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Attending to Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Agency: Lessons from a Graduate Course on Inquiry and Advocacy

Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi (2013) argue that “professional agency is practised (and manifested) when professional subjects...exert influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities” (p. 58). While recent national surveys indicate that growing percentages of teachers are thinking of leaving the profession (EdWeek Research Center, 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021), research also suggests that developing pre-service teachers' professional agency could help sustain their teaching careers (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Wray & Richmond, 2018). Enacting professional agency in U.S. schools is arguably more difficult than it has ever been given the pressures of high-stakes testing and other neoliberal policies (Author, 2006 & 2017; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Massey, 2006). The barriers to enacting professional agency may be even higher for pre-service teachers who: 1) are from low socio-economic or working-class backgrounds, with families who struggle to make ends meet and have few to no opportunities to exercise agency within their professional contexts (Lareau, 2011), and 2) attended schools where teacher and student voice was silenced or disempowered.

Given that many of the pre-service teachers in the teacher preparation program at our university meet the two criteria above, the program recognized the need to teach about agency in ways that were responsive to the unique backgrounds, needs, and experiences of this student population. As the percentages of teachers leaving or planning to leave the profession are again increasing, mirroring the patterns of the late 90s and early 2000s (GBAO, 2022), it is vital that educators who prepare pre-service teachers ask how best to teach and empower them in ways that will sustain them, even through the toughest challenges. In this teacher preparation program, the development of teacher agency has been placed alongside the learning of educational foundations, child/adolescent development, and instructional methods, because research suggests that this professional agency will improve their overall experiences in school, and lead to their retention in the profession (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Wray & Richmond, 2018). Therefore, the department designed a course to support the enactment of agency by pre-service teachers. In this course, they: 1) dig deep into the concept of professional agency through readings and discussions, 2) find a focus for their agentic action by identifying a question/concern related to their own practice or school context, 3) learn more about their question/concern by reviewing the educational literature and conducting interviews, and 4) enact agency by advocating for a position in front of an invited audience that includes faculty and staff from the university, teachers and school administrators from the students' host schools, and students' own family members and friends.

This paper examines the experiences of pre-service teachers in this agency-based graduate course, taught by two of the authors, in the spring semester of 2019. To better understand how pre-service teachers view their own agency, their responses to questions about making change, based on their beliefs as teachers, were analyzed.

In the spring semester of 2021, one of the authors was able to teach this same course again, but under completely different circumstances. The course was re-designed to enable candidates to practice professional agency despite restrictions imposed by COVID-19.

Admittedly, for many university faculty, doing research took a backseat to figuring out how to teach and support pre-service teachers through a pandemic. Though this author did not set out to collect data from the course, there were interesting differences between the topics of the inquiry/advocacy projects chosen by pre-service teachers in 2019 and the topics chosen in 2021. After receiving permission, the 2021 projects were analyzed more closely, in order to understand these differences. In a “pandemic coda” section toward the end of the paper, those differences are described and explored.

Literature Context

Professional Agency

Eteläpelto and colleagues’ (2013) concept of professional agency frames this study. They focus on how professionals can effect change, in their work and in their identities, through their influence, choices, and stances. Their model centers the agency of the individual yet, at the same time, situates that individual within a socio-cultural context. When considering the agency of individual teachers within schools, it is thus vital to consider the interaction between the individual (the teacher) and the organization (the school, district, state educational context, etc.). Because this view of agency considers agency within a contextual setting, it is expansive as opposed to limiting, aligning with the idea that teachers enact agency both within and beyond their classrooms.

Pre-service Teachers and Professional Agency

Researchers have explored conditions that foment professional agency in pre-service teachers. Ticknor (2015) argued that pre-service teachers need to experience “dissonance to the point of frustration” (p. 383) in order to recognize agentic opportunities. Once they recognize the opportunities, there are factors that promote the enactment of their professional agency. For example, Turnbull (2005) found that being a reflective practitioner, being aware of the social and political context of the learning environment, having a well-defined teaching philosophy, and having the ability to collaborate and “interact effectively in a culturally diverse context” (p. 202) all support the agency of pre-service teachers. Juutilainen, Metsäpelto, and Poikkeus (2018) found that having a peer group that is well-functioning and emotionally safe, as well as breaking away from the traditional relationship between teacher educators and student teachers, also bolstered pre-service teachers’ agency.

