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Teacher educators' challenges: focusing on teacher training colleges in Laos

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Understanding challenges faced by teacher educators further contributes to improvement suggestions on their professional development. It is a pressing study on their working in developing countries where teacher education has experienced reforms to respond to national and international demands. This qualitative study explored the challenges faced by teacher educators in teacher training colleges in Laos. Twenty-three purposively selected participants took part in semi-structured interviews during April–May 2024. Data was analyzed through thematic coding using NVivo-14 software. The analysis identified 23 themes. Detailed data analysis revealed that the primary challenge for teacher educators was their multiple roles or duties and responsibilities, comprising administrative functions and external academic services despite their teaching. That workload led to their difficulties in implementing their role and planning. Furthermore, they encountered challenges in collaboration and planning that impacted task completion. The findings underscore the need for institutional support to help teacher educators manage their workloads more effectively. Future research should: (1). examine how teacher educators manage their multifaceted responsibilities to alleviate work-related stress as a need for a balanced workload approach. Consequently, policymakers and educational leaders may inform their work-related stress and improve the overall quality of teacher training programs. (2). Investigate long-term impacts of administrative overload on teacher educators' wellbeing and retention. (3). Explore policy-level responses to institutional constraints. 4). Conduct comparative studies across regions or teacher education system in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

KEYWORDS

teacher educators, responsibilities, challenges, workloads, professional development, collaboration, Laos

1 Introduction

Teacher educators play a vital role in shaping the skills and knowledge of future educators, who, in turn, impact student learning across the nation (Zeichner, 2014; Mangaoil et al., 2017). The development of a strong professional identity is central to becoming an effective teacher educator (Izadinia, 2014). Moreover, well-supported teacher educators are crucial to quality teacher education (Goodwin et al., 2014). However, teacher educators face numerous challenges, including heavy workloads, time constraints, limited resources, and insufficient resources (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2015; Czerniawski et al., 2016). These issues could be addressed by enhancing professional development, fostering collaboration, increasing institutional support, improving resource allocation, strengthening teacher preparation, and ultimately improving student learning outcomes.

As a developing nation, Laos' Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), as well as its development partners, oversees the implementation of the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan Results indicate that strengthening staff capacity in Laos' eight Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) remains a challenge (MoES, 2020b, p. 2). However, research on the specific challenges faced by teacher educators in Laos remains limited. Moreover, there is little research addressing the unique challenges faced by teacher educators in the Laotian context, highlighting a significant gap in literature.

In the Laotian context, there is scarce evidence of in-depth studies examining teacher educators' key challenges, making it difficult to identify relevant studies that document the specific challenges faced by teacher educators in Laos. Only MacKinnon and Thepphasoulithone (2014) identified various challenges in teacher education in Laos, such as limited qualified staff, collaboration, opportunities for continuous professional development, and systematic support. However, their study did not focus on teacher educators in TTCs.

This study aims to illuminate the challenges faced by teacher educators and identify areas for improvement. The findings will guide future research by highlighting understudied aspects of teacher education, thereby contributing to a stronger educational system within TTCs in Laos. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study to specifically explore teacher educators' challenges in TTCs in Laos. It offers insights into how to further improve their professional roles. It aims to answer the following specific research questions: (1) What factors are perceived as the primary challenges for teacher educators in the selected TTCs in Laos? So that the selected teacher educators can express their key challenges; (2) How do teacher educators perceive and make sense of these challenges? This research question is for them to explain their views on each of the key challenges.

To address these questions, this qualitative study employs a combination of semi-structured interviews, purposive groups, and thematic coding analyses to generate in-depth data on the experiences and perspectives of teacher educators.

2 Background

Teacher education in Laos encompasses all forms of teacher training across educational levels, including initial (pre-service) and in-service (continuing) professional development. These professional development programs are delivered at various teacher education institutions and supported by provincial- and district-level education and sports offices. Teacher education institutions in Laos comprise government colleges and universities that offer approved pre-service teacher education programs and training (MoES, 2024). Specifically, they include (1) the Faculty of Education at a university managed by the Department of Higher Education and (2) TTCs, governed by the Department of Teacher Education. Currently, eight TTCs are mandated to prepare pre-school, primary, and secondary teachers for diplomas and bachelor's degrees within the formal education system.

2.1 Teacher educators in Laos

Teacher educators are lecturers at teacher education institutions who train pre-service teachers for their professional roles. In Laos, teacher educators are responsible for training and preparing future teachers while providing ongoing professional development for in-service teachers (MoES, 2024). Teacher educators in Laos are typically recruited from experienced schoolteachers or university graduates with subject-matter expertise. They are responsible for pre-service training, in-service professional development, and curriculum implementation. They provide both pedagogical expertise and subject matter knowledge to ensure high-quality teaching practices in schools. Their responsibilities, as defined by the MoES (MoE, 2010; MoES Order, 2020; MoES Agreement, 2022; MoES, 2024), include curriculum development, mentorship, continuous professional development, research and innovation, promotion of national educational goals, and collaboration with educational stakeholders.

Furthermore, as indicated by the MoES (2024), teacher educators play a crucial role in ensuring educational quality and effectiveness, forming the foundation for a competent teaching workforce essential to the country's educational and socioeconomic progress. They are instrumental in preparing teachers, developing in-service teachers, supporting national educational reforms, promoting educational equity, and contributing to the nation's long-term development.

2.2 Evolution of teacher education in Laos

In the 1990s, Laos began integrating into the global community, joining the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) in 1997 (ASEAN Secretariate, 2025). This period of increased international engagement prompted educational reforms and introduced global influences, including efforts toward educational modernization and the enhancement of teacher education. International organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank provided support for teacher education (MoES, 2020c, p. 11; Sithirajvongsa, 2021), and teacher education programs were introduced at both diploma and degree levels. These teacher education programs emphasize student-centered learning, modern teaching techniques, and critical thinking skills. Teacher training institutions have also focused on providing in-service training to existing teachers, offering opportunities for professional development.

In the 2000s, the establishment of higher education institutions, particularly the National University of Laos, provided new avenues for teacher education at the bachelor's and master's levels. Teacher quality and professional development have become central focuses for both the government and international organizations. Stakeholders worked to enhance ongoing teacher training programs and address challenges including insufficient training resources, lack of qualified teacher educators, and disparities in access to training opportunities between urban and rural areas (MoE, 2000, p. 8).

