PREPARING TEACHERS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: EXAMINING IDENTITY AND AGENCY OF TEACHER CANDIDATES IN A YEAR-LONG RESIDENCY MODEL

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Abstract

Pre-service teacher preparation offers an important opportunity to help aspiring teachers examine their willingness and ability to teach diverse learners in inclusive classroom. This study examined how teacher candidates enrolled in a pre-service teacher preparation program with an intensive, year-long residency model, conceived their sense of agency and identity as related to teaching inclusive classrooms that include both English learners and students with disabilities. Using Pantic's (2015) conceptual model of teacher agency for social justice and inclusive practice, the authors examined how teacher candidates navigated their emerging teacher identity and agency as they prepared to become inclusive educators. Implications and recommendations for teacher preparation programs are discussed.

Keywords: *Teacher agency, teacher identity, inclusive education, teacher preparation*

Introduction

Inclusive education can now be considered a fundamental aspect of the U.S. public school system (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Teachers are responsible for providing high-quality instruction in supportive classroom environments that leads to positive academic outcomes for a diverse spectrum of students, including English learners and students with disabilities. The extent to which teachers view themselves as inclusive educators plays an important role in their willingness and ability to teach diverse learners (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). In part, a teacher's willingness and ability to lead an inclusive classroom are dependent on a combination of agency and identity (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). Within the context of this study, agency refers to ways in which a teacher strategically thinks and acts to achieve a desired outcome within the classroom. *Identity* refers to ways in which teachers view themselves as both responsible for and capable of exercising agency within the classroom context. The complex interplay of agency and identity plays an influential role in how teachers approach their responsibilities as inclusive educators (Pantic, 2015).

Pre-service teacher preparation offers an important opportunity to help aspiring teachers develop the agency and identity needed to lead inclusive classrooms (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Effective teacher

preparation includes a combination of university classroom instruction and strategic, embedded clinical field experiences in inclusive classrooms (Kent & Giles, 2016). Teacher candidates who participate in authentic, intensive field experiences in inclusive classrooms are better able to meet the academic and social support needs of a diverse student population (Bain & Hasio, 2011). The study described in this manuscript examined how teacher candidates enrolled in a pre-service teacher preparation program with an intensive, year-long residency model, conceived their sense of agency and identity as related to teaching inclusive classrooms that include both English learners and students with disabilities.

Literature Review

The constructs of teacher agency and identity have been explored by multiple authors. According to Hiver and Whitehead (2018), there is a complex interplay between agency and identity. The ways in which teachers view their identity and selfhood within their professional context interacts with their capacity and willingness to take action. Similarly, Buchanan (2015) emphasized the fluidity of agency and identity. A teacher's identity is constantly evolving because of a sense of self and direct experience within the school environment. A teacher's agency evolves because of a variety of factors, including the opportunities and constraints of the working environment, the demands of the profession, and the teacher's perceived autonomy in taking action. Thus, identity and agency are constantly interacting in a complex system that informs a teacher's beliefs and actions (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018).

Pantic (2015) developed a conceptual model of teacher agency for social justice and inclusive practice that consisted of four components: purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity.
- *Purpose* directly related to a teacher's commitment and motivation to engage in inclusive practices. This variable included a teacher's sense of identity and role as an agent of change.
- *Competence* referred to a teacher's knowledge of the immediate working environment and larger context of social-political factors that influence classroom practice, as well as the teacher's engagement in social justice practices.
- *Autonomy* was defined as a teacher's individual and collective sense of agency. This variable explored how teachers viewed themselves as an agent of change within the larger school system.
- *Reflexivity* addressed how teachers monitor and reflect on their beliefs and capacity for engaging in inclusive practices that promote social justice and inclusive education. This variable addressed how teachers make meaning of their work, the overall purposes of schooling, and the relationship of schooling to broader social systems.

