RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Shadow teachers: Narratives of preservice teachers' identity development in long-term substitute positions

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ABSTRACT

Teacher shortages have resulted in many districts hiring preservice teachers. We employ narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of preservice teachers hired as long-term substitutes while they were learning to teach. Their narratives indicate that they felt caught between working like full-time teachers but being recognized like temporary teachers. If the employment of preservice teachers continues to be a strategy for easing shortages, teacher preparation programs and districts must work together to ensure their success.

KEYWORDS

*Teacher education, teacher shortage, preservice teachers, substitute teachers*

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According to the Economic Policy Institute, "the teacher shortage is real, large and growing, and worse than we thought" (García & Weiss, 2019, p. 1). The first report in this series was published in March 2019, one year before the COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread school closures. Walker (2022) reported that National Education Association surveys found that the pandemic led to higher levels of teacher burnout: "A staggering 55 percent of educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they had planned" (p. 1). The combination of a teacher shortage pre-pandemic and pandemic-related resignations has created a staffing crisis in education.

These staffing challenges have created a desperate situation for schools. Administrators and state education agencies have worked together to find ways to address the teacher shortage, including policies such as waiving minimum qualifications for substitute teachers and fast-tracking substitute teacher applications. These changes are in addition to prior programs such as district-sponsored Alternative Route to Licensure programs to get people into the classroom before being fully licensed. Districts have increased class sizes, employed a series of long- and short-term substitutes, and asked teachers to cover classes during their planning periods.

The severity of the teacher shortage has created challenges for every stakeholder. School districts are bound by law to provide staffed classrooms, and administrators have tried a variety of approaches, such as an "all-hands-on-deck" approach in which all employees of the school may be called upon to teach in classrooms that do not have a regular teacher. Teacher education programs have created fast-track programs and worked with local districts to merge university- and state-required clinical experiences with districts' needs for full-time teachers. Preservice teachers are being offered full-time teaching positions on an emergency basis, prior to obtaining a state-issued teaching license. Although these solutions are designed to address teacher shortages and ensure continuity and consistency for students, they also raise important questions about teachers' roles, coherence, and professional identity development, especially for preservice teachers (Sachs, 2005; Zeichner, 2010).

As university-based teacher educators, we were concerned and curious about the experiences of our students who had taken long-term substitute teaching positions, often unbeknownst to us until after the fact. In this study, we employed narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of two preservice teachers who were hired as long-term substitute teachers while they were learning to teach. Gina and Erin (pseudonyms) were graduate students enrolled in a Master of Education plus initial licensure program and

accepted long-term substitute teaching positions in local schools in their last year of the program. They took a course load of nine credits each semester, which met the university's definition of a full-time graduate student. The program is structured such that all classes meet in the evening so that students can complete field experiences during the school day. In this study, we asked: What are preservice teachers' stories about their experiences as full-time teachers while learning to teach?

## Theoretical Framework

The process of developing an identity as a teacher is one that happens gradually, recursively, and through a variety of life experiences and interactions with others (Cohen, 2008; Chong & Low, 2009; Flores, 2020; Kavrayici, 2020). Kondo's (1990) conception of identity illustrates this recursive process of identity development: "Identity is not a fixed 'thing,' it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and the open-ended, power-laden enactments of those meanings in everyday situations" (p. 24). Many students begin their teacher education programs with a strong sense of what it means and looks like to be a teacher (Flores, 2020; Kavrayici, 2020), based primarily on their experiences in schools and families, and these notions of teacher identity can be difficult to change (Settlage et al., 2009).

As preservice teachers engage in conversation about their development as teachers, they construct and reconstruct professional identities to account for their new understandings of themselves and their roles as teachers (Alsup, 2006; Anspal et al., 2019; Cohen, 2008;  Zembylas 2003). Furthermore, these experiences in program coursework and field-based teaching can promote teacher identity development by encouraging reflection, adaptation, and tension negotiation (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Zembylas, 2003).