The latest Ninth Education Sector Development Plan 2021–2025 (MoES, 2020a) focuses on improving learning outcomes, strengthening governance and management in education, and enhancing the quality of education at all levels. However, according to MoES (2020c, p. 11), teachers and educational personnel who cooperate with various domestic and international organizations still have limited knowledge, skills, and experience. Additionally, the supporting legislation is insufficient and lacks consistency. These challenges affect the achievement of sustainable development for education, as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure education quality, equality, and equity while promoting lifelong learning for all people (MoES, 2020b, p. 2; Lao Government Decree, 2020).

2.3 Challenges faced by teacher educators in Laos

A major challenge for teacher educators in Laos is the lack of infrastructure [UNESCO, 2005; Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2020; JICA, 2024], which affects their ability to train future teachers effectively. With limited access to modern technology and up-to-date materials, they struggle to stay current with the latest teaching practices and to prepare new teachers with essential skills such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and student-centered teaching.

Additionally, the lack of resources makes it challenging to maintain the quality of teacher training programs. Opportunities for continuous professional development are also often limited (MoES Report, 2024), restricting teacher educators' abilities to improve their skills and learn innovative teaching approaches. This limitation affects the development of graduates' skills needed in today's classrooms (Afzal et al., 2024).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher educators have faced the challenges of remote online teaching with insufficient preparation or support (MoES Report, 2020; MoES, 2020d, p. 18, 33). Their technical skills and flexibility have become essential for keeping student teachers engaged online, although they simultaneously struggle to adapt to virtual teaching without proper resources or infrastructure. This additional burden impacts both the quality of education they can deliver and their confidence in their roles.

In addition to these practical issues, teacher educators in Laos face emotional and psychological challenges because stress from limited resources, outdated practices, and the abrupt shift to remote learning have taken a toll on this population. Lack of support systems can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction (Research Institute for Educational Sciences, 2010, p. 93, 132–134), which in turn affects teaching effectiveness. In summary, resource-related, pedagogical, and psychological challenges must be addressed to support and strengthen teacher education in Laos.

This study is therefore essential for exploring teacher educators' current challenges in the Laos context. Identifying key challenges can inform targeted interventions and policy reforms to strengthen teacher education not only in Laos but also in other developing country contexts. Additionally, this research contributes to discussions on sustainable educational development and capacity building.

3 Literature review

This review synthesizes relevant literature to establish the context for the research questions and conceptual framework and help determine key domains related to the main findings. The following domains are derived from international perspectives on teacher educators' and student teachers' experiences regarding workload constraints, personal challenges, and professional expectations.

3.1 Organizational domain

3.1.1 Budget and resources

Limited budgets as challenges in resource allocation for educators, constraining capacity to effectively support educational programs and professional development initiatives. As Podolsky et al. (2016) posit that insufficient funding obstructs the ability of the educational institutions to offer essential tools and learning environments that facilitate growth and innovation. These constraints retard educators' professional development. They also affect student learning outcomes, as instructors may lack the necessary resources to implement teaching effectively. While these financial limitations have short-term consequences on teaching quality and student achievements, this study does not explore the long-term effects on educators' retention.

Budget constraints can affect opportunities for teachers' professional development as in Malaysia's technical and vocational education and training sector (Ismail et al., 2018). These limited professional development opportunities slow instructors' abilities to implement their teaching. They also limit students' exposure to up-to-date vocational skills. That finally affects the capacity of the sector to produce qualified teachers. In an era in which education quality is increasingly linked to national development, ensuring that teacher educators receive continuous and relevant training is essential for sustaining the quality and effectiveness of technical and vocational education and training programs. While Ismail et al. (2018) highlight the impact of funding limitations on teacher training and student outcomes, their study does not examine how these constraints influence teacher wellbeing–a critical factor in long-term educational sustainability.

Other challenges are insufficient remuneration and compensation which contribute to teacher educators' dissatisfaction as in Bangladesh's B. Ed colleges (Barman and Bhattacharyya, 2017). This financial constraint affects their motivation and overall commitment to their roles, frequently resulting in higher turnover rates and diminished morale within the colleges. While these immediate consequences of inadequate compensation are well-documented, Barman and Bhattacharyya (2017) do not explore how this persistent dissatisfaction might affect the long-term quality of teacher education programs or the broader educational system.

3.1.2 Access to information and communication technology and information literacy

Currently, information and communication technology (ICT) skills are a need for teacher educators because they should obtain them to support their teaching (Ngao et al., 2022). While educational institutions increasingly integrate technology into their curricula, educators need to utilize digital tools and resources to enhance student engagement, facilitate interactive learning, and manage remote or hybrid instruction formats. While Ngao et al. (2022) emphasize the immediate necessity of ICT skills for modern teaching, their study does not address how sustained technology integration may reshape pedagogical approaches, professional development needs, or institutional resource allocation in the long term.

Furthermore, insufficient budgets limit teacher educators' access to resources essential for their teaching work (Brown et al., 2003). Teacher educators try to keep up with the latest digital tools and information resources. Consequently, many lack the materials and training needed to develop their information literacy and technological skills. As Brown et al. (2003) clearly show the immediate challenges caused by funding limitations on resource access and skill development, their study does not examine how this persistent lack of information literacy training might affect teaching quality, student learning outcomes, or institutional development over an extended period.

3.2 Personal domain

3.2.1 Anxiety and economic factors

When the economic situation is unstable, students feel anxious about their future employment. That affects their current wellbeing (Ateş, 2019). They worry about their prospective careers, securing positions, and compensation after graduation. These concerns influence their academic focus, mental health, and motivation. When students experience financial pressure, for instance: educational expenses, they face uncertainty regarding their future jobs. To address these issues, both institutional supports, such as career counseling and skills-building programs and economic stability are required to ensure potential employment opportunities. By alleviating employment-related anxiety, students can become more fully engaged in their studies. While Ateş (2019) documents these immediate psychological and academic consequences of employment anxiety, the study does not examine how prolonged exposure to such economic uncertainty might affect graduates' long-term career paths, lifelong learning potential or overall life satisfaction beyond their academic years.