Uzum et al. (2022) used Pantic's (2015) model to examine teacher agency for social justice in a study of teacher candidates who participated in a virtual, telecollaboration learning experience. Teacher candidates from three countries participated in the study. Using Pantic's (2015) four components of teacher agency (purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity), the authors reported that teacher candidates demonstrated their teaching agency for social justice to varying degrees. The teacher candidates displayed a complex and fluid interplay of identity and agency that was similar to that described by previous authors (Buchanan, 2015; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). This interplay of identity and agency was closely related to the ways in which the teacher candidates navigated the tensions between their sense of purpose and the structural restrictions present in their learning environments.

Teacher agency and identity can be initially developed during pre-service teacher preparation opportunities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Teacher preparation programs that provide authentic, supervised clinical field experiences in K-12 classrooms are better positioned to assist teacher candidates in developing their sense of agency and identity as related to teaching in inclusive classrooms (Bain & Hasio, 2011). In recent years, an increasing number of teacher preparation programs have moved to year-long residency models (U.S. Prep, 2020). In this model, pre-service teacher candidates participate in multiple, structured field-based clinical experiences in K-12 schools while simultaneously completing university coursework (Mourlam et al., 2019). For the final year, pre-service teacher candidates engage in a year-long student teaching experience during which the teacher candidate works in the same classroom with their mentor teacher and university faculty supervisor for a full academic year (Mourlam et al., 2019; U. S. Prep, 2020). Research on year-long residency experiences indicates that teacher candidates who engage in these opportunities may be better prepared for teaching in inclusive classrooms and are more likely to remain in the teaching profession (Guha et al., 2016; Matsko et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

This study was designed to build on Pantic's (2015) conceptual model of teacher agency for social justice and inclusive practice. For Pantic, inclusive education and social justice are intertwined concepts. She defines her model of teacher agency as "a process whereby teachers act strategically to transform the risks of exclusion and underachievement into inclusion and improved outcomes for all students in contexts of cultural and social diversity" (Pantic, 2015, p. 759). As described above, Uzum et al. (2022) used Pantic's model with international teacher candidates in a virtual learning environment. To contribute further to this line of research, the study described in this manuscript was designed to use Pantic's model with teacher candidates in a pre-service teacher preparation program with an intensive, field-based year-long residency model.

The research questions that guided this study were:
1. *Do pre-service teacher candidates in a year-long residency model see themselves as inclusive educators for English learners and students with disabilities?*
2. *How do they navigate their emerging teacher identity and agency as they are trained to become inclusive educators?*

Context of Study

This study was conducted at a four-year public university in Texas that is the largest producer of new teachers in its region. Beginning in 2018, administrators and faculty in the teacher preparation program embarked on a significant curriculum revision to the elementary and middle school teacher certification degree tracks. The driving factor for the revision was a move toward an intensive, year-long residency model for student teaching that was brought fully to scale during the 2021-22 academic year. As part of the revised curriculum, teacher candidates now participate in scaffolded, increasingly intensive field-based learning experiences throughout their final four semesters in the program. In each of these semesters, teacher candidates participate in supervised field-based learning experiences in inclusive classrooms that include both English learners and students with disabilities. University faculty teach the accompanying methods courses and work closely with school-based mentor teachers to help teacher candidates develop their skills. The final two semesters are called year-long residency. These two semesters replace traditional student teaching, with the teacher candidates working in the same classroom with their mentor teacher and university faculty supervisor for a full academic year.

The three principal investigators/authors of this study are full-time faculty in the teacher preparation program. All three authors are deeply committed to the work of preparing teacher candidates to provide high-quality instruction in fully inclusive classroom environments. Two authors primarily focus on preparing teacher candidates to support English learners in inclusive classrooms, and one author focuses on preparing teacher candidates to support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. All three authors teach methods courses with field-based learning experiences in their respective disciplines, and two of the authors supervise teacher candidates throughout their year-long residency placements.

