

Narrating Critical Events Through OCER: A Narrative Inquiry Into Researcher Identity Construction Among MA Graduates in Thailand

การถ่ายทอดเหตุการณ์วิกฤตผ่านกรอบ OCER: การวิจัยเชิงเรื่องเล่าว่าด้วยการสร้าง
อัตลักษณ์ความเป็นนักวิจัยของบัณฑิตระดับมหาบัณฑิตในบริบทประเทศไทย

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in researcher identity formation in higher education, limited research has examined how master's students form researcher identities through critical academic events within specific institutional contexts. This study employed narrative inquiry to examine how master's students in an English programme at a Thai university formed researcher identities through critical academic events. Drawing on Gee's (2000) concept of institutional identity and McCabe's (2002) Orientation–Complication–Evaluation–Result (OCER) framework, the study explored how participants interpreted their experiences over time. The findings indicated that participants initially positioned themselves as postgraduate learners (Orientation), subsequently encountered challenges such as topic uncertainty, workload pressure, academic English, and research methodology (Complication), and ultimately engaged in reflection and strategic adjustment (Evaluation). These processes led to increased autonomy and identification with the researcher identity (Result). Supervisory feedback, coursework, peer interaction, and family encouragement functioned as key supports that sustained engagement and legitimized emerging identities. The study highlighted researcher identity formation as a gradual process shaped by the interaction between challenge and support. These findings suggest that graduate programmes should balance rigorous research demands with sustained academic and interpersonal support.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, researcher identity, critical events, OCER framework, institutional identity

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บทคัดย่อ

แม้ว่าจะมีความสนใจที่เพิ่มมากขึ้นเกี่ยวกับการสร้างอัตลักษณ์นักวิจัยในระดับอุดมศึกษา แต่งานวิจัยที่ศึกษาว่านักศึกษาระดับมหาบัณฑิตสร้างอัตลักษณ์ความเป็นนักวิจัยผ่านเหตุการณ์ทางวิชาการที่สำคัญภายในบริบทของสถาบันอย่างไรยังมีย่อยอย่างจำกัด งานวิจัยนี้ใช้แนวทางการวิจัยเชิงเรื่องเล่า (narrative inquiry) เพื่อศึกษาการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ความเป็นนักวิจัยของนักศึกษาระดับมหาบัณฑิตในหลักสูตรภาษาอังกฤษของมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย โดยอาศัยกรอบแนวคิดอัตลักษณ์เชิงสถาบันของ Gee (2000) และกรอบการวิเคราะห์ Orientation–Complication–Evaluation–Result (OCER) ของ McCabe (2002) เพื่อศึกษาวิธีที่ผู้ให้ข้อมูลตีความประสบการณ์ของตนตามลำดับเวลา ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ผู้ให้ข้อมูลเริ่มต้นด้วยการวางตำแหน่งตนเองในฐานะผู้เรียนระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา (Orientation) จากนั้นเผชิญกับความท้าทายต่างๆ เช่น ความไม่แน่นอนของหัวข้อวิจัย แรงกดดันด้านภาระงาน ภาษาอังกฤษเชิงวิชาการ และระเบียบวิธีวิจัย (Complication) ก่อนเข้าสู่กระบวนการสะท้อนคิดและการปรับตัวเชิงกลยุทธ์ (Evaluation) ในที่สุด กระบวนการเหล่านี้นำไปสู่การพึ่งพาตนเองที่เพิ่มขึ้นและการระบุตนเองเข้ากับอัตลักษณ์นักวิจัย (Result) ข้อเสนอแนะจากอาจารย์ที่ปรึกษา รายวิชา ในหลักสูตร ปฏิสัมพันธ์กับเพื่อน และกำลังใจจากครอบครัว ล้วนเป็นปัจจัยสนับสนุนสำคัญที่ช่วยคำนวณการมีส่วนร่วมและทำให้อัตลักษณ์ที่สร้างขึ้นมีความชอบธรรม การศึกษานี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าการสร้างอัตลักษณ์นักวิจัยเป็นกระบวนการที่ค่อยเป็นค่อยไป ซึ่งเกิดจากปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความท้าทายและการสนับสนุน ผลการศึกษานี้ยังบ่งชี้ว่าหลักสูตรบัณฑิตศึกษาควรสร้างความสมดุลระหว่างความเข้มข้นของข้อกำหนดด้านการวิจัยกับการสนับสนุนอย่างต่อเนื่องทั้งในด้านวิชาการและความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคล

คำสำคัญ: การวิจัยเชิงเรื่องเล่า อัตลักษณ์นักวิจัย เหตุการณ์สำคัญ กรอบ OCER อัตลักษณ์เชิงสถาบัน

Introduction

The transition from learner to researcher has been discussed as a developmental process in graduate education (Gardner, 2008; Mantai, 2017a), with identity understood as socially constructed through interaction and recognition (Gee, 2000). Within master's programmes, students are expected not only to acquire disciplinary knowledge but also to develop the capacity to conduct research, engage with academic inquiry, and position themselves as emerging members of a research community (Madikizela-Madiya et al., 2013). This transition, however, is rarely immediate or linear. Rather, it unfolds as a gradual process in which individuals interpret their experiences, engage in reflective practice, negotiate meanings within social and institutional contexts, and ultimately gain recognition as legitimate participants in a research community (Choi et al., 2021; Farrell, 2013; Gee, 2000; McLean & Syed, 2015). This process is often described as the development of a learner-to-researcher identity, in which students gradually shift from being learners to becoming producers of knowledge within academic communities. Understanding how this process unfolds is therefore essential for examining how graduate students construct researcher identities.

One useful way to understand this developmental process is through the lens of critical events. To examine how participants narrated these identity-forming experiences, this study also draws on McCabe's (2002) OCER framework, consisting of Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, and Result. This framework offers a useful way to analyze the structure of participants' narratives by tracing how they introduced significant events, described problems or tensions, interpreted those experiences, and reflected on their outcomes (McCabe, 2002). In this study, the framework is used to identify critical events that shaped participants' researcher identity construction, particularly the challenges that disrupted their development and the supports that enabled them to continue and grow.

The emphasis on challenges and support is central to this study because such experiences often function as critical events in graduate students' identity development. Challenges such as uncertainty in selecting a research topic, academic workload pressure, and difficulties with academic English and research methodology may create tensions that require students to re-evaluate their roles and capabilities. At the same time, support from supervisors, structured coursework, peers, and family may provide both academic and emotional resources that help students sustain motivation, strengthen research practices, and develop confidence in their emerging roles as researchers. Research on identity has long suggested that learning and identity are closely interconnected (Lave & Wenger, 1991), indicating that identity formation must be understood in relation to both personal engagement and the social and institutional contexts in which learning occurs.

To capture how these identity-forming processes unfold over time, this study adopts a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry views experience as storied and focuses on how individuals construct meaning by recounting and interpreting significant events in their educational journeys. From this perspective, identity is not treated as a fixed attribute or a final outcome of academic training (Gee, 2000; Norton, 2013), but as an evolving, relational, and socially negotiated process shaped through participants' interpretations of key moments (Gee, 2000; McLean & Syed, 2015). This view is consistent with Norton's (2013) argument that identity is continuously constructed through social interaction and investment, as well as Block's (2007) perspective that identity is dynamic, multiple, and shaped by broader social and institutional contexts.

The study was informed by Gee's (2000) concept of institutional identity, or I-identity, which emphasizes that identity is shaped by the roles, positions, and forms of recognition provided by institutions. In educational contexts, institutional identity helps explain how students become recognized as certain kinds of persons, such as learners, researchers, or professionals, through their participation in institutional structures and practices (Gee, 2000; Ivanič, 1998). In the context of a postgraduate programme master's programme, students' researcher identity development is influenced not only by their individual efforts, but also by supervision, coursework, assessment practices, academic expectations, and the broader culture of the programme (Mantai, 2017b). Gee's framework thus provided an important lens for understanding how researcher identity is constructed within the institutional setting of graduate study. This perspective is complemented by broader identity research, which views identity as dynamic, socially negotiated, and continuously reconstructed through interaction and experience (Block, 2007; Norton, 2013). Together, these

perspectives support the examination of researcher identity as both institutionally situated and socially constructed.

Despite the growing attention to identity in educational research, limited research has examined how students construct researcher identities through critical events during graduate study, particularly within specific institutional contexts. Existing research has often focused more broadly on professional development and reflective practice (Farrell, 2008), while less attention has been paid to how students narrate their identity trajectories through experiences of challenge and support. Previous studies have largely focused on doctoral students and professional practitioners, with comparatively less attention given to master's students who are undergoing the transition from learners to researchers (Mantai, 2017b). In addition, little research has explored how master's students experience and interpret challenges and support within institutional settings during this transition. This gap is particularly important because master's study represents a crucial stage of academic development in which students are expected to develop research competence and begin participating in research communities. A narrative inquiry perspective can help address this gap by showing how researcher identity emerges through storied experience and how institutional conditions shape that process over time (Gee, 2000; McLean & Syed, 2015).