3.2.2 Workload and stress management

Teachers experience burnout or stress when facing increased workloads, which affects both their wellbeing and student achievement (Yadewani et al., 2021; Toropova et al., 2021). Their workload includes multifaceted responsibilities such as lesson planning, administrative duties, and extracurricular activities, leading to stress levels that are associated with increased absenteeism and decreased classroom effectiveness. While giving adequate resources, enhancing administrative support, and having flexible scheduling can tackle these workload challenges, the existing research leaves important gaps in understanding the long-term consequences. Specifically, Yadewani et al. (2021) examine the immediate effects of work stress but do not explore how chronic stress might impact teachers' career or health outcomes over time. Similarly, Toropova et al. (2021) investigate teacher job satisfaction in the present context but do not consider how sustained dissatisfaction could influence retention rates or institutional culture in the long run. On the other hand, Sak and Yuan (2025) highlights how bureaucratic inefficiencies in Southeast Asian educational systems exacerbates workloads, diverting from pedagogy. That is why teacher educators have more workloads.

3.2.3 Psychological and emotional challenges

Mercer et al. (2025) emphasizes the interconnectedness of motivation, emotions, and wellbeing in Language Teacher Educators' (LTEs) professional lives. Their findings highlight how LTEs' psychological states are shaped by institutional pressures and socio-emotional competence.

Teachers' absenteeism at work is often influenced by financial obligations. That can generate competing demands for educators' time and energy, as observed in Turkish primary schools (Sezgin et al., 2014). Educators in both dual-income and single-parent households often face significant challenges in balancing professional responsibilities with personal commitments, including childcare, eldercare, and household management. When they are absent from work, their educational institutions face challenges, for instance: substituting teachers or managing increased class sizes. Those challenges impact students' learning experiences. Addressing these issues requires supportive policies such as flexible scheduling and family leave options to enhance both teacher wellbeing and effectiveness in the classroom. While Sezgin et al. (2014) indicate these immediate causes and consequences of teachers' absenteeism, their study does not examine how persistent absenteeism might affect student achievement, school-climate, or teacher retention rates over time—factors that could have substantial implications for educational quality.

Teachers' absenteeism at work is affected by long commutes that increase both physical and mental pressure in their daily lives (Santelli and Grissom, 2022). Spending much time traveling to work causes fatigue and stress. That has happened in both urban and rural regions where teachers face long commutes. These demands are compounded when teachers require additional time for personal and instructional duties. While flexible working conditions and enhanced transportation support may reduce absenteeism and enhance classroom effectiveness, Santelli and Grissom (2022) did not examine how prolonged exposure to commute-related stress might lead to chronic health issues or career attrition among educators over time.

Furthermore, long commutes are linked to insomnia among schoolteachers (Hori et al., 2020). Teachers who commute long distances experience high stress levels and insufficient relaxation time. That also disrupts sleeping patterns. The effects of sleep deprivation can impact student outcomes, as well-rested educators are better equipped to effectively engage and support their students.

Although flexible work arrangements and transportation support could improve teachers' sleep quality and their instructional capacity, Hori et al. (2020) did not investigate how sleep disturb long-term health consequences burnout in their work.

3.2.4 Absenteeism and student teacher challenges

Student teachers might face challenges in balancing coursework with other responsibilities, causing absenteeism and affecting their professional development, classroom continuity, and relationships with mentor teachers. To address this, social and emotional learning (SEL) provides an approach that mitigates challenges by fostering resilience, self-awareness, and stress-management skills (Knoster, 2016). When SEL strategies are implemented, student teachers can more effectively manage their roles, reduce absenteeism, and also strengthen their learning commitments. While Knoster (2016) demonstrates the immediate benefits of SEL in addressing these challenges, the study does not examine how persistent absenteeism–despite SEL interventions–might impact long-term teaching efficacy, career retention, or professional relationships in the field.

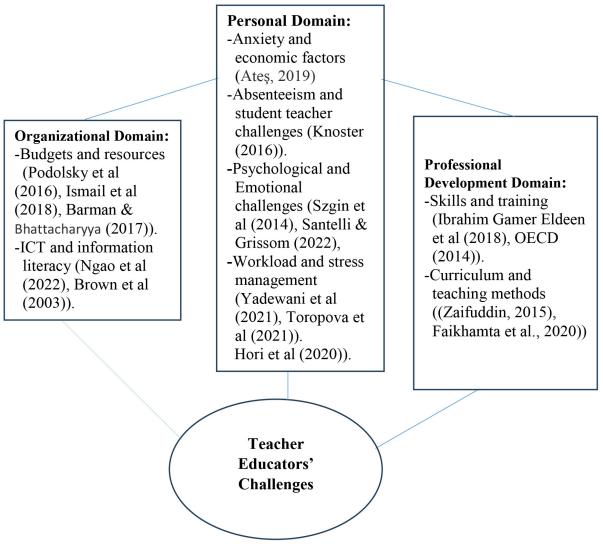

FIGURE 1
Conceptual framework of research.

3.3 Professional development domain

3.3.1 Skills and training

Employment skills comprise not only academic knowledge but also competencies in teamwork, critical thinking, and adaptability, as required by employers (Eldeen et al., 2018). Employers therefore seek candidates who can work in diverse teams, tackle complex problems creatively, and adapt to changing work environments. While Eldeen et al. (2018) point out the immediate importance of these competencies for securing employment, their study does not examine how these same employability skills might influence long-term career progression, job satisfaction, or leadership potential over the course of a professional's working life.

Currently, reskilling and upskilling are essential factors that contribute to improving higher education quality (OECD, 2024). Technological advances and updates in educational approaches drive the need for reskilling and upskilling. Therefore, equipping educators with current knowledge and skills is crucial. Professional development can help them modify their teaching methods, implement innovative technologies, and effectively meet their students' diverse needs. While the OECD (2024) highlights the importance of continuous educator development in responding to technological and pedagogical changes, their report does not examine how government policies on funding, incentives, or national standards might accelerate or hinder these crucial upskilling efforts across higher education institutions.

3.3.2 Curriculum and teaching methods

The introduction of a new curriculum requires proper alignment with the existing policy framework to mitigate implementation challenges and support educational outcomes (Zaifuddin, 2015). When educational institutions incorporate innovative curricular changes, it is essential that these updates harmonize with the current regulations, standards, and institutional objectives. Misalignment between new curricula and policy frameworks can make confusion among educators, leading to frustrations in training and resource allocation. Furthermore, without coherent policy support, curriculum integration may face resistance as teachers often feel unprepared or inadequately supported during implementation. While Zaifuddin (2015) highlights these immediate curriculum implementation challenges, the study does not examine how curriculum-policy alignment or misalignment might affect long-term educational quality, teacher retention, or institutional adaptability over time. This gap in understanding long-term impacts is particularly given evidence from Faikhamta et al. (2020) demonstrating how properly supported curriculum changes—like the PCK-based STEM PD program—can significantly enhance teachers' instructional capacities when adequate professional development is provided.

