(Re)constituting Teacher Identity for Inclusion in Urban Schools:

A Process of Reification and Resistance

Molly Baustien Siuty

University of Kansas

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**The “Urban” in Urban Teacher Preparation**

When talking about urban teacher education, Chou and Tozer (2008) ask, “What’s urban got to do with it?” Indeed, there is little consensus around what constitutes urban teacher preparation (Chou & Tozer, 2008). Moreover, the terms urban and urban education have been taken up in problematic ways in teacher education. Urban teacher education often represents coded language for teaching primarily students of color (Viesca, 2011). Most often the term urban is used to highlight racial difference between white teachers and non-white students as well as perceived cultural deficits associated with students of color and their families. In doing so, specific groups living in urban spaces are imagined as heterogeneous racial, ethnic, and classed populations (Viesca, 2011). This characterization of urban schools hardly does justice to the communities that inhabit them. Buendia (2011) laments that urban communities in teacher preparation have often “been reduced to racial, economic, cultural and spatial attributes that are seen as corresponding to the totality of their aspirations, experiences and intellectual proclivities” (p. 2). This is not to say that context and situated learning are not important when it comes to teacher preparation for urban schools (Chou & Tozer, 2008). In fact, urban education cannot be divorced from their sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts (Milner, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O’Conor, 2015). Nor can cities be treated as static, monoliths pervious to the ever-changing metropolitan landscape (Buendia, 2011). Rather, urban educational spaces must be seen as complex and dynamic systems of interconnected relationships and processes. In an online periodical, Beverly Cross makes the case for a unique approach in urban education:

It has to do with the history of the creation of our cities. Where did our cities come from? What makes them different? What makes them unique and, thus, what makes education in the big city environment so different as compared to a rural environment and a suburban environment?  It is about the history of the formation of cities, and the role of education within those cities, and, of course, on the issues of politics, cultural and racial dynamics, and size (Mitchell, 2014).

Thus, teacher preparation for urban settings must take into account the distinctive contextual factors of urban settings. This demands teachers who not only have the technical skills of teaching but also the capacity to critically analyze the particular setting in order to understand how school, community, and district factors mediate teaching and learning (Matsko & Hammermas, 2014).

In order to achieve this, teachers and teacher educators will need to conceptualize urban education systems within existing power relations connected to long-standing legacies of oppression and discrimination (Milner et al., 2015; Nygreen, 2006). For instance, access or lack thereof to businesses, public transportation, and housing opportunities can have significant impact on the socioeconomic opportunities within a community. In addition, access to infrastructure impacts rates of poverty and homelessness (Milner et al., 2015). Over a decade ago, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) urged researchers to re-imagine the problem of educational inequity in urban schools as an educational debt owed to communities traditionally marginalized by educational institutions. This debt, compounded over centuries, includes the historical legacies of lack of access to education for non-white students, inequitable funding between schools, and the exclusion of people of color from the civic process (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Thus, teacher education for urban settings must help teachers to recognize and critically account for the oppressive structures, contexts, and policies that lead to uneven levels of academic opportunity and attainment in their curricula, pedagogies, and interactions with students and families (Milner, 2012).

**The Problem with Urban Teacher Preparation**

Historically, traditional teacher preparation has not focused on the political nature of teaching. Instead, it foregrounds methods, strategies, and techniques without the critical lens teachers need to question the prevailing policies, structures, or curriculum (Picower, 2013). Teaching is never a neutral or nonpolitical practice, nor should it be (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009). This is particularly salient in urban settings, where longstanding systemic inequities have resulted in decades of inequitable educational experiences. However, many teachers do not understand or recognize the highly political nature of teaching (Picower, 2013). Behind every facet of education, there are issues of power and control that inform every educational decision from who gets retained and who gets promoted to the organization of desks in a classroom. Rather than being neutral, these decisions are shaped by broader political stances have consequential implications for students. In order to understand the political repercussions of their practice, teachers will need to reflect and critically assess both school-wide practices but also their individual interactions with students, colleagues and families such as how they pose questions, build relationships, and made pedagogical decisions (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). If teacher preparation for urban settings is to prepare teachers to recognize and challenge systemic inequities in urban education, teachers will need to analyze the political implications of their work and resist passive acceptance of political decisions. Moreover, in order to promote increased equity, the role of the teacher will need to be re-conceptualized as contributing to the broader political project of identifying and eliminating oppression.