A particularly useful conceptual model for understanding teacher identity development comes from Carlone and Johnson's (2007) three-tiered framework of performance, competence, and recognition. This model, though rooted in science-identity research, has been widely applied in education (Avraamidou, 2020; Hazari et al., 2020). The model highlights that identity is not solely about skills or knowledge but also about how individuals see themselves and are seen by others. Recognition, in particular, plays a pivotal role in affirming identity: The act of being recognized by others supports individuals' identity development by affirming that the way they look, dress, talk, think, or behave conforms to a particular community's expectations for people who belong in that community (Avraamidou, 2020). Lack of

adequate recognition or misrecognition can promote feelings of not belonging, especially when preservice teachers are positioned in ambiguous roles that lack clear institutional norms and expectations. We approach this study with the understanding that Gina and Erin were developing their teacher identities through their teacher education classes and enactments of teaching practice in their long-term substitute positions. Focusing on recognition in this study helps us better understand the connections and tensions between perceived competence, enacted performance, and public recognition and how these aspects of their teaching and learning impacted Gina and Erin's teacher identity development.

## Literature Review

Research consistently affirms that comprehensive teacher preparation significantly influences both teacher effectiveness and retention (Guthery & Bailes, 2022; Redding & Smith, 2016). Darling-Hammond (2000) found that fully prepared and certified teachers are more likely to be rated effective than their less-prepared counterparts. Further, teacher preparation programs that foster meaningful university-school partnerships, community-focused clinical experiences, and provide compensated, respected mentor teachers offer significant benefits to preservice teachers, mentor teachers, and K–12 students (Zeichner, 2021). Additionally, research has shown the positive impacts of induction strategies for beginning teachers regardless of preparation type, such as team-teaching and reduced course load (Reeves et al., 2022); structured and supportive mentorship programs (Chu & Wang, 2022; Manderstedt et al., 2022); and critical reflection (Martin-Kerr et al., 2022). Despite the existing research to show the benefits of these structures, teacher shortages have created additional stress on existing university-school partnerships, prompting the need for additional research around teacher education in the current educational climate.

The process of learning the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching in a teacher education program, along with field experiences (Anspal et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2011), can cause preservice teachers to revise their narratives of their teacher identities. Clinical experiences can deeply impact teachers' identity development as preservice teachers confront internal and external tensions related to the complexity of the classroom context and the teaching profession (Flores, 2020). Preservice teachers often experience a "borderland" of identity (Alsup, 2006; Moore, 2008), especially when they are positioned in hybrid roles as both learners in a teacher education program and classroom leaders as full-time, long-term substitute teachers in K-12 classrooms. These

dual roles can create emotional tensions, undermine professional legitimacy, and complicate professional identity development if these roles are not supported by mentoring and institutional recognition (Hong et al., 2011; Izadinia, 2013; Trent, 2010). Field experiences offer critical opportunities for identity development and enactment but vary in effectiveness, depending on the structures and support provided (Flores & Day, 2006; Ronfeldt, 2021).

Field experiences are generally seen as crucial for supporting teacher identity development because they provide authentic contexts for applying pedagogical theories and receiving mentorship (Alsup, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). Yet, without clear guidance and intentional mentoring, these settings can lead to feelings of marginalization or invisibility for preservice teachers (Izadinia, 2013; Moore, 2008). Supportive relationships, reflective dialogue, and structured feedback opportunities—whether embedded in coursework or school settings or both—can help mitigate these challenges and affirm preservice teachers' identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hong et al., 2011).

## Context of the Study

The context of this study is a post-baccalaureate master's program in secondary education at a large public university in the western United States. Students hold bachelor's degrees in majors such as English, history, psychology, mathematics, art, music, or science but have little or no coursework in education. Graduate students working toward teacher licensure take a practicum course on general secondary teaching methods that requires 45 hours of experience in a local school. This course is usually taken in conjunction with the subject-specific methods course.