3.4 Conceptual framework of research

Based on the literature review in the introduction, the conceptual framework guiding this study focuses on personal domain, organizational domain, and professional development domain (see attached Figure 1).

Each of the three above domains are related with internal and external challenges (Härkönen, 2001). Internal challenges in personal domain include workload stress (Microsystem) and economic strain (Microsystem). Its external challenges cover socioeconomic pressures (Exosystem/Macrosystem). Internal challenges in organizational domain involve budget constraints (Microsystem/Exosystem) and collaboration barriers (Mesosystem). Its external challenges comprise of policy instability (Macrosystem) and declining enrollment (Exosytem). In professional development domain, its internal

TABLE 1 Participants' demographic information.

No.	Characteristic	Description
1	Age in average	42
2	Sex	Male = 12 (52.17%); Female = 11 (47.83%)
3	Education qualification	Ph.D. = 3 (13.04%) (Science; Educational Science) Masters = 19 (82.61%) (Biology and Physics; Mathematics; Social Science; IT; Educational Science) Bachelor = 1 (4.35%) (Geography)
4	Working experience from the start	20 years in average
5	Working experience in the current leading position	10 years in average
6	Leading position	Head of Department (= 6) Vice-Head of Department (= 12) Head of Unit (= 5)

All 23 teacher educators in leadership positions also serve as subject lecturers.

challenges contain skills gaps (Microsystem) and motivation issues (Microsystem). External challenges in this domain are such as inadequate training funding (Exosystem) and dependence on non-English materials (Macrosystem).

4 Research method

Table 1 presents participants' demographic information in this study. This study focused only on exploring the challenges faced by teacher educators. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample group.

As this study aimed to explore and understand the experiences of teacher educators, focusing on the challenges they encountered, four of the eight TTCs were selected as research sites. Because these four TTCs represent others in terms of similar infrastructure and geographic location [Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2020], the results can be generalized.

To capture various perspectives, 23 teacher educators were purposively selected as research participants. These teacher educators were preferentially considered, as they have teaching subjects and leading positions (see attached Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information). During the fieldwork, the searcher first met or greeted directors of TTCs. After that, interviewees were selected by them. Then, the researcher and they gathered with all interviewees. Regarding this purposive sampling criteria, this study focused on selecting participants who have their working, teaching, and current position experience over 5 years. From those reasons, they better represent other teacher educators in their TTCs in Laos. They participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews used an open-ended question to allow the participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and insights related to their challenges, for example, "Can you describe the key challenges you face? Please explain each in detail."

Informed consent was obtained from each participant to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and to guarantee their right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study was approved by Research Ethics Clearance No. HR-ES-001586 of Hiroshima University on March 18, 2024.

This qualitative research approach is grounded in theory based on which the researcher employed a semi-structured interview technique (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis followed a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022) using NVivo-14 software. The data collected were transcribed in Lao and then translated into English. Regarding transcription and translation process, the researcher (fluent in Lao and English) transcribed audio recordings verbatim in Lao, then translated them into English. The researcher has been trained by another researcher on how to prioritize semantic equivalence over literal translation (avoiding loss of cultural nuance). For accuracy measures, a subset (20%) of transcripts was independently back translated

TABLE 2 Open coding.

Quote	Open code
"Teacher educators' teaching hours do not exceed 18 h a week, but they still have a lot of works to do (TE#21)."	Excessive workload beyond teaching hours
"We mostly do a lot of administrative work (TE#12)."	Administrative burden
"Some teacher educators use their official work time for other jobs or farming because of inadequate salary (TE#10)."	Lao salaries leading to side jobs
"Student teachers often enter the program with limited foundational knowledge (TE#4)."	Poor student teacher preparedness
"Learning sources are limited in our library (TE#8)."	Inadequate resources
"Some families are in debt because of sending children to study (TE#21)."	Socioeconomic barriers
"Student teachers' given assignments are sometimes not completed (TE#4)."	Student disengagement
"Teacher educators' ICT skills are limited (TE#22)."	Lack of technical training
"The curriculum changes every 2 or 3 years (TE#16)."	Frequent curriculum updates

TABLE 3 Axial coding.

Theme	Associated open codes
Workload & administrative burden	Excessive workload, administrative tasks, balancing teaching and office work
Economic pressures	Low salaries, side jobs, high living costs, teacher educator attrition
Academic preparedness	Student teachers' poor foundational knowledge, low enrollment standards
Resource constraints	Inadequate libraries, lack of ICT tools, insufficient training budgets
Student teachers' engagement issues	Absenteeism, dropout rates, incomplete assignments
Curriculum challenges	Frequent updates, overloaded content, confusion in teaching methods

TABLE 4 Thematic consolidation.

Final theme	Sub-themes	Key quotes
Workload & external pressures	- Administrative overload - External commitments - Economic strain	"We do the office work as well as teaching (TE#21)."
Systemic resources gaps	- Budget limitations - Lack of training - Poor infrastructure	"Some teacher educators made PowerPoint presentations but have inadequate computers (TE#11)."
Student teachers' challenges	- Low enrollment - Poor academic performance - Appeared dropout rates	"Student teachers ignore the given assignments (TE#18)."
Curriculum instability	- Frequent changes - Unclear teaching methods - Time - consuming adaptation	"Lesson preparation for the new curriculum takes significant time (TE#10)."
Skills deficits	- Limited English/ICT skills - Lack of motivation - Unimplemented projects	"Teacher educators are not competent in English because they are not studious (TE#22)."

into Lao by the researcher to confirm consistency. Discrepancies [e.g., idioms like "*work outside affects progress*" (TE#21)] were resolved and checked by the PhD lab mates who could speak both Lao and English. For peer checking, two Lao-speaking PhD researchers in the same lab read or reviewed translation during presentation at the seminar for contextual accuracy (e.g., clarifying local administrative terms like "*Correlation between declining enrollment and inadequate budget*"). To member checking for participant verification, only one interviewee validated translated summaries of his responses for accuracy. Consequently, only minor adjustments were made [e.g., clarifying "*limited planning skills*" (TE#22) as "*no time for planning due to workload*"]. For the data triangulation, themes were cross-verified against field notes from TTC site visits from the researcher and JICA report in 2020. This analytical approach comprised the following steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data by reading; (2) initial coding; () grouping codes into potential themes; (4) reviewing and revising themes; and (5) defining and reporting themes. This method focuses on reflexive inductive thematic analysis so that the researcher can sum up or compare key themes across the different themes. The coding process involves open coding, axial coding, and thematic consolidation. The open coding covers a preliminary list of codes which capture raw ideas or quotes in the data. The axial coding is about a hierarchical structure of themes and subthemes with logical connections. The thematic consolidation is refining and defining core themes that capture the essence of the data.

