school, that's absolutely fine. But outside of school, it doesn't really matter whether someone is a teacher or not, because they all have their own private lives. For example, say someone enjoys drinking alcohol – well, maybe at school they can't do it there. But once they're outside and they want to have a drink, then that's perfectly normal.* (P1)

*Well, for instance, I wear earrings. When I decided to get my ears pierced, there were some people who were concerned, saying that if you're a man – and even more so a male teacher – then you won't fit the image of a “proper” or “standard” teacher. I don't really agree with that view, though, because I think that my forms of self-expression are for my personal life. When I go to school, I'm fulfilling my professional*

*responsibilities, and I can do that perfectly well without having to change who I am or alter my self-identity. (P5)*

However, private lives were regarded as spaces where teachers should live freely from social expectations about teacher behaviour, rather than rejecting all profession-related concerns. As P3 and P8 made clear:

*I believe it's a teacher's duty to support their learners. My students often contact me outside of class hours, and if it's convenient, I'll reply – I don't really mind that at all. But my personal life is a separate matter. (P3)*

*What I mean is, if students message me outside of class to ask about the lesson or anything like that, I'm still happy to help them – I think that's necessary, and I do want my students to study properly [...] But my personal life is separate; each thing has its own place. (P8)*

The participants also highlighted the need for a clear boundary between these two aspects of life – or “two identities,” as P4 phrased it. In other words, they stressed that teachers should also maintain a professional image while at school.

*I have two social media accounts. On Facebook, I present myself as a very professional teacher, and that's the same image I maintain at school. Anything more personal, I post on Instagram, because only people I allow to follow me can see it. I think that's how I build my professional image and also protect myself from unwanted judgement. (P4)*

*I think that, sometimes, being a teacher is a bit like being an actor. In the classroom, because we're role models for the students, there are times when we really have to present ourselves well and be extra careful with our appearance and behaviour. (P6)*

*Teachers also have the need to express themselves in different ways. However, in the classroom, we still have to maintain certain boundaries and shouldn't let our personal lives affect our teaching. (P7)*

## **Discussion**

### *Non-Traditional View of the Teaching Career: Learner-Driven Roles, Negotiated Authority, Earned Status*

For the participants in this study, the teaching career was viewed as an endeavour of professional practice and growth in which their power relations with learners were balanced, moving beyond traditionally perceived institutional hierarchies. Specifically, they assumed roles centred on students' learning, attained classroom authority through democratic negotiation, and sought to gain career-related respect – all of which they conceptualised as “teaching as doing a service.” Additionally, these

Gen Z teachers recognised that language teaching is not solely about language or teaching, but is more concerned with students' psychology, indicating a broader view of education where learners are seen as more than just receivers of knowledge or language learners, but as humans with emotions and psychological needs.

This view represents a noticeable departure from the typical perception of teaching as a respected and noble career, especially in contexts such as Vietnam (Le et al., 2024; Vail, 2024). As previously mentioned, respect for teachers in Vietnam has traditionally been expected to be automatic, embedded within the country's cultural values (Trần, 2021; Vo, 2020). These Gen Z teachers, however, believe that respect should be earned through good service, not assumed based on a pre-existing position.

This shift partly reflects a recently imported trend in education, which Nguyen Thi Mai and Hall (2017) referred to as "Western constructivist pedagogies" (p. 244), requiring teachers to cultivate inclusive and democratic classrooms. In their study, Nguyen Thi Mai and Hall (2017) explored the changing perceptions of teachers and teaching among 30 preservice language teachers—Gen Z themselves. While they observed a similarly learner-centred view of the teaching career, their participants interestingly still believed in unchanged authority and automatic respect, in contrast to the findings of this study. One possible explanation is that the 30 preservice teachers in the mentioned study, as prospective educators, expressed expectations rather than experience-driven perspectives. As Tran-Thanh (2021) noted, the early years of teaching critically transform how teachers view their profession.

Furthermore, these findings mirror a wider societal landscape in Vietnam, where education—especially language education—has become increasingly commercialised (Nguyen, 2022; Tran-Thanh, 2025). Under neoliberal influence, education has become a relatively free market where traditional values of teaching are blended with marketing principles, and students have taken on the additional role of customers (Dinh, 2023; Ngo, 2020). While it would be an oversimplification to generalise, it is worth noting that Gen Z individuals are both learners and educators influenced by such shifting values. In the case of the participants in this study, who reflected on themselves as learners and through visualising a teacher image, these changing perspectives were clearly evident.

Interestingly, these Gen Z teachers were educated and grew up during a period when Western pedagogies were being imported and education was undergoing commercialisation in Vietnam; consequently, they witnessed these shifts from the dual perspectives of both student and teacher. As was evident throughout the interviews, the participants frequently referred to other teachers and their own

students as crucial factors influencing how they perceived the teaching profession. In this sense, their non-traditional views transcended the boundaries of the teaching career itself to encompass broader societal perspectives. Additionally, their perceptions indicate a significant shift in how they view teachers, seeing them more as human beings with personal lives, which will be discussed in the next section.