Elizabeth de los Santos, the first author, was the instructor for the practicum course, and Jessica Gallo has taught the course previously. Erin and Gina were students in the semester-long course during Fall 2021 and were invited to participate in this study because they were working as long-term substitute teachers. They took the practicum course in the fall and completed their semester-long internship in Spring 2022. Because Erin and Gina already had positions as long-term substitutes in local schools, their teaching positions were assigned as their practicum and internship placements for the program. For the practicum course, we found a mentor teacher at their school sites. At the end of the semester, mentor teachers provided confidential feedback about the overall performance of students. De los Santos observed one of their two formal lessons

for the course, and all students in the course wrote weekly reflections on their practicum teaching experiences.

In the spring, the internship required 15 weeks of full-time teaching in a secondary classroom under the supervision of a mentor teacher and a university-assigned field supervisor. The interns participated in a seminar-style course that focused on reflection, day-to-day problem solving, and peer teaching support. Mentor teachers and interns are encouraged to use a co-teaching model in which the intern takes on increasing responsibility over the course of the 15 weeks. University-assigned field supervisors, often retired teachers or principals, act as liaisons between the intern and the mentor teacher. Supervisors' primary responsibility is to observe and evaluate interns and provide constructive feedback.

## Methods

We employed narrative inquiry to examine preservice teachers' stories of their experiences as long-term substitute teachers while learning to teach (Clandinin & Caine, 2012). Narrative inquiry is especially well-suited to examining teacher identity development because it captures how individuals make sense of their evolving roles and experiences over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through storytelling, Gina and Erin are able to construct and revise their professional identities by situating themselves within broader institutional and relational landscapes (Avraamidou, 2020; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and conducted after the preservice teachers had graduated from the program to mitigate conflicts of interest as the authors were instructors and advisors in the program. The researchers engaged in collaborative conversations with the participants to generate narratives of participants' experiences as full-time teachers and students.

### Participants

Erin earned a bachelor's degree in geological engineering. After working for the state for a few years, she began her Master of Education program. Erin had 10 years of experience working with youth as a summer camp counselor. Family and friends had told her about the vacancy where she had previously attended high school. Erin decided to take the long-term substitute position because she already had rapport with school staff.

Gina earned a bachelor's degree in art history with a double minor in anthropology and studio art. She had spent 6 years coaching color guard at the high

school she had graduated from, so when she was offered the position, she was excited to take it because of her prior relationship with the school. Teaching positions in art were rare, so she decided to take the opportunity to gain more practical experience and potentially secure a future full-time position.

**Researcher Backgrounds**

De los Santos is assistant professor of science teacher education. Her research focuses on teachers' sensemaking of science education reform efforts. She has 11 years of secondary science teaching experience in public schools. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in earth and planetary sciences, de los Santos obtained a position teaching ninth-grade earth science and enrolled in the district's state-approved Alternative Route to Licensure program. She began teaching full-time with a provisional license after completing a 6-week summer course on lesson planning and classroom management. During the next 2 years, she continued taking coursework in education and received support in the form of a district mentor teacher.

Gallo is associate professor of secondary English education with 18 years of teaching experience. Her research focuses on teacher education, English language arts pedagogy, and rural education. Before becoming a teacher educator, Gallo completed a bachelor's degree in English, followed by a traditional teacher preparation program. She spent 4 years teaching high school English in rural schools in Wisconsin before returning to graduate school. Throughout graduate school and since, she has taught preservice and inservice teachers in the areas of literacy, English language arts, and pedagogy.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

The primary data source for this study were Erin's and Gina's oral and written narratives (Flores, 2020) about their experiences as long-term substitute teachers while learning to teach as students in a master's program. These narratives were generated by engaging in conversation via Zoom three times over the course of a few weeks in the summer after the participants had graduated from the program. We recorded and transcribed these 1-hour conversations. We characterize these interactions as conversations because de los Santos and Gallo shared their thoughts and ideas about their own experiences as former teachers with Gina and Erin to help provide historical context and comparisons for their current experiences. After these conversations, Erin and Gina articulated their thoughts and feelings about their experiences using stories.

These written stories and conversation transcriptions became the primary data sources we analyzed for the study.