5 Results

The findings of this study reveal 23 themes at the outset for open coding (see Appendix 1). These themes are categorized into seven initial sub-themes, 11 developed sub-themes, and five final sub-themes. Each sub-theme includes supporting quotes. Open coding is about breaking down raw quotes into discrete concepts (see Table 2). Axial coding (grouping open codes into themes) is identifying relationships between open codes to form broader themes (see Table 3). Thematic consolidation (final themes and sub-themes) is merging axial codes into higher-order themes and sub-themes (see Table 4). The visualization of coding process includes open coding, axial coding, and thematic consolidation (see Figure 2). Figure 3 shows the thematic map illustrating relationships between thematic categories and sub-themes. In addition to Figure 3, the three overarching thematic categories were derived from iterative coding (open to axial to thematic consolidation): A. Institutional Constraints (structural barriers); B. Professional Identity Struggles (role conflicts); and C. Response and Coping Mechanisms (adaptive strategies). The following explanations are to show the relationships between these categories and their sub-themes.

5.1 Institutional constraints

Systemic barriers hindered teacher educators' effectiveness, manifesting in workload inequities, resource scarity, and curricular instability.

- Workload-capacity misalignment

  Administrative tasks dominated teacher educators' time, leaving teaching as a secondary priority. For example, TE#12 noted, "*We mostly do administrative work*", while TE#10 highlighted role diffusion: "*Tasks include waste management, cleaning, and office work*". This **invisibility of administrative labor** eroded pedagogical performance, as teacher educators struggled to balance mandates (TE#21: *"Teaching hours do not exceed 18/week, but the workload is unsustainable" *).
- Resource deprivation

  Budget constraints limited ICT access and training. TE#8 reported "*limited library resources,*" and TE#11 described makeshift solutions: "*We create PowerPoints but lack computers.*" Inadequate funding perpetuated skill gaps (TE#22: "ICT budgets are critical but insufficient"). This exacerbates ineffective teaching practices.
- Curricular instability

  Frequent curriculum revisions have caused confusion. TE#7 stated, "*Five major updates in as many years,*" and TE#1 resisted "*constant adjustments every 2-3 years.*" Overloaded content (TE#14: "*Too many topics, no depth*") and unclear methods (TE#15: "*Confusion about new pedagogies*") further strained adaptation.

5.2 Professional identity struggles

Teacher educators grappled with role dissonance and competing demands

- Role fragmentation

  External academic services (e.g., in-service teacher training) diverted focus from core duties. TE#21 explained, "*External work stalls internal progress,*" while TE#10

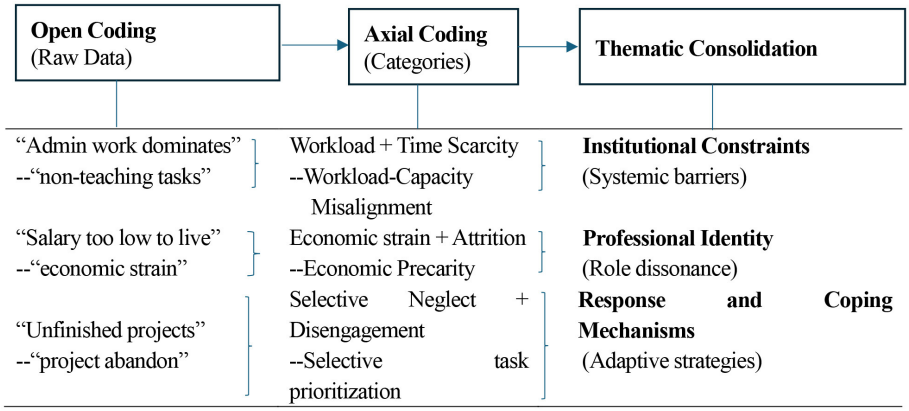

FIGURE 2
Visualization of coding process.

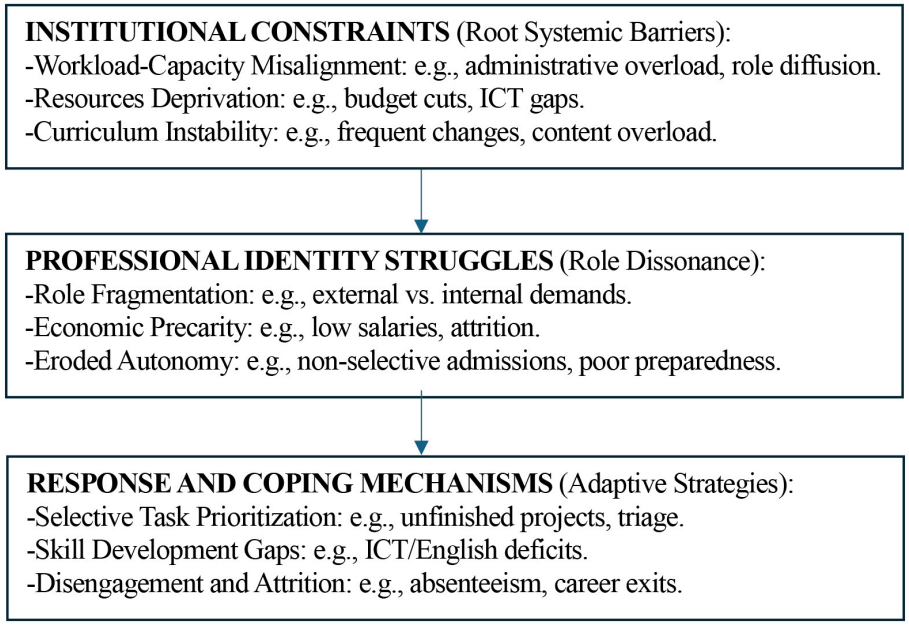

FIGURE 3
Thematic map: relationships between categories and subthemes.

tied fragmented collaboration to *"permission-seeking for external commitments."*

- Economic precarity

  Low salaries forced teacher educators into secondary jobs (TE#10: "Some farm during working hours"), and attrition rose (TE#16: "5 teacher educators leave yearly"). TE#20's lament—"I cannot afford living cost"—underscored financial strain's toll on retention.