Unfortunately, approaches to urban education teacher preparation have fallen short of this goal. While many programs have attempted to incorporate content around diversity, multiculturalism, and culturally responsive pedagogy, they do not necessarily equip teachers with the critical lens to challenge oppression in their school contexts (Cross, 2007). These reforms are often well intentioned as a means to account for the racial and cultural mismatch between a predominantly white teaching force and the students in urban classrooms. Yet, these programs ultimately fail to address the power differentials embedded within urban schools. Several scholars have identified the problematic nature of this omission. For example, Banks (2015) describes that successful multicultural education involves substantial change to the “the curriculum; teaching materials; teaching and learning styles; the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of teachers and administrators; and the goals norms and culture of educational institutions” (p. 54). However, the implementation of multicultural education falls short of this more substantive intent due to a limited conceptualization of multicultural education content to instruct about non-dominant groups. Similarly, Sleeter (2012) critiques approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy that focus on cultural celebration rather than a critical examination of power relations. Certainly, attending to culture alone will not promote equity for marginalized communities (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In fact, pre-service teachers have expressed the belief that social justice work simply means demonstrating respect or tolerance for other cultures (Young, 2011). Moreover, in spite of being grounded in the racial mismatch between teachers and students, these aforementioned approaches do not highlight the relational aspect of racial inequity. Ullucci and Battey (2011) found that color-evasiveness is a pervasive phenomenon in teacher education. By ignoring race, teacher educators and pre-service teachers can minimize racism and avoid an uncomfortable confrontation with their role in privileging whiteness. Yet, we know that in order to address oppressive structures within and around urban schools, teachers need to understand that race matters, racism exists, and they impact schooling (Matias, 2013). In sum, teacher preparation for urban education that use terms such as multiculturalism, diversity, and culturally responsive pedagogy act as soft code words for exploring the racial other, while primarily operating for the academic benefit of white pre-service teachers (Cross, 2007). At best, this ensures that hegemonic power structures go unexamined and remain invisible to teachers. At worst, it reifies deficit notions about students in urban settings. If teacher preparation for urban settings seeks to prepare teachers with the ability to identify structural oppression, there must be space in preparation programs to explore the relational aspect of race and how it mediates one’s relationship with school and society rather than just learning effective practices for the teaching the “Other” (Cross, 2007).

**The Problem with Urban Special Education Teacher Preparation**

Urban special education teacher preparation calls for an even more comprehensive understanding of structural inequality that specifically addresses disability and its intersection with other marginalized identities (Artiles, 2013). However, disability is often missing in teacher preparation curriculum for diversity or multiculturalism (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Moreover, teacher education does not take a critical approach to challenging ableism and how it permeates educational settings. Hehir (2002) defines ableism as “the devaluation of disability that results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert its better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kits, etc. In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids” (p. 3). He argues that since these ableist assumptions saturate the culture of schools, the primary goal of education gets distilled down to overcoming disability rather than encouraging students to use the skills and modes that best suit their learning abilities and needs. Yet, ableism is rarely critically analyzed in the school context. Collins (2013) advocates for a sociocultural interrogation of disability labels and special education in order to “make visible the interactions, discourses, practices and, tools which influenced the construction of identity, achievement and ability” (p. 13). Drawing on Vygotsky, she describes how social processes, like disability diagnosis and labeling, are mutually constitutive and interdependent. In doing so, she places the disability within the sociocultural context of schools rather than as a deficit within a particular person. Yet, curricula meant to address disability in teacher preparation do not expose pre-service teachers to viewpoints that challenge ableism (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Indeed, approaches to disability in teacher education that emphasize impairment rather than discrimination, such as disability simulations or inspirational stories of the “supercrip” (Lalvani & Broderick, p. 470), serve only to reproduce deficit views of disability rather than disrupt disability oppression. Without knowledge of ableism and a sociocultural understanding of disability, pre-service teachers will find themselves ill equipped to challenge inequity in the schools in which they will one day work.