To triangulate the data sources and analysis, Erin's and Gina's written reflections for the practicum course were a secondary data source. Students completed five written reflections throughout the semester about their practicum experiences on a variety of topics, including classroom management, understanding adolescents, lesson planning, assessment and grading, and a topic of their choice (perhaps related to their content area). For example, the second practicum reflection prompt asked students to consider: "What types of classroom activities seem to best support students' learning? How do you know? Why do you think this type of activity helps students learn?" We used these practicum reflections as secondary data sources to help us identify potential topics for the conversations and build trustworthiness by triangulating the reflections with participants' written narratives and the co-created conversations. For example, in her first formal lesson reflection for the practicum course, Gina wrote:

> My mentor teacher has not been very present during this semester.... I feel I am lacking in the presence of an experienced mentor. I've been working with my department leader, who has been extremely helpful, but I have not been able to see an experienced teacher in action.

We used this revelation to identify the topic of mentor teachers and mentoring as an issue that we should explore in our conversations with the participants.

Throughout the iterative process of conversation and analysis, our primary goal was to explore Gina's and Erin's identity development while serving as substitute teachers and learning to teach as students in a master's program. De los Santos and Gallo began the conversation by asking questions that would help Erin and Gina share their stories. But as the conversations continued, all four participants and researchers shared stories about their own teacher preparation, processes of learning to teach, mentorship experiences, and teaching practices. Through our conversations about commonalities and differences among our stories as teachers and students, we all began to "recognize the centrality of relationships among participants and researchers studied through, and over, time and in unique places and multilayered contexts" (Clandinin & Caine, 2012, p. 166). Our shared and collective stories often revealed identity tensions—between being and becoming, belonging and exclusion—supported by our narrative approaches and collective reflection. Using narrative inquiry, we were able to identify themes that captured Erin's and Gina's experiences and our collective

sensemaking about their experiences. To promote credibility of our analysis, we conducted member checking with the participants by sharing memos of our interpretations with them.

### Limitations

There are two limitations in this study. First, the participants were selected purposefully because of being in the unique position of teaching full-time while learning how to teach. The study findings regarding identity development may not be generalizable to teacher candidates who are not in this position. Second, the participants were employed in a school district and enrolled in a teacher preparation program that did not have a formal agreement or memorandum of understanding about how to support student teachers who work as long-term substitute teachers. Study findings may not be generalizable to contexts such as teacher residencies where the program is administered jointly by a preparation program and a local educational agency.

## Findings

In this study, we sought to understand Erin's and Gina's identity development as full-time students and full-time classroom teachers. Our analysis coalesced around Gina's and Erin's feelings of being invisible as a classroom teacher. Although they had all the responsibility and expectations of fully licensed teachers in their classrooms, they were paid, recognized, and often treated like temporary visitors in their schools. We share these findings through Gina's and Erin's narratives of tensions in their classroom teaching experiences and our collective sensemaking about these tensions.

### Institutional Invisibility

The first tension was Gina's and Erin's feelings of working as a "real" full-time teacher yet being treated like a temporary substitute teacher. These disparities were due to district policies and procedures related to job classifications—for example, long-term substitute teachers are not included on email lists of licensed classroom teachers, so they do not receive information related to instructional support and school activities. Thus, long-term substitute teachers are not recognized in the school system as legitimate teachers, resulting in tensions when long-term substitute teachers are still given the responsibilities of fully licensed teachers. For example, because they were long-term substitutes, neither Gina nor Erin participated in beginning-of-the-year

orientations for teachers that would have provided them with important information, such as school policies, procedures, and norms. Erin explained:

> Initially I was stumbling through administrative tasks like attendance verification, IEPs, and where to access resources like printing or computer issues. My school provided no guidance besides giving me keys to my classroom and the staff bathroom. I had no idea I had a mailbox or where it was. I did not know how to get worksheets printed for my classes. My computer would randomly stop connecting to the internet and it took me a week to figure out how to do an IT request. I got nasty emails from the administration for not completing attendance verifications, which I had no idea existed or how to do them.