- Eroded autonomy

  Non-selective admissions due to low enrollment (TE#5: *"Accepting 15/25 applicants compromises quality" *) and poor student preparedness (TE#4: *"Limited foundational knowledge"*) undermined teacher educators' agency.

5.3 Response and coping mechanisms

Teacher educators adopted adaptive strategies, often with mixed efficacy.

- Selective task prioritization

  Incomplete projects (TE#9: *"Unapproved plans cause discouragement"*) and unimplemented work (TE#22: *"No progress reports due to poor planning"*) reflected triage amid constraints.

- Skills development gaps

  Limited English/ICT proficiency (TE#9: *"Many lack English skills"*) was attributed to motivational deficits (TE#22:

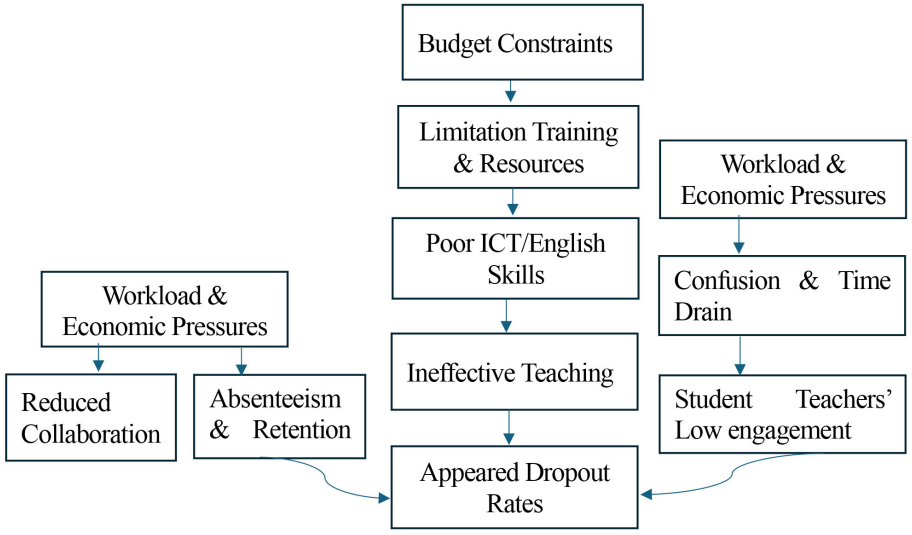

FIGURE 4
Logical connections (casual relationships).

"They are not studious"), though systemic training gaps were the root cause.

- Disengagement and attrition

  High student teacher absenteeism (TE#8: *"Student teachers are always absent"*) and dropouts (TE#19) mirrored teacher educator frustrations. Some coped by exiting the system (TE#16: *"Annual attrition"*).

It is clear from the quotations that the three themes and their sub-themes were previously mentioned are profoundly associated with each other. Therefore, the main domain of the three overarching thematic categories is further discussed in the next section and summarized in the conclusion part.

6 Discussion

The findings revealed 23 identified themes during the open coding phase. Based on the results in the result part, logical connections (causal relationship is mapping how themes interact to create systemic impacts (see Figure 4).

From Figure 4 above, there are some key points to be discussed:

- Economic pressures lead to some teacher educators' side jobs. This shows neglecting primary duties.
- Budget constraints lead to inadequate ICT tools. This makes teaching methods ineffective.
- Frequent curriculum updates cause confusion. This consumes time wasted on lesson preparation.
- Student teachers' poor preparedness causes their low motivation. Its result has been seen by the dropout rates that appeared.

In other words, if explaining in simplified cause-and-effect flow, the following points are discussed:

- Overwork + Low Pay led to some teacher educators taking side jobs. This may make them focus less on teaching.
- Inadequate budget for training leads to teacher educators' lacking skills. This may make student teachers' poor learning outcomes and unmotivated in learning.
- Constant curriculum changes lead to teacher educators' wasting time for adjusting. This may make less teaching progress.

The analysis revealed personal domain as the primary concern, consistent with prior studies of Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015), Czerniawski et al. (2016), Yadewani et al. (2021), and Toropova et al. (2021), professional demands—such as administrative burdens and limited resources—prove more disruptive than l organizational domain. Within personal domain, teacher educators face multiple responsibilities beyond their instructional duties, including external academic services and increased administrative tasks, which are further complicated by limited resources and budgets. This workload leads to ineffective practices and incomplete tasks (McGrath, 2012, p. 626–629). Teacher educators also face difficulties in collaboration and planning, especially when setting clear objectives, which hinders task completion (Orchard and Winch, 2015, p. 19–22).

To address workload challenges, teacher educators need to develop effective planning and prioritization skills (as in professional development domain) for better time and task management. To the findings, this study suggests that systematic approaches to work prioritization and time management mechanisms are crucial for task completion amid multiple responsibilities.

To specifically mitigate the workload and administrative burden that teacher educators face, including administrative tasks beyond teaching, an integrated human development approach could be adopted, emphasizing the importance of balancing work

responsibilities with personal and professional growth (McGrath, 2012, p. 626–629).

Heavy workloads and external commitments hinder educators' collaboration and planning skills. As Orchard and Winch (2015, p. 19–22) suggest, teachers must engage with educational theory to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for effective collaboration and planning.