Researchers have also identified a variety of factors that stymie the enactment of professional agency by pre-service teachers. In a study of over 100 student teachers, Meierdirk (2018) found that mentor teachers who constrained student teachers’ innovation negatively impacted those students’ sense of agency, as did not feeling welcomed by other staff members in a school, and not having access to resources (like copiers, printers, and other classroom materials). Smaller studies have identified factors outside of the practicum learning environment that detract from the enactment of professional agency by student teachers, including self-perceived gaps in their professional knowledge and their lack of more general professional skills (Turnbull, 2005), as well as their own feelings of powerlessness (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). Juutilainen, et al. (2018) found that student teachers’ agency could be restricted by their peer groups (i.e. peer

groups of student teachers) if they did not feel emotionally safe in these groups or they had difficulty attaching to their peer groups. Yangin Eksi and colleagues (2019) further substantiated previously identified factors that detract from and support professional agency, placing those factors into three categories: mentor-related; self-related; and classroom and student-related.

Moving beyond factors influencing the enactment of agency, Roberts and Graham (2008) investigated the proactive strategies of agentic pre-service teachers. They identified three: 1) tactical compliance - intentionally fitting in and winning approval in order to gain some autonomy from a mentor teacher, 2) personalizing advice - being receptive to mentor teachers' advice but adapting that advice to fit the teacher candidates' style, and 3) taking initiative - seeking out and seizing opportunities to exercise control in a classroom. The current study builds on the literature of pre-service teachers' agency by exploring what they choose to focus their agentic action on.

Pre-service Teacher Agency and Coursework

A few studies have explored how agency can be developed through coursework, including Hulse and Hulme (2012) who found some evidence that engaging in practitioner inquiry, on a small scale, promoted teacher candidates' agency. Specifically, during a course, these pre-service teachers designed an intervention to address a problem of practice, and then evaluated the effectiveness of the intervention. Ticknor (2015) looked at rehearsals in coursework as a method for developing agency. Through talk and writing in "interactional spaces for critical reflection" (p. 396), the pre-service teachers in her study "recognized an opportunity to be agentic, assessed the associated risk, and took action to implement a change..." (p. 396). Ticknor also found that pre-service teachers need risk-taking to be supported through observations and approximations in the field. The current study looks at coursework that teaches professional agency explicitly and gives students the opportunity to take a public stance on an educational issue they care about.

It is important to emphasize that pre-service teacher agency is not limited to pushing back against what candidates see in their mentors' classrooms. For example, Hernández Varona and Gutiérrez Álvarez (2020) found that interacting with people in their community, and voicing and advocating for their communities' needs, helped to develop agency in student teachers. Correspondingly, Xun, Zhu, and Rice (2021) found that beginning teachers "perceived their professional agency as both temporal and relational phenomena by interacting within their current circumstances" (p. 745). The pandemic coda section of the paper contributes to the growing literature on how pre-service teachers' professional agency and sense of mission might be fostered by conditions outside of classrooms - the broader social, political, and cultural contexts within which schools sit.

Pre-service Teacher Agency and Retention

The literature linking pre-service teacher agency and retention is slim, but there are several studies that suggest a connection between the two. In a case study of three beginning teachers, Wray and Richmond (2018) provided evidence of interactions between the teachers' identity and agency. Based on their data, the authors argue that agency is foundational to the retention of teachers. Along those lines, Pearce and Morrison's (2011) ethnographic study found

that the development of an early career teacher's identity resulted in a sense of agency. That agency led to resilience, which the authors defined as teachers' capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances. Though teacher resilience and retention are not synonymous, Castro, et al. (2010), in their qualitative study of 15 novice teachers, suggest that the two constructs are related. They posit that teachers who demonstrate certain resilience strategies have agency. This study draws on connections among teacher identity, agency, resilience, and ultimately retention in the field. Beginning retention efforts in pre-service preparation can serve to create a better prepared and more stable teaching force, which ultimately benefits students (Young, 2018).