Accordingly, to address the gap, this study explores how three MA graduates from an English programme narrated the critical events that shaped their development as emerging researchers. It also examines how experiences of challenge and support contributed to this identity formation process over time. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of researcher identity formation at the master's level and offers insights into how graduate programmes can better support students in becoming recognized members of the research community.

Research Questions

1. What critical events did MA graduates in an English programme experience during their graduate studies?
2. How did these critical events contribute to their construction of researcher identities?

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to examine how MA graduates in an English programme at a Thai university constructed their researcher identities through critical events encountered during graduate study. This study drew on Gee's (2000) concept of institutional identity and McCabe's (2002, as cited in Farrell, 2014) Orientation-Complication-Evaluation-Result (OCER) framework, which were applied at different stages of the research process. Gee's framework informed the conceptual design, including the research focus, interview prompts, and interpretation of findings, with attention to how participants came to understand themselves and were recognized by others as researchers within the institutional context.

McCabe's OCER framework was used in data analysis to structure participants' narrative accounts into episodes. These episodes were examined across four stages: Orientation (context), Complication (critical events), Evaluation (interpretation and support), and Result (identity outcomes). Together, these frameworks made it possible to trace how researcher identity developed through narrated experiences over time.

3.2 Participants and Research Context

Three participants were purposively selected for this study based on three criteria: (1) they had completed the MA programme, (2) they had conducted a thesis or academic research project during their studies, and (3) they were willing to participate in in-depth interviews about their experiences. Following the selection criteria, participants were assigned the pseudonyms Mali, Dara, and Niran. Basic contextual information is presented in Table 1. At the time of data collection, all participants had completed their MA studies and had continued into doctoral study or university teaching.

Table 1

Participant Background Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Academic Background	Current Position at Time of Interview		
Mali	Female	MA in English	Doctoral Student	Lecturer	University
Dara	Female	MA in English	Doctoral Student	Lecturer	University
Niran	Male	MA in English	Doctoral Student	Lecturer	University

The study was conducted as a small-scale qualitative case study in the English MA programme at a university in the northeastern region of Thailand, where English served as the medium of instruction. The case study focus allowed for an in-depth examination of researcher identity construction within a bounded institutional context. The case was defined by a specific programme, a participant group, and a shared period of experience, namely participants' MA studies in the programme. Situating the inquiry within this context made it possible to examine how critical events were shaped by the academic and institutional environment in which participants studied.

3.3 Research Tools

The study used two main data collection tools: semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews. The interview questions were designed with reference to McCabe's (2002) critical event framework and Woolsey's (1986) guidelines and were organized around four stages: Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, and Result (OCER). This structure helped participants

describe key events, reflect on their meaning, and explain how these experiences influenced their development.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online and lasted around 90 minutes each. The interview protocol was structured around McCabe's (2002) OCER framework. Orientation questions focused on participants' academic context and experiences during their MA studies. Complication questions explored participants' challenges, tensions, or disruptions encountered during their research journey. Evaluation questions invited participants to reflect on the significance of these experiences and the support they received. Result questions examined how participants responded to these experiences and how they contributed to researcher identity development.

Follow-up interviews were conducted online approximately one to two weeks after the initial interviews and lasted about 20-30 minutes. Their purpose was to clarify ambiguous responses, verify interpretations, and obtain additional details about critical events discussed during the first interview. Follow-up questions also encouraged participants to elaborate on their emotional responses, reflections, and actions related to key experiences (Roberts, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