The experiences of students with a disability label[[1]](#footnote-1) in urban schools connects to larger systems of oppression and marginalization along lines of race, ability, and class in the education system and society as a whole (Blanchett, 2009). Rather than highlighting the ways in which urban school systems fail to provide high-quality educational opportunities, academic failure is often blamed on individual students and their families. These students are then pathologized and labeled with a disability (Skrtic, 1995). Students of color who are labeled as having disability in urban settings are said to experience “double jeopardy” (Blanchett, Mumford, & Bachum, 2005, p. 74). Not only are they likely to face educational inequities related to urban schooling but they also are less likely than their white peers to experience inclusion. For instance, students of color who are labeled with a disability are more likely to be educated in segregated classrooms, have limited access to the general education curriculum, and achieve lower post-secondary outcomes (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Moreover, the service delivery model in special education is rooted in white, middle class, English speaking cultural values. Therefore, the services and interventions offered by special education can be unsuited for non-white, poor, non-English speaking students and those living at the intersections of these social identities. However, educational discourses in special education often do not utilize sophisticated tools to understand the intersections between race and disability (Artiles, 2013). Erevelles and Minear (2010) warn against taking an additive approach in which disability is simply layered onto the study of other social categories. Rather, they advocate for investigating how social divisions are enmeshed and constructed by each other and in relationship to social constructions of these identities. In order to combat structural inequity, special education teachers will need to understand the intersecting nature of systems of oppression in urban settings and realize their role in taking more nuanced approaches in order address systemic inequity. Thus far, I have laid out ways in which teacher preparation, and specifically special education teacher preparation, for urban settings fall short in preparing socially just educators with the skills to resist oppression and promote greater equity. In the following section, I will conceptualize an approach to teacher preparation that seeks to address these issues for the purposes of increased equity and inclusion.

**Towards Critical Inclusive Teacher Education**

The most basic premise of inclusive education promotes a process of schooling that is “about belonging, nurturing, and educating all children and youth, regardless of their differences in culture, gender, language, ability, class and ethnicity (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). However, Artiles and Kozleski (2007) note several limitations to this definition. First, it does not take into account the role that power and privilege play in decisions that impact historically marginalized groups of students. This will require the use of critical theory that challenges the underlying assumptions that undergird the policies and practices of educational institutions. The lack of a systemic approach for implementing inclusion is also problematic for how inclusion gets taken up in local contexts. Moreover, in the United States, typology of difference in approaches to inclusion often gets reduced to students with disabilities and ignores intersectional identities. Furthermore, it does not take into account the contextual complexities of geography, cultural historical practices, and policies that influence and sustain local activity. Therefore, Artiles and Kozleski (2007) identify three core needs for a more comprehensive definition and approach to inclusive education: (1) a cultural historical dimension, (2) an understanding of community and participation, and (3) a transformative agenda. In the following section I will use these needs as an organizing framework to articulate and advocate for critical inclusive teacher education for urban settings.

**Cultural Historical Dimension**

Approaches to inclusive education in urban settings must take into account the cultural history of education and the ways in which it creates uneven access to educational opportunity (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007. In terms of teacher education, this means helping pre-service teachers to see their classrooms as sites of cultural and social reproduction of inequity around difference (Oyler, 2011). They will need the both the practical and theoretical tools to examine these day-to-day processes through the curriculum, their own classroom, and also the school as a whole. Approaches to teacher education that merely appreciate difference will prove insufficient. Rather, teachers need to understand dominant ideologies such as racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and class bias operate in schools and society (Oyler, 2011). This will require that pre-service teachers develop a critical lens for unearthing tacit forms of oppression. Indeed, systems for exclusion can “lurk in, and operate through, the shadowy world of what I [Slee] loosely call school cultures: an agglomeration of pedagogic practices, curriculum choices, assessment regimes and the demographic and policy context of schooling (Slee, 2010, pp. 99-100). Thus, teacher education for urban settings that promote inclusion and inclusive practices without a critical lens will ultimately prove inadequate for disrupting the status quo.

In addition to critically interrogating education systems as a whole, a critical inclusive teacher education approach will also necessitate an understanding of the cultural and historical context of special education by both pre-service teachers and teacher educators. Even though inclusive education includes multiple forms of difference beyond ability, historically it has been tightly linked to special education (Slee, 2010). The particular challenge in special education teacher preparation is that many teacher educators and programs espouse inclusive education in a noncritical way (Slee, 2010). This is because there is resistance on the part of special educators to reject the paradigmatic foundations of their field. Non-critical approaches to special in teacher education mostly use the medical model of disability (Ashby, 2012). According to the medical model, the perceived deficit is within the individual rather than understanding how the environment itself is disabling (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). These assumptions are rooted in positivist notions that there are discrete, definitive and knowable categories of difference. Furthermore, non-critical approaches to special education privilege expert knowledge about disability (Slee, 2013). They assert that students identified with disabilities are best served by specialists and minimize or silence familial and community knowledge and expertise. Critical inclusive teacher education must facilitate the critical examination of how these professional narratives and expert discourse are positioned in teacher education and schools. Indeed, special education serves as a parallel system to general education for students identified with disabilities (Waitoller, Kozleski, & Dorn, 2006). As such, school bureaucracies use special education as means to legitimize the exclusion of students with disabilities from the general education setting (Skrtic, 1995). This parallel structure results in separate processes for allocating resources, dividing labor, and developing professional teacher identities (Waitoller, et al., 2006). In order to make spaces for inclusive practices, critical inclusive teacher education will need to dismantle these longstanding divisions by troubling the underlying assumptions of special education such as disability categories, separate education and certification of teachers, separate schools, settings, and funding streams (Connor & Ferri, 2007). This work will prove challenging because it will demand that teacher educators and pre-service teachers abandon fundamental assumptions that have shaped their own professional educational experiences. Due to the historic a theoretical nature of the special education field (Artiles, 2013), special educators in particular will need exposure to critical theory and thoughtful application to their practice.