The decline in student teacher enrollment is caused by a combination of economic, social, and systemic issues. The following are the key factors: economic factors, lack of job opportunities, poor quality of education and training, systemic issues in teacher education, and societal perceptions of teaching. Firstly, in economic factors, graduates see teaching as a low-paying profession [*"After graduation, they get low compensation" (TE#17)*). In other words, manual labor or other jobs offer higher wages [*"Many people get more salary from manual work." (TE#13)*]. Moreover, families struggled with debt from education expenses ["Some families are in debt because of sending children to study." (TE#21)]. Secondly, about lack of job opportunities, students fear unemployment after completing the program [*"After graduation, there is no job." (TE#6, TE#7, TE#15, TE#20)*]. Thirdly, for poor quality of education and training, many student teachers enter with poor foundational knowledge [*"Student teachers often enter with limited foundational knowledge." (TE#4)*]. Not only that, TTCs accept unqualified students due to low enrollment [*"When we need 25 students but only 15 take the exam, we accept all." (TE#5)*]. Furthermore, lack of training, outdated teaching methods, and poor ICT tools discourage student teachers [*"Some experienced teacher educators cannot teach effectively." (TE#17)*]. Fourthly, for systemic issues in teacher education, inadequate budgets lead to fewer resources, for instance: lack of books, computers, and training demotivates student teachers [*"Learning sources are limited in our library." (TE#8)*]. Moreover, **frequent curriculum changes** or **constant curriculum updates confuse both teacher educators and student teachers** [*"The curriculum changes every 2 or 3 years." (TE#16)*]. Additionally, some student teachers quit their study due to academic struggles or financial pressure [*"Some student teachers drop out." (TE#19)*]. Fifthly, for societal perceptions of teaching, low respect for the profession because teaching is seen as an undervalued career path. Therefore, applicants who are students will look for other fields because they prefer careers with better pay and stability.

To briefly sum up the decline in student teacher enrollment in the above paragraph, it is necessary to clarify its results like a cycle. Fewer student teachers enrolled amid lower admission standards will lead to poor quality graduates. Unskillful teachers are caused by poor-quality graduates, resulting in declining education quality. Fewer jobs and lower salaries resulted from declining education quality may lead to even fewer enrollments.

In alignment with Bronfenbrenner's theory (Härkönen, 2001), results in this paper are also discussed the following five points:

- Microsystem (immediate environment)

  For workload and administrative burden, teacher educators' direct interactions with their work environment (e.g., teaching, administrative tasks) reflect stressors in their microsystem. Not only that, regarding student teacher relationships, poor academic preparedness and some dropout rates among student teachers highlight dysfunctions in the classroom microsystem.
- Mesosystem (interconnections between microsystems)

  For collaboration challenges, lack of coordination between teacher educators' roles (teaching vs. external commitments) mirrors weak mesosystem linkages (e.g., home-school disconnect in Bronfenbrenner's model). Economic pressures, for instance: low salaries force teacher educators to take side jobs, disrupting mesosystem stability (e.g., work-family conflict).
- Exosystem (external influences)

  Regarding budget constraints, government funding cuts (exosystem) limit resources in TTCs (microsystem) akin to how parents' workplaces affect children's home environments. For declining enrollment, socioeconomic barriers (e.g., family debt, better-paying manual jobs) are exosystemic factors reducing student teacher numbers.
- Macrosystem (cultural/societal context)

  In curriculum instability, frequent policy changes reflect macrosystemic issues in educational governance. For low compensation for teachers, societal undervaluation of teaching (macrosystem) perpetuates economic strains (microsystem).
- Chronosystem (temporal changes)

  In attrition trends, the decline in teacher educators over years (e.g., from 200 to 147) shows chronosystemic erosion of the profession. For historical underfunding, persistent budget shortages represent a chronic macrosystemic failure.

From the above discussions, there are some key differences in this study from Bronfenbrenner's framework such as (1). This study focuses on teacher educators in examining systemic challenges for them and their institutions. However, Bronfenbrenner centers on child development; (2). Bronfenbrenner emphasizes developmental processes (e.g., socialization) while this study highlights structural barriers (e.g., budgets, workloads) that hinder professional effectiveness; and (3). This study depicts a unidirectional strain (e.g., economic pressures to educator attrition) with less focus on adaptive responses. However, Bronfenbrenner stresses reciprocal interactions (e.g., child to parent).

For alignment, economic (exo/macrosystem) and workload (microsystem) issues in this study mirror Bronnfenbrenner's emphasis on environmental layers. Regarding divergence, this study lacks the development optimism of Bronfenbrenner's model, instead of presenting a cyclical decline driven by systemic neglect.

Recommendations to above statements, interventions should adopt Bronfenbrenner's holistic view—addressing macrosystemic (policy) and microsystemic (school-level) factors simultaneously to break the cycle of educator attrition and student disengagement.

After merging Bronfenbrenner's model, three domains, internal and external challenges, and categories, all of them are associated or related with each other but some main findings (primary challenges of teacher educators) of this study are: (1). Internal challenges in personal domain: workload stress (Microsystem), high administrative burdens reduce personal capacity for teaching

[*"Teacher educators' teaching hours do not exceed 18 hours a week, but they still have a lot of work to do" (TE#21)*]; Economic strain (Microsystem), low salaries force teacher educators to seek side jobs, fragmenting focus]*"I cannot afford my cost of living" (TE#20)*]. (2). Internal challenges in professional development domain: skill gaps (Microsystem), lack of institutional training perpetuates outdated practices [*"Teacher educators' ICT skills are limited" (TE#22)*]; Motivation issues (Microsystem), absence of incentives reduces engagement in self-development [*"Teacher educators are not competent in English because they are not studious" (TE#22)*].

From those previous discussion points, there is a need for: (1). Macrosystemic levers: policy reforms (funding, teacher pay). In comparison with another study in developing country as in Vietnam, the salary system for the university lecturers has been reformed (Linh et al., 2022). However, it remains misaligned with labor market demands. This leads to low motivation, retention issues, and professional insecurity. Therefore, investment in developing the teaching staff should be paying the right salary. (2). Microsystemic supports: reduce administrative burdens, improve collaboration; and (3). Chronosystem trends: monitor long-term attrition/enrollment patterns. Like Myanmar case, core factors influencing teacher retention such as inadequate infrastructural facilities, limited professional development opportunities, and socio-cultural barriers (Marlar and Zreik, 2024). Because low compensation and economic pressures such as teachers' salaries do not match the high cost of living or the extra difficulties of rural work, many of them seek jobs in urban areas. Also, due to insufficient institutional support, this affects morale and retention. In comparison with Thailand case, for operational and administrative efficiency, it is transition from bureaucratic and regulation-heavy system to cost-effective and decentralized management using ICT tools (Nookhao and Kiattisin, 2023). This is a very interesting study, titled "Achieving a successful e-government: Determinants of behavioral intention from Thai citizens' perspective."

To three domains such as personal domain, organizational domain, and professional development domain, there are intervention points: (1). Personal domain: provide mental health support, fair wages; (2). Organizational domain: provide stable curricula, resource allocation. If comparing with the Cambodia case, curriculum challenges and instability in Cambodia's teacher education reform have appeared (Vandy, 2024) such as lack of coherent curriculum framework, top-down reform implementation, and overloaded and fragmented curriculum. Although teacher educators are called as "curriculum developer," some of them have limited capacity for curriculum development and insufficient pedagogical skills. (3). Professional development domain: provide funded training, multilingual resources.