To improve the trustworthiness of the data, participants were invited to review and confirm their interview transcripts. The data were also read and checked multiple times to ensure that the analysis remained consistent with the participants' accounts.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were generated through two rounds of in-depth interviews with each participant: a semi-structured interview followed by a follow-up interview. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately 90 minutes each, while the follow-up interviews were conducted one to two weeks later. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed. Interview transcripts were returned to participants for review and confirmation to ensure the accuracy of the data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a narrative analytic approach, focusing on how participants constructed and interpreted their experiences through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In line with narrative inquiry, analysis involved both within-case and cross-case examination of participants' accounts to identify patterns of meaning-making and identity development over time.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative. Second, key narrative segments were identified and organized into narrative episodes, representing critical events in participants' experiences. Third, these episodes were analyzed using McCabe's OCER framework to examine how participants structured their narratives in terms of Orientation (context and positioning), Complication (challenges and disruptions), Evaluation (interpretation and reflection), and Result (outcomes and identity shifts). Following this stage, Gee's (2000) concept of institutional identity was used as an interpretive lens to examine how participants understood themselves and were recognized by others as researchers within the institutional context of their MA programme. This

process allowed for a systematic examination of how identity development unfolded temporally through cycles of disruption, reflection, and transformation.

Following within-case analysis, a cross-case synthesis was conducted to identify shared patterns and variations across participants. Attention was given to how challenges and supports functioned as mediating forces in identity construction, as well as how participants positioned themselves in relation to institutional expectations and research practices.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the university at which the first author was undertaking a master's degree and conducting the thesis research (Approval No. HE673389). All procedures adhered to institutional ethical standards for research involving human participants. All participants were informed of the aims of the study, the nature of their involvement, and the procedures for data collection and analysis before participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports, and identifying details were removed or modified where necessary. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Care was taken throughout the study to represent participants' narratives accurately and respectfully.

3.7 Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. First, member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy of their accounts and the validity of interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Second, thick description was used in presenting findings, providing detailed accounts of participants' experiences and contextual factors to enhance transparency and allow readers to assess the transferability of the findings (Trent & Cho, 2006).

Third, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting decisions related to data collection, coding, and interpretation. This contributed to the dependability and transparency of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Finally, iterative analysis and constant comparison across narratives were employed to ensure consistency and depth in identifying patterns of identity construction. By examining both individual trajectories and cross-case patterns, the study strengthened the credibility of its findings.

Results

This section presents the narrative findings derived from participants' accounts, illustrating how they organize and interpret their experiences and how these processes reflect the development of their researcher identities over time. The findings are presented as narrative episodes structured through McCabe's (2002) Orientation–Complication–Evaluation–Result (OCER) framework.

Table 2

Overview of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

Research Question	Main Findings
RQ1: What critical events did MA graduates experience?	Participants experienced a range of critical events, including workload pressure, time-management difficulties, thesis topic uncertainty, challenges in academic English and research methodology, institutional constraints, and delays associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Key sources of support included supervisors, coursework, peers, family members, and self-regulation strategies.
RQ2: How did these critical events contribute to researcher identity construction?	Through interpreting and responding to these critical events, participants developed researcher-related qualities, such as critical thinking, reflective practice, self-regulation, problem-solving, autonomy, lifelong learning, and a stronger identification with the researcher role.

4.1 Mali: From Early Struggle to Reflective Practice

Using McCabe's (2002) OCER framework, Mali's narrative reveals how her researcher identity developed through a sequence of contextual positioning, challenge, reflection, and outcome.

In the *Orientation* stage, Mali located her experience in the first semester of the MA programme, which she described as the most demanding stage of her graduate journey. This was a period in which she was adjusting to postgraduate study while simultaneously balancing coursework and part-time work. As she explained, "*during the first semester... I had to work... and I had a lot of part-time jobs like translating things*", which made it "*quite hard to manage the time*". The early phase of the programme formed the context in which her initial struggles with academic expectations, time management, and emotional pressure emerged, particularly as she was "*a little bit overwhelmed... especially during the first few months*".

In the *Complication stage*, Mali described several critical difficulties that disrupted her transition into graduate study. The greatest challenge was balancing academic responsibilities with work commitments during the first semester. She felt overwhelmed by time management problems, stress, and conflicting feedback from professors. She explained that she “*could not manage [her] time and stress very well at all*”, and when faced with multiple academic demands, she “*did not know which one [she] should do first*” and “*could not prioritize things very well*”. Challenging courses, particularly the Second Language Acquisition course, further intensified this pressure. These experiences made her feel unable to prioritize tasks effectively and marked the early stage of her MA studies as a period of instability and self-doubt.