In order to critically examine the cultural historical dimensions of urban schools systems including special education, pre-service teachers and teacher educators will need to be equipped not only with the traditional tool box of approaches, techniques and strategies for differentiation but also with theoretical tools to conduct critical analysis (Broderick et al., 2012). For instance, Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) is a way to promote understandings of disability from a social model rather than a medical model perspective (Connor et al., 2008). While DSE does not represent a monolithic theoretical approach, the one commonality that pervades the literature is the social construction of disability. This helps pre-service teachers and teacher educators to understand that disability is not inherent in all students but part of the cultural practices of schooling (Broderick et al., 2012). However, DSE represents only one critical theoretical approach (Broderick et al., 2012). DSE alone in critical inclusive education is insufficient to address other forms of socially constructed difference and their intersecting oppressions. Specifically, the historical convergence of race and disability call for more sophisticated and intersectional analyses of difference and exclusion (Artiles, 2013, Slee, 2010; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). For instance, Annamma, Connor and Ferri (2013) combine aspects of Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies to propose a new theoretical framework that incorporates a dual analysis of race and ability called Dis/ability Critical Race Studies, or DisCrit. Critical inclusive teacher preparation will require constant attention to the ways in which the cultural historical residue of educational inequity impacts urban educational systems such as teacher preparation and special education as well as the development and use of increasingly complex theoretical frames to help understand the relationship between socially constructed difference and oppression.

**An Understanding of Community and Participation**

Critical inclusive teacher education will also help pre-service teachers make sense of the communities in which they will work. When teachers leave their program, they will encounter urban education systems entrenched in dominant narratives regarding difference, disability, and special education (Broderick et al., 2012). As teachers enter communities of practice, they will confront normative ways of belonging that can have a significant impact on how teachers construct their identity and enact their practice (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Exploring teacher identity is important for understanding the processes through which teachers make decisions regarding their practice as a result of their personal and professional identities (Mockler, 2011). Hammerness (2006) describes this important connection, “Developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers’ commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms…the identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role” (pp. 383-384). In a review of the literature on teacher identity, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) identify five key themes that pervade the literature. In summation, teacher identity is a dynamic construct that shifts over time through constant transformation. Additionally, teacher identity is shaped by both personal life histories and social interactions. Therefore, the study of teacher identity is complex and ongoing work that will require mediating the way in which teachers negotiate and build on their personal identities as they develop as an educator. Yet, teacher identity remains under researched in teacher education (Aritles & Kozleski, 2007; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Furthermore, there is very little evidence that the limited research that exists translates into tangible elements of teacher education curriculum. Identity is a complex construct that will require rigorous inquiry that includes a strong theoretical understanding of identity development to guide methodological decision-making.

Artiles and Kozleski (2007) argue that inclusive education must be situated in the community of practice in which it takes place. For inclusive teacher education, this means that attention must be paid to the way that teachers engage in identity projects as they enter school communities. Since communities of practice define normative ways of being, beginning teachers will feel pressure to adopt certain identities in order to signal membership into the community. Since we know that schools and the actors within them operate under dominant ideologies that pathologize and exclude individuals who fall outside the norm (Leonardo & Broderick, 2007), these normative ways of being may threaten and even overpower the inclusive message of a teacher preparation program as teachers continuously negotiate their identities. Indeed, institutional practices establish norms and create precedents for how participants think about and discuss issues such as inclusion (Artiles, et al., 2006). Often, inclusive education in school contexts can be reduced to battles over additional resources and supports for students to help students access the general education curriculum instead of designing the curriculum for a broad array of needs (Slee, 2013). Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) found that graduates from their inclusive teacher preparation program reported disconnects between the knowledge presented in their coursework and the reality they observed in their fieldwork experiences. Without strategies to critically analyze and make sense of these discrepancies, pre-service teachers reported a lack of confidence in their ability to implement inclusion.