Methods

Research Questions

This study contributes to the growing literature on pre-service teacher agency by focusing specifically on the possible influence of a graduate course, where the complex idea of professional agency is taught explicitly and discussed at length, on pre-service teachers and their sense of professional agency. Given the complex relationship between candidate learning in preparation programs and the sometimes-conflicting experiences candidates receive in the field, the extent to which candidates left the program with a sense of agency and what they might choose to advocate for in their professional lives inspired curiosity. The research questions guiding the study were: 1) What are pre-service candidates' sense and scope (i.e., classroom, department, school, district, state, etc.) of professional agency after completing the graduate course? and 2) What is important to pre-service teachers when they consider enacting agency in their schools?

The Graduate Course Context

Participants were enrolled in a required course focused on agency, educational research, inquiry, and advocacy. Two of the authors were the course instructors, each teaching one section. Teacher candidates took this course during the fifth year of a 5-year bachelor's plus master's (plus licensure) teacher preparation program at a state university in Massachusetts. In 2013, the University undertook a major revision of its teacher preparation programs, moving all teacher licensure to the graduate level. Candidates apply for admission to the combined bachelor's/master's program in the spring of sophomore year with entry into teacher preparation coursework in the fall of junior year. The first cohort of teacher candidates entered the new 5-year program as juniors in 2016. The new graduate course that was the focus of this research project, was developed as part of the revised program and taught for the first time in 2019. The purpose of the course, taken in the final semester of the program, is to consider how the professional lives of teachers are influenced by local, state, and federal policies and the role of the teacher as an advocate on behalf of their students both within the walls of the school and beyond, with particular attention to creating environments in which students' diverse backgrounds, strengths, and challenges are honored. In the class, candidates build an understanding that teachers share responsibility for the performance of all students within a school and how to take action on behalf of students. They explore ways in which they can work collaboratively with colleagues and draw upon outside resources in order to act as change agents within schools or larger educational contexts, through the use or careful critique of

policy and research. In all aspects of the licensure program redesign, the faculty were concerned with creating learning experiences for pre-service candidates that would fully prepare them for entry into the profession, and support their retention once there.

While enrolled in the course, elementary/early childhood license candidates were completing year-long student teaching experiences. Secondary/specialist license candidates worked in school-based internships, having recently completed student teaching the previous semester. During the course, candidates explored influences and constraints on teachers' practices; discussed agency and educational research and their roles in teacher practice; drew connections between school, district, state or national policies and teacher practice; and engaged with practitioners, leaders, and experts in education on issues they cared about. The course culminated in an inquiry and advocacy project (paper and presentation) involving academic research as well as interviews with school practitioners to first investigate a question or concern, and then advocate for action or change as a result. Candidates presented their projects at the university to an audience of faculty, university staff, school-based practitioners, family members, friends, and classmates.

Participants

There was a total of 36 teacher candidates enrolled in the focal course in 2019. Candidates were preparing to teach at the secondary level or in specialist roles (e.g., PE, Spanish, or drama teacher) and elementary (1st-6th) or early childhood (pre-K-2nd) levels. Within the sample, the majority were white women, with more men pursuing secondary or specialist roles. Though the majority of participants were traditional-aged college students, a few were completing college later in life.

State Context

Participants in this study were predominantly graduates of public high schools in the region. During the course, all participants either had completed or were completing student teaching in public schools, with placements split evenly between suburban and urban districts. In order to understand their inquiry questions and their developing sense of agency, it is helpful to acknowledge the context within which they experienced schooling and student teaching. Massachusetts has curriculum frameworks (e.g., standards) for all subject areas that define the content to be taught by grade level, and students are tested annually on many of those standards beginning in third grade. Districts, schools, and teachers are evaluated based on students' performance on the state test, along with other indicators, such as graduation rates. Understanding this context is important to any investigation of agency; although there is localized decision-making regarding curriculum, teachers are, for the most part, following district-wide mandates, aligned to state-level policies, that may or may not be particularly effective in helping all students to learn and achieve.

Similarly, schools and districts have adopted approaches to social-emotional learning and behavior management that guide teachers' classroom management. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) strategic plan in 2019 placed increased emphasis on social-emotional learning, defined as self-awareness, self-management,

social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2015). Some schools have adopted the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports framework (PBIS) as the foundation for social-emotional development. Many of the teacher candidates were challenged by student behavior and mental health needs, and interested in the school-based approaches determining teachers' responses.