In the *Evaluation stage*, Mali narrated how she interpreted and responded to these challenges. A significant moment in her account was her decision to temporarily leave Khon Kaen and travel to Vietnam without a fixed plan, explaining that she “*just wanted to go away from Khon Kaen*” because she didn’t know where she wanted to go. Acting on impulse, she “*booked a flight for the next day... to Vietnam*”. She presented this not as avoidance but as a self-regulation strategy that allowed her to recover mentally and regain emotional balance, as she reflected, “*When everything is all in here, in the brain, I can’t think well*”. After returning, she felt re-energized and more prepared to continue her studies, noting that she felt “*fully energetic... ready to go*”. She also emphasized the role of critical thinking and teamwork in helping her overcome difficulties: “*everyone around you is working, so you’re going to work*”, suggesting that her ability to move forward depended on both personal reflection and collaborative support.

In the *Result stage*, Mali described how these experiences contributed to her development as a reflective teacher-researcher. In her current role as a language instructor, she continues to apply research-oriented thinking in her teaching practice. She approaches classroom issues by questioning what works, experimenting with alternative methods, and adapting teaching strategies to student needs. She explained that she begins by identifying classroom problems, stating that she would “*find a problem... identify the problem of [her] students*”, and then “*try out a few methods*” to address them. She also described herself as a problem solver who learned from unsuccessful teaching experiments, such as trying a flipped classroom approach that proved unsuitable in her context. She explained, “*It’s not really suitable for Thai students*”. In addition, she highlighted self-management as an important outcome, particularly in balancing teaching, PhD study, and personal life. Through this sequence of challenge, reflection, and adaptation, Mali’s narrative shows that her researcher identity emerged through the gradual transformation of academic stress into critical, reflective, and context-sensitive practice. As she further explained, “*Thinking through roles helped me understand what being a researcher really means*”.

Overall, Mali’s narrative demonstrated how challenges, reflection, and support interacted to shape her researcher identity formation. Through these experiences, she developed critical thinking, reflective practice, problem-solving skills, self-regulation, and a stronger sense of herself as a researcher.

4.2 Dara: From Uncertainty and Delay to Confidence and Persistence

Dara's narrative, when examined through McCabe's (2002) OCER framework, shows how her identity as a researcher developed through prolonged difficulty, sustained support, and increasing self-confidence.

In the *Orientation stage*, Dara situated her experience within the thesis phase of the MA programme, where she was expected to define a research topic, engage with academic literature, and complete an independent study. She explained that this stage began when she "*set the title of [her] thesis*" and started to "*look at a lot of information*" and "*read a lot of papers as [her] guideline*". She also noted that she has "*read a lot of studies about writing in different ways*". This stage formed the broader context of her identity development, as she moved beyond coursework into the more demanding process of thesis writing.

In the *Complication stage*, Dara described a series of difficulties that made this phase especially challenging. One major challenge was identifying a suitable thesis topic. She recalled that she had to "*read a lot of papers*" to set her title, but the process became increasingly confusing as the more she read, new ideas came up, leading her to repeatedly change her topic. She also explained that she "*changed the topic many times*" during consultations with her advisor because she could not find a direction that felt appropriate. In addition, she found reading academic texts difficult due to both conceptual complexity and challenging language, noting that "*the language is not a normal language, it is academic English*". Her lack of prior experience in conducting research and writing a thesis further intensified these struggles. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed her data collection and extended the time required to complete her studies. Together, these factors created emotional pressure, as she "*got depressed sometimes*" when she could not settle on a satisfactory thesis title.

In the *Evaluation stage*, Dara emphasized the importance of support in helping her continue. She explained that her advisor gave her "*thesis papers from former MA students to read and study*" when she lost motivation and stopped writing. A particularly important event in her narrative was her advisor calling her and encouraging her "*to keep doing it until finishing*", which motivated her to return to her work and reminded her not to give up. Dara interpreted this as a moment of emotional and academic support that helped her regain motivation. Although her advisor was not an expert in her topic area, she still provided practical assistance, as Dara noted that her advisor "*marked some part of [her] writing*" and even "*edited it herself*" when revisions were insufficient. Dara also highlighted the emotional support she received from her family, who did not pressure her despite delays but instead tried to understand and encourage her. In addition to these external sources of support, she described practicing self-support by reminding herself to value the achievement of completing the thesis, particularly when she "*stopped doing [her] research for a while*" due to burnout.