Gina agreed, particularly regarding her legal and ethical responsibilities for supporting students with special educational needs:

> One issue that came about due to lack of communication was the situation of IEP [individual education program] meetings. At the beginning of the year, the previous teacher gave me the student information she had such as IEPs and student health information. I was not told I could access this information online until about halfway through the first semester, and still I am unsure how exactly to do this. This could have been a huge problem because I was working in a classroom with students who could have had possible health crises, and I was not prepared with the proper information. In terms of the IEP meetings, I received several invites to IEP meetings over email but had never attended those meetings before. When I received these emails, I wasn't sure of my legal responsibility. Did I have to go?

These narratives show how Gina and Erin were treated as temporary teachers yet had the responsibilities of real teachers, resulting in Gina's and Erin's feelings of frustration about the lack of communication and uncertainty about their legal responsibilities.

Despite Gina's and Erin's roles as full-time teachers in the classrooms, both expressed concerns that they were not seen as legitimate teachers by staff and administration. Beyond simply not knowing the required information, Gina and Erin described several moments during the year when they felt frustrated that they seemed invisible to colleagues. For example, Gina described being mistaken for a student on multiple occasions:

> One issue that arose due to my isolation from the rest of the school was not being physically recognized around campus. While I always dressed professionally, I am young and was usually confused for a student. One time in the copy room, I was asked to leave because “students aren’t allowed in here.”

Erin had a similar experience:

> Yeah, sometimes I see other teachers in the hall who’ve been there all year, and they’re like, “Oh, who are you?” I'm like, “I've been here all year and teaching science.” They’re like, “Oh, who are you subbing for?” and I'm like, “No one. There wasn’t anybody in that position. It's just me.”

In response to these narratives, de los Santos reflected:

> You know, Gina, what you said about not being recognized physically, it’s kind of like you’re, like, a shadow, like a ghost in the schools almost. Like you’re there. You’re doing a lot of work, but in a lot of ways, you’re not really being recognized for doing that work.

Erin agreed, adding:

> And you always wonder, like, “Do I have to go to the staff meeting? Is it really pertinent to me?” Like, I'm not during my contract hours because I’m just a sub, but everyone else has to go, so should I go too?

Even though they felt invisible at times, both Erin and Gina found themselves in positions of having responsibility with little guidance about how to manage those responsibilities. For example, both teachers described having to spend budgeted program money for their classrooms. In Gina’s case, the school had budgeted a significant amount of money to purchase art supplies for the next school year, and Gina had to decide how to spend those funds. She said,

> I had to go through all the paperwork and, like, give it to the bookkeeper, and I didn’t even know where her office was. And it was a lot of money to spend. It went well; I got the supplies that we needed, but it was like, “Okay, I guess I’ll figure this out too.”

These situations caused Erin and Gina to feel like they were invisible: They had all the responsibilities and expectations of full-time teachers, but they lacked access to many

of the resources and legitimacy of their fellow permanent teachers. Beyond the issue of physical recognition in the school, Gina described feeling undervalued in other ways:

> While not being physically recognized was an issue for me, I was also not recognized in other ways. The pay scale for long-term substitutes is not a livable wage. I was lucky to be able to pull off this situation with financial help from my parents. To be completely transparent, my university tuition was paid through scholarships and through my parents. My rent and other living expenses like health insurance and car insurance were covered by my parents. This situation as it exists now is not livable for someone without my privileges. The issue of low pay and lack of benefits increased my lacking legitimacy around the school. I was asked to fill the role of teacher in every meaningful way without the meaningful pay or benefits recognition.

Gina's and Erin's narratives about their legitimacy as teachers contradicts the level of responsibility in their positions. They were both teachers of record in every sense of the phrase, yet they often felt isolated or invisible in their schools.

## Discussion

We sought to understand preservice teachers' identity development in the case of serving as a full-time substitute teacher while being a student in a pre-service program learning to teach. Using narrative inquiry, we found that two preservice teachers felt invisible, like a shadow teacher, not a real teacher. How does this feeling of invisibility in their schools impact their teacher identity development?