Data and Data Analysis

Following completion of the graduate course, candidates were contacted to inquire whether their work products could be used for analyses. All but one candidate agreed. Analyses focused on two data sources: 1) the responses candidates provided to a series of reflective questions at the end of the course, inquiring into their developing thinking about teacher agency, and 2) the topics of their inquiry and advocacy projects. Reflection prompts included:

- What is the role of the individual teacher in making change?
- Learning to teach is a process and learning to make changes and/or enact beliefs about teaching is also a process. Describe where you are in this process of making changes/enacting beliefs right now.

To answer the first research question, "What are pre-service candidates' sense and scope (i.e., classroom, department, school, district, state, etc.) of professional agency after completing the graduate course?" qualitative methods were used to analyze participants' written reflections, applying a common coding scheme of open and axial codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The written reflections were coded in relation to the candidates' perceptions of their own agency during their student teaching and/or internship experiences, the way they perceived teacher agency more generally, the ways in which they perceived how their individual school contexts shaped their ability to enact changes (if at all), and their self-perceptions about their ability to enact change in the future. This coding approach was calibrated collaboratively, then coding was conducted individually. Following the coding of each candidate's responses, matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1984) were created that allowed for cross-case comparisons and the generation of themes within the data. Throughout, an iterative approach was utilized, cross-checking analyses among members of the team.

To answer the second research question, "What is important to pre-service teacher candidates when they consider enacting agency in their schools?" analyses focused on candidates' inquiry/advocacy project papers and presentation slides. Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was used to undertake a systematic analysis of each candidate's focus and/or stance in each project. Content analysis allows for the analysis not only of texts but also intentions and inferences one can draw from those texts (Krippendorff, 2004). "Content analysts examine data...in order to understand what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xviii). Through looking analytically at candidates' topic choices, presentations, and papers, content analysis allowed the consideration of the challenges and themes within the profession that emerged as worthy of candidates' interest and agentic action. In a number of presentations, there were discrepancies between the titles, research questions, and introductory slides (e.g., the title was not reflective of the research question), so all three of these elements were examined

in order to reach a conclusion about each candidate's main focus or stance for the project. Once the focus of the inquiry project from the data sources available for each candidate was determined, patterns were found in the data, and the projects were grouped thematically.

Findings

The findings are framed inside Eteläpelto and colleagues' conceptualization of agency, (2013), which locates any individual's agency within the sociocultural context in which it is embedded. To bring this framing to the data, agency was defined as low, moderate, or high (see Table 1). A candidate with a low level of agency might perceive that they have little ability to make change in a school context, while one with a high level of agency may see themselves as central to the work of school change in a given school or district context. However, building on Eteläpelto and colleagues, the different ways in which the sociocultural context of schools, as organizations, can support or hinder agency were noted. Thus, any individual's sense of agency interacts with their perceptions of their context, and their sense of their own ability or necessity to enact agency. Notably, a teacher may have a high level of agency even if working in a context that might objectively be seen as hindering student voice. In the face of barriers, that teacher may see it as that much more important to assert their beliefs and to enact change.

Table 1. Individual levels of agency.

Level of Agency	Definition	Exemplary Quote
Low	Little sense of personal influence or ability to choose independently about how to proceed professionally.	<i>I think I am still on the learning curve of how to effect change in a large-scale way. I think feeling confident and comfortable in your educational opinions comes with time and experience and as much as research is helpful, educators still need that experience to make them truly seasoned enough to form their own thoughts and opinions about pedagogical approaches.</i>
Moderate	Some sense of the ability to exercise professional choice in limited areas, but choices are bounded or candidates are hesitant, in some instances, about enacting their own professional choices.	<i>The teachers can make changes in their classrooms on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis. They can control what happens in their classroom. For example, behavior management, discipline, rules, etc. If the individual teacher wants to make a change for the school or district, they can bring it to the principal or higher administration.</i>

Strong/High	A strong sense that the candidate has the knowledge and expertise in order to exercise and act on professional judgment. The candidate is empowered to take a stance based on their beliefs and to make professional choices informed by those beliefs and their professional knowledge.	<i>The teacher's role in change-making is to first, be an advocate for his/her individual students and class as a whole. The teacher needs to be invested. That involves, but is not limited to, speaking up for the rights and needs of their students. It includes doing the research yourself in order to be more informed about policies, theories, and programs. It also means having conversations and going to administration and other faculty members about your thoughts, questions, and concerns. Teachers have a voice and their job is to use it appropriately, even in, or especially in, uncomfortable situations.</i>
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Candidate Perceptions of Agency