During monthly curriculum planning meetings, the authors shared notes and observations from their classroom instruction and field supervision. A common theme that frequently arose during these conversations centered around preparing teacher candidates to teach *all* students in inclusive classrooms. Anecdotally, the authors noted that teacher candidates demonstrated varying levels of willingness and preparedness to support both English learners and students with disabilities in elementary and middle school classrooms. Without using the terms, teacher candidates often seemed to discuss their sense of *agency* (the ways in which a teacher strategically thinks and acts in order to achieve a desired outcome within the classroom) and *identity* (the ways in which teachers view themselves as both responsible for and capable of exercising agency within the classroom context). As described by Pantic (2015), the complex interplay of agency and identity plays an influential role in how teachers approach their responsibilities as inclusive educators. Motivated by these anecdotal observations and a desire to better prepare teacher candidates to work as inclusive educators, the authors decided to engage in the project described in this manuscript

Method

There are 16 total participants in this study. The participants were all in the first semester of their year-long residency placement in inclusive classrooms in public schools throughout the university's region. Along with their year-long residency fieldwork, the participants were enrolled in courses that focused on instructional methods for teaching English learners and instructional methods for teaching students with disabilities.

There were eight participants (50.0%) with a teacher certification degree track of Early Childhood-Grade 6 with special education, six participants (37.5%) with a degree track of Early Childhood-Grade 6 generalist, and one participant each (6.3%) for Prekindergarten-Grade 3 and Grades 4-8. The participants all self-reported their gender as female (100%). Fifteen participants (93.7%) reported their age as 20-29 and one participant (6.3%) as age 30-39. Two participants (12.5%) reported having a disability, and two participants (12.5%) reported being fluent in at least one language in addition to English. Data on the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Study participants. (n = 16)

	n	%
Teacher certification degree track		
PreK-3	1	6.3%
EC-6 generalist	6	37.5%
EC-6 w/ special education	8	50.0%
4-8	1	6.3%
Age range		
20-29	15	93.7%
30-39	1	6.3%
Gender		
Female	16	100%
Male	0	0%
Non-binary	0	0%
Disability status		
Yes	2	12.5%
No	14	87.5%
Fluent in multiple languages		
Yes	2	12.5%
No	14	87.5%

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. At two points during the semester (class week #3 and class week #12), the participants were asked to respond to two open-ended questions available via an online form in the university's secure Qualtrics survey account:

1. Do you see yourself as a "teacher of students with disabilities"? Please explain.
2. Do you see yourself as a "teacher of English learners"? Please explain.

At the conclusion of the semester, the authors downloaded the data from Qualtrics into a file prepared for use in Microsoft Excel. For the analysis, the authors followed a two-stage process. In the first stage, the three authors independently coded the data using descriptive codes "remaining open to all possible theoretical directions" (Saldana, 2013, p.100) and had a meeting to compare their codes. For example, a teacher candidate responded to question #1: "Yes, I have worked with students who have disabilities for a couple years and I absolutely love it." The descriptive codes assigned to this response were *prior experience, emotional connection, competence as a result of previous experience*, and *strong feelings and commitment*.

In the second stage, the authors used theoretical coding and coded the responses for questions #1-2 using Pantic's (2015) conceptual model of teacher agency for social justice and inclusive practice. These theoretical codes also included descriptive phrases explaining why and how these codes had explanatory power for a given response. For the example given above, the theoretical codes assigned were *purpose (commitment and motivation), competence (previous experience and awareness),* and *autonomy (level of confidence and individual efficacy).* The responses for question #3 were coded using descriptive codes and were analyzed for common themes identified by the authors.

Findings

The data analysis indicated that there was some growth during the candidates' first semester of their year-long residency in terms of how teacher candidates saw themselves as emerging inclusive educators. Some teacher candidates defined themselves as a "teacher of English learners" and/or a "teacher of students with disabilities" at the onset of the study, while some voiced concerns and hesitations and pointed out the need for further experience and training. Some of these concerns were resolved at the end of the semester while some stayed the same. Overall, there was improvement and growth in terms of Pantic's (2015) four components of teacher agency for social justice: *purpose, competence, autonomy*, and *reflexivity* (see Figure 1 for pre- and post-survey data). In the following section, each question is addressed with representative examples from the teacher candidates' survey responses (pseudonyms throughout, no editing in the quotes).

Figure 1: Pre- and post-survey results

Question 1: Do you see yourself as a "teacher of students with disabilities"? Please explain.