In the *Result stage*, Dara described several qualities that she believed had developed through these experiences, including continuous learning, self-management, critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. She explained that these qualities continue to shape her professional practice. In teaching, she now questions whether methods truly work,

reflecting a more critical and evidence-based orientation. She *“finds the problem, identifies the problem of [her] students”*, and then deliberately tests different methods by *“trying out a few methods”*. She also demonstrated stronger self-regulation in balancing teaching, doctoral study, and personal life, emphasizing that research requires discipline because *“you have to keep doing it until you finish it”*.

Her problem-solving ability is reflected in the advice she now gives to others beginning research, explaining that *“we have limited time... so you have to decide immediately”*. She added that she needed to solve the problem. Her interest in new developments, such as AI in language teaching, illustrates her continuing orientation toward learning, as she noted that *“if you stop doing it, you would forget and you would lose the motivation”*. Dara’s narrative, therefore, shows that her researcher identity was built through repeated cycles of uncertainty, support, persistence, and reflection, which gradually strengthened her confidence and autonomy.

Dara’s narrative highlights how thesis-related uncertainty, limited research experience, and external disruptions created significant challenges during her MA journey. Supervisory guidance, family encouragement, and self-motivation enabled her to persist despite these difficulties. Through these experiences, she developed greater confidence, self-regulation, critical thinking, and a stronger researcher identity.

4.3 Niran: From Topic Uncertainty to Realistic Research Direction

Niran’s narrative, interpreted through McCabe’s (2002) OCER framework, highlights how his development as a researcher was shaped by topic uncertainty, institutional limitations, and gradual adaptation.

In the *Orientation stage*, Niran situated his experience at the end of coursework, when he was expected to move from structured academic study into independent thesis research. This transition marked the key context in which his researcher identity began to take shape. As he explained, he was beginning to *“find out what research [he] was interested in and also had enough gap to do”*, when he faced the challenge of defining a feasible area of study and making more autonomous academic decisions.

In the *Complication stage*, Niran identified selecting a thesis topic as the major challenge of his MA experience. He struggled to define a topic that was both theoretically meaningful and practically manageable, stating that *“finding the research that you can do is very hard”*. This difficulty reflected uncertainty not only about the research title itself but also about how to produce work that was academically worthwhile and realistically achievable. A further complication involved the tension between his own interests and the institutional limitations of the programme. He explained that *“we don’t have professors who specialize in music”* and *“we don’t have professors who specialize in literature”*. Although he wanted to explore fields such as music or literature, he found this difficult because the programme lacked faculty expertise and resources in those areas. As a result, students were often encouraged to choose safer topics under available supervision. These conditions constrained his choices and shaped how he understood the possibilities of academic research.

In the *Evaluation stage*, Niran highlighted the role of regular supervisory meetings in helping him respond to these difficulties. He described how he “*discussed with [his] professor in person*”. Although his supervisor did not have expertise in his preferred area, she still offered general methodological guidance and consistent encouragement. Niran valued not only the practical advice he received but also his supervisor’s commitment to student success beyond her own specialization. Through these repeated discussions, he gradually re-evaluated his expectations and came to understand that moving forward required choosing a topic that was realistic within the institutional environment available to him.

In the *Result stage*, Niran described how he eventually gave up ideas that were too idealistic and selected a more theory-based topic that allowed him to continue steadily. He noted that “*if you are actually going forward with a bad design, it’s not going to make you go fast*”. This change marked an important shift in his approach to research. Looking back, he observed that “*the research goes very fast because the design is now based on good theory*”. He identified critical thinking as the most valuable skill developed during the programme, particularly because he had learned to analyze carefully before making decisions. He also emphasized self-regulation, lifelong learning, and effective communication as outcomes of his MA experience because “*you have to keep doing it until you finish it*”. In his current role, these qualities are evident in how he evaluates teaching methods, balances multiple responsibilities, and works collaboratively with colleagues. Niran’s narrative shows that his researcher identity developed through learning to negotiate between personal academic interests and institutional possibilities, with supervisory support helping him move toward greater independence and confidence.

Overall, this narrative indicated that Niran’s researcher identity was shaped by challenges related to thesis topic selection and institutional constraints. Through supervisory support and reflective decision-making, he learned to balance personal interests with practical research considerations. These experiences fostered greater autonomy, critical thinking, self-regulation, and confidence in his role as a researcher.

4.4 Cross-Case Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

This section presents a cross-case narrative account synthesizing participants’ experiences to identify patterns of researcher identity construction across the OCER stages. Moving beyond individual narratives, it highlights key similarities and differences in positioning, challenges, and reflective meaning-making. By comparing narrative episodes across cases, it shows how participants interpreted and responded to critical events.