These findings are particularly significant given the limited research on preparing teacher educators for twenty-first-century challenges (Cochran-Smith et al., 2019). Future research should explore the strategies teacher educators employ to manage their multifaceted responsibilities, focusing on approaches that alleviate work-related stress and promote balanced workloads, thereby preventing workload intensification (Turner and Garvis, 2023).

This study is inevitable with seven limitations. Firstly, limitation concerns potential self-reporting bias because the study relied on individual participants' challenges. While the researcher attempted to mitigate this through explicit communication and follow-up questions. Therefore, future studies could strengthen validity by incorporating triangulation methods, such as observational data or institutional records, to cross-verify educators' reported experiences. Secondly, although the study revealed challenges across personal domain, organizational domain, and professional development domain, only administrative overload and resource constraints are considered as the most crucial challenges. Since these factors directly impact instructional quality and educator burnout, future research should prioritize in-depth qualitative investigations into systemic solutions, such as policy reforms or workload redistribution models, to alleviate these pressures. Thirdly, while the study used a single open-ended interview question, the researcher occasionally introduced pop-up questions to clarify responses. Although this ensured smooth discussion, it may have introduced variability in data collection. Future work could improve consistency by pre-defining a semi-structured interview protocol with standardized follow-ups while retaining flexibility for probing. Given these three limitations, future studies should employ mixed methods to explore professional challenges in teacher education, combining broader surveys with in-depth case studies. Fourthly, for contextual and linguistic boundaries, to cultural specificity, findings reflect Laos' unique TTC system (e.g., centralized MoES control, rural-urban divides) and may not transfer to other Southeast Asian contexts with different governance structure. Regarding language constraints, despite back-translation checks, nuances of Lao educational terminology (e.g., *"external academic services"*) may not fully convey intended meanings in English. Fifthly, two points of researcher position are insider-outsider dynamics and power imbalance. For insider-outsider dynamics, as a Laotian scholar (author affiliation: Hiroshima University), the researcher has dual perspective as both cultural insider and internationally trained academic. This may influence interpretation of data, e.g., privileging institutional critiques over individual adaptability. For power imbalance, participants' responses may have been shaped by perceived authority of the researcher, e.g., underreporting dissent due to hierarchical norms in Lao academia. Sixthly, translation should be done with experts and sampling bias should be solved by selecting participants from all TTCs. For translation gaps, while back-translation was used, some colloquialisms [e.g., *"work outside affects progress"* (TE#21)] lack direct English equivalents, potentially flattening emotional tone. Regarding sample limitations, purposive sampling of 23 teacher educators from four TTCs (of eight total) risks overrepresenting urban or well-resourced institutions, despite claims of representativeness (Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2020). Moreover, the reliance on interviews may include possible response biases such as underreporting workload stress due to hierarchical workplace norms (TE#21: "We mostly do administrative work") or overstating challenges to advocate for policy changes. Therefore, member checking and triangulation with other reports should be used as well as incorporating

observational data (e.g., time-tracking of tasks) to measure workload distribution. Seventhly, scope and transferability in generalizability. For narrow scope, this study only focuses on four selected TTCs. This excludes primary/secondary school teachers, whose challenges may differ (e.g., larger class sizes). For non-transferability, systemic issues like budget constraints are context-dependent; findings cannot be extrapolated to countries with stronger teacher education infrastructure (e.g., Thailand, Vietnam) without further study. Therefore, other follow-up studies should be implemented in those underrepresented regions of TTCs. Future research should: (1). examine how teacher educators manage their multifaceted responsibilities to alleviate work-related stress as a need for a balanced workload approach. Consequently, policymakers and educational leaders may inform their work-related stress and improve the overall quality of teacher training programs. Mixed-methods longitudinal studies should be conducted to track policy impacts (e.g., post-implementation of Laos' Ninth Education Sector Development Plan) and experimental designs (e.g., piloting workload-reduction strategies in TTCs). (2). Investigate long-term impacts of administrative overload on teacher educators' wellbeing and retention. (3). Explore policy-level responses to institutional constraints. (4). Conduct comparative studies across regions or the teacher education system in the ASEAN.

7 Conclusion

Teacher educators face significant challenges stemming from multiple responsibilities and heavy workloads. These demands lead to ineffective work practices, incomplete tasks, and difficulties in collaboration and planning, ultimately compromising their ability to fulfill their roles effectively. To address these challenges, teacher educators must develop a stronger capacity for managing multifaceted responsibilities through strategic task prioritization. Future research should explore effective coping mechanisms that promote a balanced approach to these professional roles.

Because teacher educators in TTCs in Laos have faced key challenges, such as multiple responsibilities and heavy workloads, it has resulted in effective work practices, incomplete tasks, and difficulties in collaboration and planning. Furthermore, these outcomes have lowered teachers' ability to perform their roles effectively. Thus, the pressure to balance teaching, research, administrative duties, and mentorship can lead to teacher burnout and reduced productivity. To solve this problem, a more sustainable work environment needs to be fostered.

To overcome these obstacles, teacher educators must strengthen their capacity to manage multifaceted responsibilities through task prioritization and time management. As Orchard and Winch (2015, p. 16–19) argue, teachers must understand the conceptual, empirical, and normative dimensions of education to make informed decisions in the classroom. By focusing on what matters most and letting go of less urgent tasks, teacher educators can save time and energy. Their TTCs can help by sharing workloads, offering training, and encouraging teamwork to make their jobs easier and more fulfilling.

The analysis of this study focused on structural barriers (e.g., budgets, workloads), however cultural factors should be examined such as coping mechanisms among Lao teacher educators or institutional leadership's role in mitigating stress (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2015). From this study, some Policy Implications are suggested: Macro-level: Advocate for stable funding mechanisms (e.g., earmarked budgets for ICT, per TE#22) and standardized curricula to reduce revision frequency (TE#16); and Meso-level: Implement workload audits to redistribute non-teaching tasks (TE#12) and create peer-support networks for skill gaps (TE#9).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Informed consent was obtained from each participant to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and to guarantee their right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study was approved by Research Ethics Clearance No. HR-ES-001586 of Hiroshima University on March 18, 2024.

Author contributions

KS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1614060/full#supplementary-material

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