Critical inclusive teacher education will need to prepare teachers who can shift their gaze between individual student needs and the institutional traditions and practices of urban schools that determine and marginalize difference by understanding critical theory as described in the previous section (Oyler, 2011). One way to accomplish this is through the development of professional learning communities in which inclusive teacher preparation programs partner with local urban school districts (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2013). Unlike one-directional partnerships that operate as distinct, parallel structures, these partnerships will need to be dynamic and interconnected. Moreover, they will need to take into account the role of power and privilege in these relationships and the value that is placed on different sources of knowledge. Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) state that, “Inclusive education demands the construction of meaningful partnerships that encompass overlapping kinds of expertise, including the expertise of families and students” (p. 38). In this way, inclusive teacher preparation is informed by the unique flavor of local school practices and also the needs of students and their families in urban communities. At the same time, local school districts learn from the intellectual and theoretical work of the inclusive teacher preparation program. This reciprocal relationship will help to work through the disjunctions between the inclusive message of the preparation program and the communities of practice in which teachers will work. Thus, critical inclusive teacher education cannot operate distinctly from real-world urban educational contexts. Rather, they will need to design their programs with an understanding of how inclusion will be challenged by dominant schooling practices and how their graduates will negotiate those tensions in practice.

**A Transformative Agenda**

Slee (2013) describes inclusive education as “a commitment to particular values, which accounts for a wish to overcome exclusion and promote inclusion” (p. 308). Indeed, inclusive education is not just a noun but also a verb, meaning that is an ongoing project to resist oppression and transform school sites. Inclusion will challenge the business as usual approach in urban schools (Slee, 2013) and require fundamental changes to schooling practices (Narian, 2016). Artiles and Kozleski (2007) describe a transformative agenda for inclusion as an intellectual, moral and political act. It means making visible the ways in which schools systems have ignored, silenced, and excluded certain groups of students and privileged others. They describe this work as “praxis” (p. 362) or the pairing of critical reflection with action. Praxis for inclusion requires ongoing attention in order to ensure that students and families on the margins are continually brought back into the community and resist reverting back to the status quo.

In order to bring about transformation, teachers must understand how inclusion is tied to a larger agenda for social change in urban schools. Teachers will need to take an active and deliberate role in the transformation of schooling as a whole (Broderick et al., 2012). This will require vigorous critique of special education and the ways in which it is used to legitimize the segregation of students disabilities. In addition, they will have to also critique it as a vehicle for the disproportionate segregation of students of color from the general education classroom. The aim is that through anti-oppressive discourse, teachers will go into schools and actively work against oppressive structures related to difference and exclusion (Narian, 2014). It will be the role of the teacher preparation program to foster activist communities that can extend beyond preparation and into teachers’ careers.

In this section, I have described a critical inclusive teacher preparation approach that uses critical theory to critique dominant schooling practices while promoting an expansive notion of inclusion that accounts for the variety of difference in schools systems and also how individuals experience intersecting forms of oppression due to the meaning that is brought to bear on their social identities. Artiles and Kozleski (2007) identify three core needs for a more comprehensive definition and approach to inclusive education: (1) a cultural historical dimension, (2) an understanding of community and participation, and (3) a transformative agenda. Indeed, these core needs are appropriate for inclusive teacher education as well and will need to be shape the design of teacher preparation program coursework, curricula, and fieldwork experiences.

**Limited Opportunities for Resistance and Transformation**

Thus far, I have advocated for an approach for teacher education, particularly for special education teachers, that prepares them to critically examine structural inequity, challenge oppressive structures, and promote increased equity in urban schools. However, it is important to understand that teachers in urban settings are not immune to structural inequity themselves (Farber & Azar, 1999; Milner, 2008). Teachers are often one of the groups typically blamed for the perceived lack of educational attainment in urban settings (Farber & Azar, 1999). This critique, rooted in sexist notions in a field comprised primarily of women, promote of deficit view of the people, including teachers, who inhabit urban spaces (Milner, 2008). These deficit theories blame teachers rather than focusing on systemic, institutional and bureaucratic constraints that can prevent teachers and students in urban settings from reaching their potential. As a result, groups that lodge these critiques, absolve themselves of their own role in structural inequity and succeed in perpetuating the status quo (Farber & Azar, 1999). One such example of these deficit discourses in urban settings is neoliberal reform (Crawford-Garret & Riley, 2006). These reforms promote ideologies of individual self-interest and the unrestricted flow of capital. In urban schools, it manifests itself as top down mandates for teachers and strictly controlled curricula. In this type of environment teachers have few opportunities to advocate for equity, challenge the dominant culture, and transform the spaces in which they work.