Orientation

Across the three narratives, the English MA programme was constructed as a transitional institutional space in which participants moved from structured learning toward the demands of independent research. Entering the programme as students, they were gradually expected to assume responsibilities associated with researcherhood, including identifying research problems, engaging with academic literature, making methodological decisions, and completing a thesis. In

this sense, the programme did not merely provide academic training; it also constituted an institutional setting in which researcher identity became both possible and necessary.

Complication

The transition, however, did not unfold smoothly. Rather, the narratives revealed that identity development was shaped through disruption. For Mali, the first semester represented a period of destabilization, marked by the strain of balancing coursework, part-time work, and the emotional demands of postgraduate study. Dara's account foregrounded the uncertainty of the thesis stage, where repeated topic revisions, difficulty reading academic texts, limited research experience, and delays during the COVID-19 pandemic combined to prolong her sense of academic vulnerability. Niran similarly identified topic selection as the key complication, but his narrative further exposed a tension between personal intellectual interests and the institutional limitations of supervision and programme expertise. Across the three cases, these complications did not simply hinder academic progress; they challenged participants' confidence, unsettled their learner identities, and exposed the demands of becoming researchers in practice.

Evaluation

What distinguished these narratives was not the presence of difficulty alone, but the ways participants interpreted and responded to it. In the Evaluation stage, support emerged as a crucial mediating force in identity development. Mali highlighted self-regulation as a way of regaining emotional control and re-entering academic work with renewed energy. Dara emphasized the importance of supervisory encouragement, practical feedback, family understanding, and her own self-motivation, all of which helped transform periods of delay and discouragement into continued engagement. Niran described supervisory meetings as a stabilizing structure that provided both methodological guidance and reassurance, even when specialist expertise was limited. Analytically, these forms of support were significant not only because they helped participants cope, but because they enabled them to reinterpret challenges as workable and meaningful. Through this process, support functioned as a form of legitimization, allowing participants to remain positioned within the research trajectory rather than outside it.

Result

The Result stage captured the cumulative identity work produced through these cycles of challenge and mediation. Mali's narrative pointed to the development of reflective practice, problem-solving, and self-management, all of which now inform her teaching and classroom-based inquiry. Dara described the emergence of continuous learning, critical thinking, self-regulation, and effective communication, suggesting that her researcher identity was consolidated through persistence as much as through academic achievement. Niran identified critical thinking, self-regulation, lifelong learning, and clearer communication as outcomes of learning to work within institutional constraints while gradually exercising greater autonomy. Across all three narratives, researcher identity did not appear as a discrete outcome reached at the end of the MA. Instead, it

emerged incrementally through participants' efforts to negotiate difficulty, mobilize available support, and act with increasing independence.

Discussion

Across the three participants, researcher identity became visible through how critical events were structured and interpreted over time within the OCER framework. This finding supports narrative inquiry perspectives that view identity as dynamic and constructed through storied experience (Barkhuizen, 2008; Richards, 2005). The OCER framework also provides a useful temporal lens for tracing how researcher identity development unfolds over time. This finding is also consistent with Mantai (2017b), who argues that postgraduate students often develop researcher identities through engagement with uncertainty, challenge, and reflection rather than through a linear progression of skill acquisition.

The three participants demonstrated distinct yet converging trajectories of becoming researchers. Mali developed a reflective researcher identity grounded in self-regulation and adaptive practice, transforming early overload into inquiry-oriented thinking. Dara's trajectory reflected a persistent and resilient researcher identity, in which prolonged uncertainty and emotional strain were gradually stabilized through sustained support, making persistence itself central to her identity. Niran developed a strategically adaptive researcher identity through negotiating institutional constraints, demonstrating how pragmatic decision-making and critical judgment were shaped by available supervision and programme structures. These findings are broadly consistent with previous studies suggesting that researcher identity develops through engagement with academic challenges, reflective practice, and participation in research-related activities (Mantai & Marrone, 2022). However, unlike many previous studies that focus primarily on doctoral students, the present study highlights how researcher identity formation also occurs at the master's level through the interaction of individual agency, institutional expectations, and available support.