Units of analysis	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Purpose	1,2,3,6,8,12,13,14,15,16	1,2,3,6,7,8,10,11,12,13,14,15,16
Competence	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11,13,14,15,16	1,3,4,5,8,9,10,11,12,13,16
Autonomy	2,3,4,5,7,9,12	2,5,7,9,11,12,13
Reflexivity	2	

Question 2: Do you see yourself as a "teacher of English learners"? Please explain.

Units of analysis	Pre-survey	Post-survey
Purpose	2,3,6,8,12,13,14,15,16	1,2,3,6,7,8,10,11,12,13,14,15,16
Competence	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11,12,13,14,16	1,4,5,8,9,10,11,12,13,16
Autonomy	1,3,4,5,6,7,9,12	1,2,11,12,16
Reflexivity	4	1,2

Question 1: Do you see yourself as a "teacher of students with disabilities?" Please explain.

Teacher candidates who showed a strong sense of *purpose* (commitment and motivation) at the onset of the study also showed high levels of *competence* and *autonomy* at the onset or conclusion of the study. In some cases, teacher candidates' personal and family histories guided their motivation to become inclusive educators for students with disabilities. For example, one teacher candidate wrote: "I worked a lot in high school with the life skills program and grew up with my childhood best friend who has Down syndrome and just being around people with disabilities has always been something I have gravitated towards" (Stacey, pre-survey). In her response, Stacey offered *competence* through her previous experience in high school, *autonomy* through her personal experience and connection, and purpose to become an educator for students with disabilities that has long been her driving motivation. In the post-survey she wrote: "Yes. I have always had a heart for the special education community, and it is my minor" (Stacey, post-survey). She maintained her *purpose* and *competence* as an emerging inclusive educator for students with disabilities throughout the semester.

In another example, the teacher candidate showed moderate growth in her *competence* and *autonomy* after a semester of year-long residency experience. In her pre-survey, Catherine wrote: "Yes, I have students in my class and I have taught them. But these students' disabilities are not too severe. If these students' disabilities were severe then, I would not see myself as a teacher who could teach those with severe disabilities. Those students need someone who has the right training" (Catherine, pre-survey). In this example, Catherine showed some *competence* and *autonomy* through her individual efficacy. But she determined the boundaries and limits of her knowledge and skills and decided that the severity of a disability would be a determining factor of where her *autonomy* and agency end. She drew the boundaries of her own *autonomy* and that of a specialist. In her post-survey response, she showed some improvement in how she sees herself and wrote: "Yes, I am slowly starting to see myself as a teacher of students with

disabilities. Finishing my first semester in year-long residency and have worked and taught students with disabilities I am more confident in myself" (Catherine, post-survey).

Some teacher candidates saw themselves as not ready to teach students with disabilities at the end of their first year-long residency semester. Many suggested that more training and practical experiences were deciding factors. One candidate wrote: "Not at the moment. I think I need more practice and observation with students who have disabilities so I can become more confident in teaching students with disabilities by making specific accommodations" (Jennifer, pre-survey). In her response, Jennifer showed limited *competence* and *autonomy*, but showed some *reflexivity* by suggesting that she would need more experience working with students with disabilities and providing them accommodations in order to be more confident in her abilities. At the end of the semester, Jennifer still showed limited *competence* and *autonomy*. She wrote: "I feel like I need to know and understand more accommodations and modification activities as a whole that would benefit my students before I could be considered as a teacher of students with disabilities" (Jennifer, post-survey). Unlike previous examples, Jennifer did not show much purpose or awareness of the challenges of providing inclusive education for students with disabilities. Therefore, there was no driving force (commitment, motivation) to seek and develop the *autonomy* and *competence* teacher candidates would need to become inclusive educators.