While a critical approach to inclusive teacher education can serve as a means to prepare special educators who can challenge structural inequities in urban educational settings, scant attention has been paid to the process through which graduates of inclusive teacher education programs (re)constitute their teacher identity as they work in schools that promote dominant ideologies that perpetuate marginalization for certain groups of students (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). The purpose of my study is to understand the social processes through which special educators (re) negotiate their identity within the power dynamics of their communities of practice. In doing so, I will examine ways in which these teachers reify dominant ideologies but also how they demonstrate resistance by drawing on their teacher preparation experience and personal histories. My methods seek to answer three research questions:

How do special education teachers in urban school settings:

1. Use their knowledge from (a) their preparation program and (b) their personal histories to understand and critically analyze exclusion in relation their teacher identity?
2. engage in present activity through the mutual constitution of the norms, values, and rules of the community of practice and their teacher identity?
3. demonstrate resistance to or reification of structural oppression embedded within their community of practice?

**Theoretical Framing**

This study will draw on the conceptualization of identity put forth in the work of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) in order to investigate teacher identity. Drawing on the work of Vygotsky and Mead, Holland and her colleagues argue that identity development occurs through an interaction of the personal world and the communal space in which individuals engage with culture and social interactions. From this vantage point, identity is actively (re)constituted through ongoing participation in present activity. The authors use “history-in-person” to describe the relationship between the personal aspects of identity. By this they mean that individuals bring the residue of their personal histories into present activity, which in turn spurs transformation. The social spaces in which this identity work occurs are termed “figured worlds.” Figured worlds are simultaneously historical constructions and actively constructed by those within them. The concept of “heuristic development” is used to describe the identity development that individuals engage in within these figured worlds. In this process, participants and groups appropriate cultural materials in order to continuously (re)constitute their personal and collective identity. In sum, Holland and colleagues describe the process of identity formation as an ongoing process of (re)constitution through the interaction of personal history and social activity.

However, the understanding of identity must be couched in the historical legacies of power and privilege that are brought to bear in both “history-in-person” as well as daily cultural and social activity (Holland & Lave, 2007). For instance, the degree and type of participation in figured worlds is contingent on the participant’s position within them. This position is not only self-authored but also afforded by social interaction. Thus, not all participants hold the same positions, and in fact, some participants may even be denied participation in certain figured worlds. Furthermore, heuristic development is based on the availability of certain cultural tools to the participant. The ability to appropriate material and symbolic tools in social spaces is unevenly distributed across socially identified groups. Therefore, the social identities that individual claim or others place upon them, will determine both the degree of participation and ability to use specific cultural tools. While certain identity groups may experience restrictions within figured worlds, the process of identity formation is not passive. The ultimate paradox of this conceptualization of identify is that *humans are both social products and social producers*. The ways in which individuals chose to take up cultural tools helps them to mold figured worlds as they transform their identity.

**Teacher Identity**

I will take up the conceptualization of identity used by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) in order investigate teacher identity. Specifically, I will look at special education graduates of an inclusive teacher preparation program as they negotiate their teacher identity in the schools in which they work. Exploring teacher identity is important to understanding the way special education teachers make decisions regarding their practice as a result of their professional identity (Mockler, 2011). Hammerness (2006) describes this connection, “Developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers’ commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms…the identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role” (pp. 383-384). The study of teacher identity has the potential to inform the field’s understanding of not only teachers’ decisions-making processes and practices but also their impact on their school community and their students.

This study is not the first to explore teacher identity as a construct. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) conducted a review of the literature on teacher identity and identified five key themes that pervade the literature. Much like Holland and colleagues (1998), most authors agree that teacher identity is a dynamic construct that shifts over time through constant transformation. Additionally, teacher identity is shaped by both personal life histories and social interactions. In much of the literature on teacher identity, the focus is on professional settings for identity development. These connections between my theoretical framing of identity along with the prevailing literature on teacher identity will inform the ways in which I analyze the data in this project. The next section will explore human agency as the means through which individuals exert even a degree of control over their own identity formation and alter the figured worlds that they inhabit.