Across the sample, there was variation in candidates' perceived levels of agency at the end of their 5-year program (which coincided with the end of the course experience described here). By the end of the course, the majority of candidates felt a moderate to strong sense of agency regarding their ability to make changes across different contexts (e.g., at the classroom, school, district, or state level). In fact, 94% of participants (34 out of 36) expressed a level of professional agency rated moderate to high. Students framed their sense of professional agency as one that gave them influence across contexts and allowed them to enact choices based on professional judgment, or to integrate newly-gained professional knowledge and beliefs into their practice (Eteläpelto, et al., 2013).

A strong sense of agency is exemplified by one elementary candidate, who described her ability to make change in her school, based on a professional stance or “cause,” as follows: “A single teacher can advocate for one thing and have others join their cause.” Another candidate described the shift in her perception of herself as a changemaker (a term that multiple candidates used in order to capture a sense of agency) in schools—as someone with influence who could utilize her beliefs to support others:

For me, it [speaking out for change] was scarier in a work environment than in my everyday life, where I am more comfortable in advocating. However, I learned from the readings and through talking to educators that teachers have a big voice in advocating in the school. I now feel more comfortable speaking up to others, such as giving advice, making a change.

This candidate's response illustrates the carryover of course-based learnings into her sense of professional agency in the field. It also illustrates the ways in which an environment in which “speaking up” may feel hard, is not necessarily a hindrance to enacting agency. Similarly, a

secondary candidate described his growing confidence and agency to exercise choice and influence as an aspiring teacher and the role that this particular course played in that process. He said, “This class had [sic] made me feel like change within a classroom is possible and that if many teachers fight for the same thing, then change will come. I started feeling like our voices as teachers matter and that if we feel strongly about something we should always advocate for it.” The belief, on the part of most teacher candidates, that they could use their voices to make change, indicates a growing sense of self-efficacy. As Eteläpelto, et al. (2013) noted, “high self-efficacy is connected to active agency, understood as the exertion of intentional influence on one’s life and circumstances of living.” (p. 57).

While most candidates ended this course with a stronger sense of their own agency as changemakers, there was variation in the perceived scope of their influence. The majority of early childhood and elementary candidates (14 out of 20) saw themselves enacting change and exercising choice within their classrooms (both in their pre-service teaching and in future jobs). In contrast, a larger proportion of secondary and specialist candidates (9 out of 16) saw their influence as extending beyond the classroom to the school, district, or state level. For example, one secondary candidate wrote: “An individual teacher can make change in their classroom based on research; they can make suggestions on grade or school wide changes; and/or they can take steps towards making a bigger change throughout their school district/state.” Another secondary candidate, a future history teacher, wrote: “I can now visualize the process in how the history standards are determined, and that encourages me to be a part of the review panel in the future. I like the idea of having my voice heard.”

Finally, for most pre-service teachers, their perceived sense of agency within their practicum school sites matched the level of agency that they projected for themselves in their first jobs. Those who felt confident exerting influence at their pre-service field sites trusted that they would feel similarly when they moved on to full-time employment. Importantly, this was not dependent on contextual factors, as candidates trusted that, by and large, they could enact agency regardless of the extent to which a new school context facilitated this act. There were, however, a few notable exceptions to this pattern. A handful of candidates experienced a low sense of agency in their pre-service placements, noting that a desire not to “burn bridges” and to focus on obtaining or maintaining a job was their first priority. For them, this priority superseded enacting their beliefs about working for change. As one candidate explained:

Changes that I am currently comfortable making are only within the classroom. As a new paraprofessional with potential to be a first-year teacher next year, I have begun to form my beliefs about teaching, but I do not feel comfortable enacting much change. For example, I am comfortable structuring my lessons and interactions with students in a way that matches my beliefs, but when school rules or expectations go against my beliefs, I follow them anyway. I do not want to burn bridges, so I am currently keeping an open mind and doing my best to go along with decisions as they are made by administration.