In the final example, some teacher candidates rejected the notion of being an educator of students with disabilities, suggesting that the term has negative connotations. One candidate wrote: "I do not, only because I have very limited special education training. Also, I try not to think of my students as 'disabled' because I feel it has a negative and limiting connotation" (Alison, pre-survey). In her response, Alison showed limited *autonomy* and *competence* to be a teacher of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms due to her limited special education training. Next, she suggested that she does not see her students as "disabled" since it has a negative connotation. She showed some *reflexivity* by avoiding the adjective "disabled" (as opposed to using person-first language such as "student with a disability"), but also ran the danger of ignoring the fact that specific instructional considerations are needed to effectively provide inclusive education for students with disabilities. She maintained this position in her post-survey and wrote: "I do not look at it that way, I just look at it as I am a teacher of all types of students" (Alison, post-survey). In her response, she showed no *purpose* and limited *competence* and *autonomy*. Rejecting the specialized needs of an underserved group runs the risk of potentially not addressing the specific instructional factors that are needed to provide effective inclusive education.

Question 2: Do you see yourself as a "teacher of English learners"? Please explain.

Teacher candidates demonstrated some growth in many of the four components articulated by Pantic (2015), especially more so in *autonomy* and *competence*. Some teacher candidates showed *purpose* at the onset of their first year-long residency semester, and this potentially helped them develop *competence* and *autonomy* throughout their experience. One candidate wrote: "I would love to teach English learners and learn so much more about teaching English learners as I hope to make a difference in teaching them and learning more how to be able to support my English learners in the classroom" (Jennifer, pre-survey). In her response, Jennifer showed growing *competence* and *autonomy* and a strong sense of *purpose* and commitment through her willingness to support English learners. In her post-survey, she wrote: "I think I am more confident teaching English learners than special education students because I have more experience with English learners in the classroom at all different levels, which gives me practice to help English learners at any stage they are in" (Jennifer, post-survey). In her response, she

showed *autonomy* and *competence* through her increased level of confidence due to her practical experience with different proficiency levels in the classroom.

In another example, the teacher candidate showed some *competence*, but limited *autonomy* and identified "language barrier" or "language proficiency" as factors determining the level of her *autonomy* and *competence*. She stated in the pre-survey: "I feel confident teaching students at a higher proficiency level, but not English learners at a lower proficiency level because I will not be able to communicate with them" (Ana, pre-survey). Ana demonstrated some *competence* as she was aware of the different proficiency levels and the amount of scaffolding or support English learners needed depending on their proficiency level but lacked the confidence and individual efficacy to teach them in class. In the post-survey, she showed some growth in her *competence* and *autonomy*, most likely because of her intensive year-long residency experience directly working with English learners at different proficiency levels. In her response, proficiency level was no longer an obstacle or a challenge for her to see herself as a teacher of English learners. She stated, "Yes, I see myself as a teacher of English learners because I have learned how to differentiate my instruction to meet all student needs" (Ana, post-survey).

In the third example, some candidates appeared to resign themselves to the fact that there will be English learners in their classrooms, and they accepted that reality and their new role as teachers of English learners. This realization was not necessarily a result of their training or their development of *autonomy* and *competence* but was an outcome of their acceptance. One candidate wrote: "I do not because I am not fluent in other languages to help the student adapt to the classroom" (Jane, pre-survey). In her response, she identified language proficiency in students' first language as a prerequisite to be able to become a teacher of English learners. Therefore, she had limited *purpose* and commitment. In the post-survey she wrote: "Yes, because each classroom will have English learners in it" (Jane, post-survey). At the conclusion of the semester, she answered "yes" as seeing herself as a teacher of English learners, not due to her year-long residency experience and growing competence and autonomy, but "because each classroom will have English learners". This acceptance shows not so much purpose but a resignation to an unavoidable reality. Therefore, she did not show much growth in *purpose*, *competence*, or *autonomy*. In parallel examples, some teacher candidates responded in the post-survey: "Not really, but I know it's going to happen."

In the final example, teacher candidates showed purpose but limited *competence* and *autonomy* at the onset of the study and showed further growth in the latter throughout the semester. One teacher candidate wrote: "I feel that if they are intermediate or advanced then I will be able to give them the education, support, and strategies they need in order to be successful" (Kassie, pre-survey). In her initial response, Kassie showed some *purpose*, but limited *competence* and determined the boundaries of her competence through language proficiency. She added she could teach higher proficiency level students. At the conclusion of her first year-long residency semester, she wrote: "I am more than capable and comfortable teaching English learner students. I have taken many courses, I have had many experiences interacting with them. I am more than capable of working with students and teaching them in a classroom" (Kassie, post-survey). In her response, Kassie showed growth in her *competence* and *autonomy*, especially individual efficacy as she saw herself sufficiently prepared to teach English learners. Her strong wording was further evidence of her improved confidence in her skills. In the post-survey, language proficiency was no longer a factor determining her level of confidence teaching English learners. Her year-long residency experience with English learners in an inclusive classroom built on her purpose and helped her develop her *autonomy* and *competence* throughout her experience.