**Human Agency**

Archer (2000) defines agency as the ability to pursue one’s values. Holland and her co-authors (1998) describe the ever present possibility of human agency, “In continuous self-fashioning, identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible. They are possibilities for mediating agency” (p. 4). Thus, it is always important to acknowledge and notice ways, even minute, in which individuals demonstrate personal agency and its role in identity development in order to transform social spaces. These authors look at how enduring struggles are taken up in local context in order to impact the cultural production of identities. By enduring struggles, they mean dominant ideologies with historical legacies within social structures (e.g., racism, ableism, patriarchy). Specifically, it is how these enduring struggles get taken up on local contexts that mediate identity formation. Agency comes into play when the localized context of these struggles gets constituted by both personal identity formation and social participation. Indeed, history is both made in and by persons. Therefore, the degree to which these enduring struggles in the localized context are influenced by individuals and their social interactions is evidence of human agency. In this study, I will draw on Holland and Lave (2007) in order to understand agency and its connection to identity.

**Teacher Agency.** In their review of the literature on teacher identity, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), identify a gap in our understanding of agency in relation to teacher identity. This research will address this gap by exploring ways in which teachers demonstrate agency in order to promote inclusivity in their schools, even when it lies in opposition to the prevailing ideology. Day, Stobar, and Sommons (2006) explain that teachers will experience contradictions and tensions between their various identities. One of these tensions in this study will be the inclusive message of the teacher’s graduate program and the lack of inclusion in their work setting. Day and co-authors (2006) argue that in order to deal with these tensions, teachers exhibit agency by adopting strategies to try to reconcile the friction that they experience. Thus, they argue that identity development occurs in the space between social structures and their own agency.

Mockler (2011) asserts that teacher identity development needs to be harnessed as a practical and political tool. By this she means that teachers need to understand their identity within the local context and the broader societal structure. In this way, they can connect their decision-making and practices to alter the power dynamics in which they work. Mockler (2011) argues that this awareness can lead to a disruption of dominant discourses in schools. I argue that these points of resistance are important to study in order to harness it as a tool for social justice in schools. It is important to explore the role that teacher agency plays in the process of identity development and participation in figured worlds for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates how even in the face of structural inequity, teachers can show resistance through their practice. Secondly, it highlights ways in which individuals can resist hegemonic structures and, ultimately, promote social change for increased inclusivity.

Holland and her co-authors explain the small yet powerful impact of human agency in the face of structural inequality,

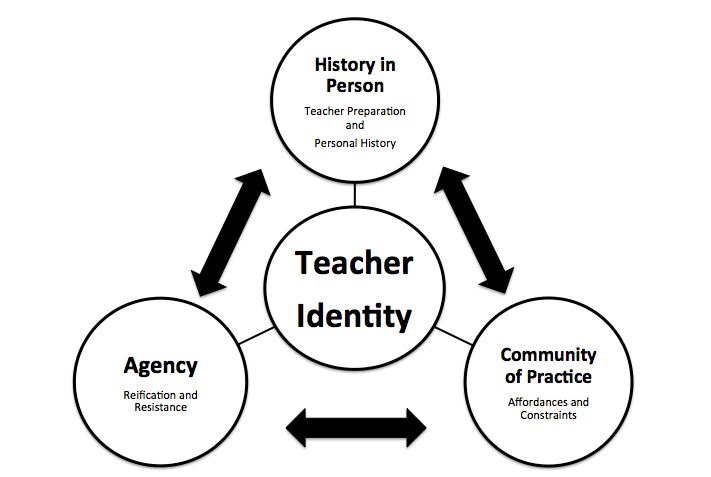
Human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention. Humans’ capacity for self-objectification-and, through objectification, for self-direction-plays into both their domination by social relations of power and their possibilities for (partial) liberation form these forces (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5).

Indeed, demonstrations of human agency by teachers can serve as a social and political tool to challenge injustice in its many forms. However, the way in which special education teachers exert their agency and for which purposes may result in uneven levels of inclusivity and equity.

