

Chapter 13

The Ties That Bind: Maintaining Inclusive Practices Through Alumni Engagement in Critical Reflections

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we critically explore the role of teacher education programs in supporting early career educators, especially those trained in inclusive education and Disabilities Studies in Education. We highlight novice teachers' transition challenges, including the loss of foundational mentorship and the struggle to maintain an inclusive teacher identity in real-world settings. Focusing on the evolution of teacher preparation towards social justice and inclusive education, the chapter examines the experiences of first-year teachers, emphasizing the disconnect between inclusive training and the demands of the education system. To address these challenges, the authors review a year-long support project for alumni, incorporating critical conversations and activities to manage emotional challenges and promote transformative change. They conclude by advocating for ongoing engagement between teacher preparation programs and alumni, emphasizing the importance of this support in empowering educators to enact educational reform and maintain their commitment to social justice and inclusive pedagogies.

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INTRODUCTION

Our primary objective in our teacher education program is straightforward—to prepare candidates effectively for the multifaceted task of teaching. Throughout our initial teacher preparation program, teacher candidates are supported through faculty mentorships, formative supervisor observations, and peer collaboration toward programmatic goals. Darling-Hammond and Hylar (2020) call attention to the need to better prepare teachers in a post-Covid world by stressing “even greater efforts are called for in meeting the social-emotional needs of children and implementing trauma- and healing-informed practice, all while making up for learning loss” (p. 457). Pugach and colleagues (2020) assert the importance of embedding deep learning through the interaction of foundational knowledge in content areas such as special education, Disability Studies, and curriculum theory to prepare teacher candidates best to enact inclusive practices and pedagogy.

With the increasing emphasis on dual certification programs, which aim to support students with disabilities learning in general education classrooms, cultivating inclusive mindsets and practices becomes vital (Pugach et al., 2020). Grounding these programs in Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) can empower future educators to adopt inclusive teaching identities and dismantle ableist barriers that contribute to exclusionary experiences for disabled students (Ashby, 2012). However, educators who embrace a DSE identity often struggle to maintain this identity within the restrictive confines of the current education system, striving to enact transformative practices (Rood, 2022). This dichotomy is further highlighted in preservice teachers' experiences, who, despite their inclusive training, observe mentor teachers either resisting or conforming to deficit-based systems (McKay, 2016; McKay & Manning, 2019). This challenge is particularly acute for early career teachers. Graduates from dual-certified programs often find themselves isolated as they navigate the tensions between their inclusive philosophies and the demands of the special education system (Broderick et al., 2012; Rood & Ashby, 2020; Siuty, 2019).

When novice teachers enter the field, they lose faculty and program support that can help them navigate their new professional world. While we as teacher educators are called on to be mindful of how preparation programs help emerging teachers develop their professional teacher identities (Brown et al., 2021; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010), without mentors and safe spaces to unpack bridging theory to practice during their early career, novice teachers may experience an emotional burden that could lead to burnout and attrition, especially if they were prepared to be inclusive advocates (Rood & Ashby, 2020; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). These rates can be even higher for graduates of accelerated programs or novice teachers in charter schools (Gutheruy & Bailes, 2022). This rate of burnout was something we began to consider as our program grew.

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