In terms of being recognized by others as "real" teachers, the results of institutional invisibility can include a feeling of being undervalued, both in terms of monetary compensation and status. Long-term substitute teachers are paid less than fully licensed teachers for the same responsibilities, and their school colleagues may not view them as legitimate teachers because they are still learning to teach. This study raises important considerations about teaching during teacher shortages. On its surface, hiring preservice teachers in long-term substitute positions seems ideal—people who are planning to pursue careers in education have rich, authentic classroom experiences in which to implement approaches they learn in their teacher education courses. Students like Erin and Gina can bridge the theory-practice divide every day as they have immediate opportunities to put their learning into practice with real students. For the school district, hiring preservice teachers as long-term substitutes means that they can

staff their classrooms with people who have some background in education and content. For preservice teachers, the opportunity to build relationships with K–12 students and school staff prior to their job search as licensed teachers can be invaluable. In Gina's and Erin's cases, having connections to schools led to future job opportunities as they both took full-time licensed teaching positions in those schools the following year. Beyond the long-term benefits of these relationships, the short-term benefit of a regular paycheck is often the deciding factor, especially when teacher education programs are structured with evening classes that allow for day jobs.

## Implications

While there are advantages in this approach to staffing schools during a teacher shortage for many stakeholders, hiring preservice teachers as long-term substitutes can have important drawbacks that impact teacher education programs, the preservice teachers, and schools. Gina's and Erin's narratives illustrate a major concern about this situation: a lack of clear policies and practices that can lead to long-term substitute teachers feeling invisible and unsupported, which can impact their teacher identity development. This lack of policy implicates both the school district and the teacher education program as we work to redefine roles that are largely separate. In light of our theoretical perspectives, we understand Gina's and Erin's experiences not simply as a result of structural oversight (though that is partly to blame too) but as indicative of deeper systemic tensions in teacher education. Their dual status as students and full-time classroom teachers positioned them in a space where performance and competence were insufficient without recognition from their school-based and university-based peers. Their stories exemplify how identity is not only a matter of what teachers do, but also of how they are seen—and how feeling like a shadow teacher can disrupt the formation of a teacher identity (Avraamidou, 2020; Moore, 2008; Olsen, 2008).

And yet, given the current context of education, it seems likely that positions like Erin's and Gina's will persist in schools and teacher education programs, and so it is imperative that the institutions that support preservice teachers take steps to ensure continued identity development in changing contexts. Perhaps requiring more documentation of sufficient support and resources on the part of the school and the assignment of a university field-supervisor (outside of the internship course) would help alleviate the problem of teachers like Erin and Gina feeling that they needed to just figure it out on their own. Schools that need to fill shortage areas with preservice

teachers might increase the success of those teachers with a more structured and intentional method of sharing important school information and building staff unity, including acknowledgement of the limitations of using district job classifications that limited long-term substitutes from receiving information from the school. University-based teacher preparation programs could support these efforts by creating cohorts of preservice teachers working in long-term substitute positions to provide specialized reflection and support for their experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Trent, 2010). Both teacher education programs and districts should recognize that preservice teachers in long-term substitute positions inhabit a unique space between a fully licensed teacher and a temporary teacher.

## Conclusions

Given the challenges in education in recent years and the growing teacher shortage in general, it seems unlikely that these types of positions will disappear anytime soon. In fact, as preservice teachers experience success in long-term substitute positions, it is likely that school districts and universities will begin to see positions like these as viable solutions to teacher shortages. Despite the challenges that Erin and Gina experienced in their long-term substitute positions, they returned to the school district as fully licensed teachers in the fall. However, not all preservice teachers are assured such success without structured approaches to help them more fully integrate their experiences as both teachers and students and develop competent teacher identities by being recognized as real teachers by others. If this is to be a part of the future of teacher preparation, it is imperative that all stakeholders work together to build support systems with these positions in mind so that we can ensure the long-term success of our beginning teachers while also responding to the needs of our school communities.

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