Across cases, Complication functioned as a key trigger for identity negotiation. However, these challenges were not merely obstacles; they were moments in which participants repositioned themselves in relation to institutional expectations. Here, Gee's (2000) concept of I-identity (institutional identity) was particularly salient. Participants' development as researchers was not solely a matter of internal growth but depended on how they were recognized, supported, and legitimized within the institutional context. Mali's increasing agency was enabled by her ability to re-enter academic participation; Dara's persistence was sustained through recognition and encouragement from supervisors and family; and Niran's adaptation reflected alignment with institutional possibilities. In this sense, researcher identity emerged through processes of institutional positioning, recognition, and negotiated participation. This finding supports previous research suggesting that critical events often function as turning points in identity development (Farrell, 2013; Pandee, 2021). Like those studies, participants in the present research did not experience challenges merely as barriers to progress but as opportunities to reassess their capabilities, redefine their academic roles, and gradually adopt researcher-like ways of thinking. However, the present study further suggests that these challenges were shaped not only by individual

factors but also by institutional conditions, including supervision, programme expectations, and available academic resources.

Evaluation acted as the central mediating process through which identity transformation occurred. While Mali relied more on internal reflection, Dara on relational support, and Niran on supervisory interaction, all three cases showed that support functioned as identity validation, enabling participants to sustain engagement and perceive themselves as legitimate members of the research community. This finding resonates with sociocultural perspectives that conceptualize identity as participation within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), but the present study extends this view by showing how validation operates narratively through participants' interpretations of support. The importance of support identified in this study is consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of supervision, mentoring, peer interaction, and institutional support in researcher identity development (Madikizela-Madiya et al., 2013; Pandee et al., 2020, 2021). However, the findings extend this literature by demonstrating that participants interpreted support not only as practical assistance but also as a form of recognition that legitimized their participation in the research community and strengthened their emerging researcher identities.

The Result stage indicated that researcher identity is not a fixed endpoint but an evolving orientation toward thinking and acting as a researcher. Mali demonstrated reflective inquiry in practice, Dara demonstrated sustained commitment and self-regulation, and Niran demonstrated critical and context-sensitive decision-making. These outcomes suggest that identity develops incrementally through recursive cycles of challenge, mediation, and action. These findings help address the two research questions by identifying the critical events experienced by MA graduates and demonstrating how those events contributed to the construction of researcher identities within a specific institutional context.

This study makes three key contributions to literature. First, it advances narrative inquiry research by demonstrating how the OCER framework can be used not only as an analytic tool for structuring narratives but also as a temporal model for tracing researcher identity development. Second, it extends Gee's (2000) notion of I-identity by showing how institutional recognition and support are narratively experienced and interpreted by students, thereby linking structural conditions with individual meaning-making processes. Third, it provides a context-sensitive account of researcher identity development in a Thai graduate education setting, highlighting how identity is shaped through the interaction of individual agency, relational support, and institutional constraints.

Overall, the findings suggest that becoming a researcher is not simply a matter of acquiring research skills but involves ongoing identity work situated within specific institutional and social contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined how MA graduates narrated critical academic events and constructed researcher identities through the Orientation–Complication–Evaluation–Result (OCER) framework. Identity emerged as temporally mediated through cycles of complication and evaluation. Three trajectories were evident: Mali adopted a reflective, inquiry-oriented stance; Dara adopted a resilient, persistence-driven orientation; and Niran adopted a strategically adaptive stance shaped by institutional constraints. Narrated incidents prompted repositioning, with evaluation enabling re-engagement through support. Drawing on Gee’s (2000) concept of institutional identity, the findings highlight recognition, legitimization, and participation as key conditions for becoming a researcher. The study positions the OCER as a temporal analytic framework for tracing identity trajectories and reframes support as identity validation that sustains engagement in postgraduate research. The findings suggest that becoming a researcher is not only a process of acquiring research competence but also of developing a sense of belonging, recognition, and participation within academic communities. Pedagogically, the findings highlight that graduate programmes should move beyond a sole focus on research skills to provide sustained support, including responsive supervision, peer interaction, and guided reflection. At the institutional level, universities should embed researcher identity within programme design by integrating supervision, mentoring, and reflective learning opportunities that foster participation in research communities.

Future research may examine researcher identity development across different disciplinary and institutional contexts to explore whether similar patterns of challenge, support, and identity construction emerge. Longitudinal studies following students throughout their postgraduate journeys may provide deeper insight into how researcher identities evolve over time. In addition, future research could investigate the perspectives of supervisors and programme administrators to better understand how institutional practices influence researcher identity development.

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