Similarly, another candidate reflected:

As a future teacher, I do want to be that person who can advocate for my students and help make change. However, I do not think I will be comfortable doing so as a new

teacher. Right now, I can say my primary goal is to find a job. I will do whatever I can to find a job and keep it. As a first-year teacher, I will do whatever I can to fit into the school and school district I am at. The longer I have been teaching, the more comfortable I will feel about making changes and advocating for change.

For candidates like these two, a focus on future employment played a strong role in shaping their thinking about professional agency. Additionally, their level of agency, unlike most candidates, was affected by their perceptions of the school context and their desire to align with the norms of that context as opposed to pushing back or “standing out.”

Focus of Agentic Action

In addition to framing how pre-service candidates thought about their own agency as the course progressed, how candidates thought about enacting agency was also investigated: What particular areas were of interest to them? How did they hope to create change in those areas? Who did they hope to work with in order to begin to enact change? Most candidates focused on helping students or other educators to grow or shift their practice. For instance, one elementary candidate created a plan to advocate, within her district, for ongoing professional learning communities (PLCs) for paraprofessionals. Recognizing not only the vital role that paraprofessionals play in students’ learning, but also the role that ongoing, collaborative learning plays in the growth of all educators, this candidate created a proposal for “embedded on-the-job training,” through “professional learning groups...[created] to train and support them on many topics for a short amount of formalized time each day.”

Similarly, another candidate focused on advocating for the inclusion of instruction on self-regulation in elementary and early childhood classrooms. Noting the academic and life benefits of strong self-regulation skills, this candidate planned “to persuade curriculum coordinators that it is easy to incorporate self-regulation into the district’s curriculum. It is something that can be embedded across subject areas. Something as simple as a morning meeting could be scheduled into the day that focuses on self-regulation so that all students get that exposure at some point during the day.” This candidate noted that the audience for her advocacy was principals, classroom teachers, and curriculum coordinators. They recognized that their advocacy needed to be far-reaching in order to spread the message about the importance of teaching self-regulation, and that educators in a variety of roles needed to be on board.

Candidates overwhelmingly chose to focus their agentic efforts on content related to students’ needs and well-being in order to improve outcomes for all students. Twelve percent (5) of candidates focused their research and advocacy on mental health issues, pursuing topics such as “Supporting Students who have Experienced Trauma” and “Alleviating Math Anxiety.” Twenty percent (8) of candidates chose to focus their research and advocacy on culturally-responsive teaching approaches or justice-focused work in the field. They explored topics such as “Increasing the Diversity of the Teaching Workforce,” “Supporting English Language Learners” and “Striving toward Cultural Competency.” For example, in the advocacy project about supporting English learners, the candidate argued against extensive pull-out ESL instruction because the “students are missing core instructional time in reading, math, and science.” They asked whether “the educational gap is truly being closed” for English learners,

and she researched best practices for teaching ESL, concluding that greater collaboration between content and ESL teachers, and more time spent in content classes with ESL support, are needed to create more equitable learning experiences. Across the board, students' advocacy topics illustrated their understanding both of the need to use agency to enact their beliefs as well as their understanding of the contexts that gave rise to these advocacy needs. For these candidates, agency embodied individual action, contextualized in a deep understanding of school and district context.

Discussion

This study is unique in exploring the development and scope of perceived teacher agency. While nearly all candidates in the graduate course increased their sense of agency, findings were more nuanced when it came to the scope of their agentic actions. Proportionally, more secondary and specialist candidates than early childhood and elementary candidates saw their agentic influence extending beyond the classroom. Looking for a possible explanation, a deeper dive was taken into their inquiry and advocacy projects and it was found that twice as many of the projects by secondary and specialist candidates focused on what can be done school-wide to address various issues (e.g., teacher absences, cultural competence of faculty and staff, the use of flex blocks). The projects of early childhood and elementary candidates, by contrast, were nearly evenly split between projects focused on what schools can do and projects focused on what teachers can do in classrooms (e.g., strategies to promote self-regulation, alleviate math anxiety, or support traumatized students). Perhaps candidates who spent time investigating school-wide issues, or even larger policy issues, developed a sense of agency beyond the scope of their own classrooms. Of course, further research would be needed to support this.