### *Relationality through a Personal-Professional Lens*

By viewing teaching as more of a service rather than as an unquestionably noble or well-respected profession, these Gen Z language teachers also scaled down expectations of their career-related responsibilities and behaviours. In more detail, teachers in Vietnam are normally expected to take on multiple roles and responsibilities beyond their pedagogical duties while leading simple and modest lives (London, 2011). Moreover, they are typically defined as individuals who uphold high moral standards and remain calm and well-mannered even in unfavourable situations (Nguyen et al., 2025; Tho, 2016). Accompanying these responsibilities is the respect that Vietnamese society generally grants intellectuals. This phenomenon is explained by Nguyen (2015) and Nguyen (2018) as a Confucian legacy, where people with dignity are automatically respected.

By arguing that teachers should limit their authority through democratic negotiation and earn rather than demand respect, these Gen Z language teachers have reconsidered social expectations of teachers by stating, *“Teachers are also humans.”* Across their responses, they expressed the value of a private life apart from teaching and social responsibilities, where teachers should be allowed to live *“however they want”* (in the words of P1). This relationality of authority, respect, responsibility, and expectation indicates a changing view of not only how Gen Z conceptualise personal privacy, as noted by Seemiller and Grace (2019), but also how they view teaching service as providing the best quality product while holding the right to reject irrelevant tasks or in cases of unreadiness.

Situated in a broader context, Gentina (2020) noted that Gen Z place more emphasis on education as personal growth. In this sense, traditional roles of teachers, typically positioned at the top of educational hierarchies as knowledge-providers or classroom authorities, are starting to diminish. Instead, teachers are expected to accompany learners, and such proximity reduces both authority and unquestioning respect. At the same time, Booker et al. (2024) reported a greater demand for mental health support among Gen Z individuals, who more frequently experience fear of missing out, depression, or global issues—all of which are brought closer to them by the abundance of mass media.

### Conclusion

This research is not intended to create generational stereotypes, which Rauvola et al. (2019); Rudolph et al. (2021) have referred to as generationalism or myths about generational differences. Rather, it seeks to highlight the voice of a new generation of language educators by depicting their distinctiveness, grounded in the unprecedented circumstances of today's world.

The Vietnamese Gen Z language teachers in this study, consistent with the wider literature on this generation worldwide, showed greater concern for mental health—for both their students and themselves—as well as a desire for purpose and self-actualisation in their careers (Booker et al., 2024; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). These concerns were reflected in their views of the teaching profession, moving beyond the traditional notion of teachers as unquestioningly respected individuals with near-absolute classroom authority, to seeing themselves as educational service providers. In this sense, authority and respect are balanced in a relational manner with responsibility and expectation. As a service, teaching is expected to be of the highest quality, delivered through serious professional practice and well-planned professional development. At the same time, service providers, in the Gen Z teachers' view, have the right to refuse customers when they are not ready and are entitled to a private life free from career-related burdens.

These findings, due to inherent methodological boundaries, should be interpreted with caution. First, as the study is interpretivist by nature, readers are advised to avoid oversimplification or generalisation. Second, while the sample focused exclusively on Gen Z teachers, it is acknowledged that the desire for positive mental health and high teaching quality without excessive responsibilities exists among most teachers. Gen Z teachers, however, may be more explicitly vocal regarding these needs due to favourable contextual affordances. Third, the study was conducted in Vietnam, a setting with unique social characteristics; interpretations for other contexts should therefore be made with consideration of their own specificities.

In light of this, the following recommendations are offered for both future research and practice. First, future research could expand on both quantitative and qualitative methods. Large-scale studies surveying Gen Z language teachers' affective and professional needs would provide useful insights for training and professional development programmes, while narrative or autobiographic studies could depict internal nuances. Second, support across levels, from the broader society to individual institutions, should be catered to Gen Z teachers in light of these emerging perceptions. Third, professional training, whether at universities or throughout a

teacher's career, should take into account the need for interdisciplinary competence and a balanced view of life and work.

As an emerging and prospective central teaching workforce—and, subsequently, future education leaders—Gen Z's views of the teaching career have the potential to influence much more than their own classrooms. Understanding how they define the career, including its roles, authority, and status, not only paves the way for more effective and timely teacher education programmes but also informs the future direction of the profession. While teaching may encompass new definitions, concepts, professional standards, and values, it does so by reflecting life and constantly evolving societal values. As Niemi et al. (2018) noted, the roles and relevant professional aspects of teachers have continuously changed throughout history, adapting to societal developments and complexities. Therefore, the roles teachers assume matter as much as who they are and the values they bring to the profession.

### ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6663-0636>

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Generative AI was used to enhance the quality of language use.

### Ethics Declarations

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Not applicable.

### Data Availability

Data are available upon reasonable request.

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### Appendix

#### Interview Guide

- Check information related to qualification and teaching experience
- (Role) How do you identify yourself as a teacher? Is there anything in your role that is different from traditional views?
- (Role) What are new roles that teachers of this age have to take on, if any?
- (Authority) How do you normally conduct your lessons?
- (Authority) How do you normally deal with misbehaved students?
- (Authority) How do you normally maintain class discipline?
- (Status) What do you think about the current status of teachers, particularly language teachers, in this modern age?
- (Status) What do you think about the responsibilities, privileges, and professionalism of teachers?

Other questions can be asked following interviewees' responses.