**Communities of Practice**

Since humans exert resistance to enduring struggles within local practice, it is important to understand the cultural and social environment in which they occur. Communities of practice will be used as an analytical tool to investigate the particular contexts in which graduates of inclusive teacher preparation programs will (re)constitute their identities.The term “communities of practice” comes from situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This theory rejects the notion of abstract learning in favor of the tacit learning processes that occur as a result of participation in the practices of a community and their impact on identity development. Communities of practice are the context in which individuals develop practices (influenced by norms and values) through which identities are deemed appropriate or inappropriate in that community (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006). Handley and her colleagues (2006) warn against viewing communities of practice as homogenous entities because participants bring a multiplicity of experiences to them from beyond and across multiple communities. Often these experiences in different communities can create tensions in identity development and must continuously be negotiated. However, they can be opportunities for participants to exert agency based on how they internalize, challenge, or reject the existing practices of a given community.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study will explore how graduates of an inclusive teacher education program engage in identity work within communities of practice using the (Re)Constituting Teacher Identity Conceptual Framework (See Figure 1). Artiles and Kozleski (2007) argue that this transition from an inclusive teacher preparation program into communities of practice remains an underexplore area of the research on inclusive teacher education. In this section, I will connect the issues I presented in the first section with teacher preparation to urban settings to the theoretical frames I will use in my analysis. The goal of this endeavor is to inform the way in which inclusive teacher education prepare their teachers for the complexities of the schools in which they will one day work. ****

*Figure 1*. (Re)Constitution of teacher identity conceptual framework.

**History-in-Person**

The participants will bring their “history-in-person” with them as they enter their professional settings. This history will include the knowledge and skills gleaned from their teacher preparation program as well as their personal histories, which will be shaded by their own social identities and the meaning brought to bear on these identities. I anticipate that the inclusive ideal of their preparation programs will conflict with some of the prevailing practices within their schools (Broderick et al., 2012; Narian, 2014). I will explore how they negotiate these tensions drawing on the cultural tools acquired through these histories. For instance, the way that they take up critical theory introduced in their preparation program in order to understand educational oppression and how it limits inclusion. This way, I will explore what elements of teacher preparation teachers continue to draw on in practice as well as which elements get subsumed by dominant ideologies of their contexts.

**Community of Practice**

At the same time, I will situate this negotiation process within the affordances and constraints of their community of practice. Indeed, communities of practice dictate normative ways of belonging and signal which practices are acceptable (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). The dynamic between identity-development and forms of participation are integral to the ways that individuals internalize, challenge, or reject the existing practices of their community (Handley et al., 2006). Therefore, I will explore teachers’ identity work in light of the dominant rules, norms, and values of their school. Even if they have critical analysis skills from their teacher preparation programs, their ability to express or utilize them in practice may be contingent on these dominant ideologies and how the teachers situate themselves within their schools. Moreover, the community of practice will influence their understanding of their preparation in ways that can overshadow the influence of their teacher preparation altogether.

**Agency**

Teachers (re)constitute their teacher identity through their history-in-person and engagement with their communities of practice, I anticipate that they will use their capacity for agency to both resist or reify educational oppression (Narian, 2014). I will explore the sociocultural factors that afford and constrain opportunities for resistance. This analysis will bear in mind that teachers are both oppressors and oppressed simultaneously in school systems (Farber & Azar, 1999). Thus, their use of agency is not wholly self-determined but rather mediated by the both the knowledge and skills acquired through their preparation programs and also the institutional affordances and constraints. Moreover, their understanding of inclusion and inclusive practices will shift and morph as they continuously co-construct and make meaning of their teacher identity.

**Conclusion**

Researchers and teacher educators have proposed inclusive teacher education as one means to address to the complexities of education, particularly urban education, that lead to systems of interlocking oppression for students with disability labels (Ashby, 2012; Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, & Trezek, 2008; Dotger & Ashby, 2010; Gehreke & Cocciarella, 2013; Oyler, 2011; Zeichner, 2010). This version of inclusive teacher education rejects a limited scope of inclusion as a place but rather a critical conceptual understanding of school organizations (Ashby, 2012; Oyler, 2011). Ultimately, these programs seek to prepare educators, including but not limited to special education teachers, to be agents of change in their schools. Yet, dominant ideologies that pathologize and marginalize difference remain deeply embedded within communities of practice and stifle social change. The ways in which teachers negotiate the tensions that emerge between the inclusive message of their preparation and their communities of practice will have implications on the way that they construct their teacher identity and, ultimately, use their agency to either reify or subvert marginalizing practices. A deeper understanding of these processes will help to inform the way special education teachers are prepared for the complexities of urban education with the ultimate goal of promoting greater inclusivity and equity.

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1. I use the phrase “students with a disability label” rather than “students with disabilities” to acknowledge the social construction of disability within school systems and to reject a deficit perspective that places disability within the individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)