The findings of this study also bolster the existing literature showing the impact of the student teaching context on pre-service candidates' sense of agency (Meierdirk, 2018). The majority of candidates felt prepared to challenge the status quo, and attempt to make changes for the benefit students, especially if they were working in school settings that supported the exercise of professional agency. Though those with lower levels of agency either in their pre-service placements or projected agency as new teachers comprised only a small number within the larger sample, it is vital to examine how the pressure to obtain and maintain a job can also affect teachers' change-making efforts. These findings are consistent with Eteläpelto, et al.'s (2013) notion that "the way subjects think, act and learn is always imbued and resourced – and also constrained – by their socio-cultural contexts." A "mutually constitutive relationship between the socio-cultural context and individual learning and identity construction" (p. 57) seemed to be at play as the teacher candidates considered and navigated their developing sense of agency within their school contexts.

This study also adds to the existing evidence that graduate courses have the potential to grow pre-service teachers' sense of agency (Hulse & Hulme, 2012; Ticknor, 2015; Yangin Eksi, et al., 2019). For the most part, the inquiry/advocacy project stayed at the level of proposed ideas. Importantly, the assignment could be even more powerful if it were developed over a year with action/implementation as a culminating step. With strong school/university partnerships and communication about expectations during the 5th year of the program, this extension of the

course assignment could be possible. An inquiry/advocacy/*action* project has the potential for an even greater impact on the development of teacher agency and sense of mission.

Though this study cannot make claims about the connection between an emergent sense of professional agency among novice educators and their retention in the profession, Wray and Richmond (2018) proposed that “teacher agency establishes the foundation for the retention of teachers in the profession, especially those whose careers are in particularly challenging contexts” (p. 785). Exploring the connection between developing professional agency amongst teacher candidates and retention in the field is a vital area for further exploration. In anticipation of that research, pre-service preparation programs can do more to lay the groundwork for sustaining teachers in the profession by explicitly teaching professional agency early on and providing pre-service teachers with multiple opportunities to genuinely exercise professional agency both individually and collaboratively.

Pandemic Coda

In 2021, one member of the research team had the opportunity to teach two sections of the graduate course again with a total of 39 teacher candidates. As students moved through the advocacy projects, it was clear that the focus of this work was dramatically influenced by the context in the country. The work of the 2021 cohort demonstrated the powerful effect of learning to teach during a global pandemic and national reckoning with racism. These candidates were eager to effectively address the issues raised by these “twin pandemics” in their classrooms and schools. Upon noticing this pattern, permission was sought to analyze students’ work from the course once again. Having obtained it, both their reflections on their own growing professional agency and the focus of their advocacy projects were analyzed. Among candidates in the 2021 cohort, 28% (10) chose to focus their advocacy projects on mental health issues, pursuing topics such as “How can teachers and physical education be of help for students’ mental health during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic?” and “Social-Emotional Learning as a Vehicle for Exploring Controversial Issues in the Classroom.” Supporting the social-emotional development of students and attending to their mental health needs was a pressing issue for more than a quarter of candidates in 2021.

For example, one candidate in the 2021 cohort chose to frame their research and advocacy around how to redesign schools in order to better address the social-emotional and mental health needs of students that emerged in the pandemic. This candidate dug into research from the field in order to advocate for a comprehensive plan in schools that centered students’ mental health through daily mindfulness routines, “form[ing] meaningful relationships by speaking one-on-one with students on a personal level through weekly check-ins,” and building a compassionate school community where students could connect both within and beyond their classes. Candidates who advocated around issues related to mental health saw, as a result of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, how these issues were increasingly systemic. Due to this context, they understood the need to advocate for multi-level change, such as the candidate proposed here: in daily routines, daily relationships, and across the school community.

In 2021, fully one-third (12) of candidates pursued inquiry and advocacy in culturally relevant and justice-oriented topics. Within this work, a large portion of candidates looked specifically at practices to address racism and approaches to developing anti-racist curriculum

and instruction. They explored topics such as “Teaching Anti-racism in the Classroom,” “Teaching Elementary Students about Current Events Relating to Racial and Bias Injustice,” and “Teaching Anti-Black Racism in the Middle School ELA Classroom.” Given that their work was situated in the midst of a racial reckoning within the United States, candidates clearly recognized that tackling the hard work of incorporating anti-racist curriculum and pedagogical practice was critical as they considered areas of need within their schools as well as areas for learning and advocacy for themselves.