Discussion

Overall, teacher candidates showed some improvement and growth in Pantic's (2015) four components: *purpose, autonomy, competence*, and *reflexivity* during their initial year-long residency semester as they learned to become inclusive educators. Since teacher candidates had only completed their first year-long residency at the conclusion of this study, it is not surprising that the outcomes are mixed. At the onset of the study, some teacher candidates showed a clear purpose (commitment and motivation) and some competence and autonomy. These candidates were more likely to develop further autonomy, competence, and reflexivity throughout their first semester of year-long residency. On the other hand, some candidates showed some purpose and limited autonomy and competence in the beginning. They were unsure of their skill, and they did not see themselves as teachers of English learners or students with disabilities yet. During the semester, these candidates were able to develop further autonomy and competence, and slowly started to see themselves as teachers of English learners and students with disabilities. In contrast to these first two profiles, some candidates either rejected the labels of English learners and students with disabilities, or identified other parties such as specialists as the responsible party for the education of these students, in a way rejecting the responsibility and identity of being an inclusive educator and delegating it to others. Therefore, they did not have purpose at the onset or conclusion of the study. These candidates were less likely to change their mind or develop autonomy and competence if they lacked purpose while they were learning to become inclusive educators.

A potential pedagogical implication is to create identity-building exercises and assignments throughout their teacher preparation classes and fieldwork to develop students' agency and autonomy. Teacher candidates could be tasked to write teaching philosophies in which they can describe how they will become teachers of English learners and students with disabilities. In these assignments, candidates would use the personal pronoun "I" and action-oriented language such as "I will…" to build agency toward becoming an inclusive educator.

A potential curricular or policy implication could be to require teacher candidates to have specializations in either one or both areas targeted in this study (English learners and/or students with disabilities). For example, Early Childhood-Grade 6 with special education is a degree track at this university. Candidates in this degree track in the present study showed strong purpose and commitment for inclusive education for students with disabilities. However, candidates in the degree tracks of Early Childhood-Grade 6 generalist, Prekindergarten-Grade 3, and Grades 4-8 did not see themselves as teachers of students with disabilities and/or English learners to the same extent. Requiring specialization areas may help teacher candidates develop their sense of agency (the ways in which a teacher strategically thinks and acts in order to achieve a desired outcome within the classroom) and identity (the ways in which teachers view themselves as both responsible for and capable of exercising agency within the classroom context). The development of agency and identity can play an influential role in how teachers approach their responsibilities as inclusive educators (Pantic, 2015). The teacher preparation program could expand the existing teacher certification degree tracks to include endorsement and/or certificate areas directly related to the English learners and students with disabilities. This could help teacher candidates take ownership of their future responsibilities as inclusive educators.

Limitations

This study had a small sample size consisting of a convenience sample from one university's teacher preparation program. Additionally, the study focused on teacher candidates in the first semester of

their year-long residency placement. The authors plan to improve and expand this line of research by including a larger pool of participants across different semesters in the teacher preparation program. As more teacher preparation programs are moving toward a year-long residency model (U.S. Prep, 2020), the authors anticipate opportunities to expand this study to additional university sites.

Conclusion

The constructs of agency and identity are central to how teachers approach their responsibilities for educating a diverse spectrum of students in inclusive classrooms, including English learners and students with disabilities. This study examined how teacher candidates enrolled in a pre-service teacher preparation program with an intensive, year-long residency model, conceived their sense of agency and identity as related to teaching inclusive classrooms that include both English learners and students with disabilities. The authors hope that an emphasis on teacher agency and identity in teacher preparation programs will help future educators grow their willingness and ability to teach diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

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