For instance, one candidate who completed her student teaching as a teacher of record in her own classroom framed her advocacy around the importance of teaching anti-Black racism in middle school language arts. This candidate noted the importance of addressing structural racism by embedding it directly in the curriculum. As a teacher with her own classroom, she was able to take the extra step of implementation, moving beyond the course assignment to actually enacting curricular change. With such a curriculum, the intention was that middle school students would begin to understand how structural racism plays out across the United States, and then begin to create ideas for change themselves. The candidate shared how she began this work in their own classroom: “I created a lesson that was inspired by Amanda Gorman’s poem, ‘The Hill We Climb’...[We] discussed what [students] believed the message of the poem was. This particular lesson sparked a deep conversation about the BLM movement and the Capitol riot.” As evidenced by this candidate, some members of the 2021 cohort turned their advocacy into direct action within their classrooms, confronting issues of racism head on by integrating the topic fully into their lessons. For many of these candidates, the cultural context of the country was critical in shaping their developing consciousness as educators. It is notable that so many projects focused on teaching about race and anti-racism, given the growing resistance to the teaching of critical race theory across the nation during the time this course was taught.

Due to the pandemic restrictions on large gatherings at the University, the presentations in 2021 did not take place on campus. Instead, candidates presented to groups of teachers and/or administrators in their school buildings. This is potentially more effective at building the capacity to advocate with actual stakeholders, and was a more authentic experience than presenting to professors and invited guests. Therefore, current iterations of the course now make this part of the requirements. When the coding scheme was applied to the 2021 participant reflections, it was noticed that all participants demonstrated medium or high levels of agency, with 20 coded as high and 19 as medium. While this relatively high level of agency could be attributable to individual characteristics or school contexts, this may have resulted from the cultural/social climate in 2021 and/or the sense of direct impact gained from presenting their projects to school staff. In the words of one 2021 participant: “On the national level, I feel that the call to action for teachers is growing. Without changing much of what we teach, anti-racism can be brought into the classroom at any level.” Another participant noted: “Due to my presentation, I was able to realize I can also help teachers learn even though I am so new to the profession and they have many years under their belts. Prior to this class, I would not have shared with any colleagues or educators my teaching beliefs, but now I feel confident in doing so.”

The 2021 cohort experience illuminates the need for pre-service teacher preparation programs to lean into local, national, and global contexts, guiding candidates to think about the

ways that their learning, and ultimately teaching, can be responsive to these contexts in order to best meet student needs, and their own needs as teachers. Overall, the graduate course and this study illuminate the importance of listening to novice educators. Many of the candidates developed powerful stances and knowledge around mental health issues and racial justice - topics that many school communities shy away from or struggle to address. New teachers have the potential to bring fresh ideas, perspective, and courage to work around mental health, racial justice, and other areas that challenge educational systems. By giving novice educators voice, listening to their experiences and expertise, and allowing them to advocate for change, district and school leaders, and educators, have the opportunity to tap into the expertise that comes from those who may bring a new courage and lens to questioning educational systems and practices. The space and support to effect change and enact agency on issues of social justice and mental health, for students and teachers, may help keep these beginning teachers in the classroom.

Future research is needed to investigate whether the preparation described in this study, with its explicit focus on exerting influence, exercising choice, and acting on principles and beliefs, translates to increased agency, advocacy, and a sense of empowerment among novice teachers in their first years of teaching. Longitudinal research following teacher candidates in their first three to five years of teaching is needed to investigate the longer-term effects of preparation focused on teacher agency, and its relationship to attrition and retention.

Conclusion

This study, and its pandemic coda, suggest that coursework which explicitly teaches about professional agency, and gives teacher candidates genuine opportunities to exercise that agency, has the potential to boost pre-service teachers' sense of agency in their classrooms and/or schools and/or beyond. And more agency may increase their retention rates (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Wray & Richmond, 2018). This study also suggests that the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the U.S. reckoning with race may have influenced what pre-service teachers chose as the focus of their agentic action. Further exploration of these connections is warranted. In anticipation of that research and in response to educational systems which are in desperate need of change, pre-service programs should plant the seeds of professional agency early on; spiral agency, and opportunities to enact it, throughout the preparation curriculum; and encourage district partners who hire these first-year teachers to listen to, and elevate, their voices in their school communities.

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